

# Exploring the Cognitive, Hedonic, and Emotional Dimensions of Tourist Purchase Intentions for Ethnic Foods: A Qualitative Inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of cognitive, hedonic, and emotional factors on Sabah's tourists' desire to purchase ethnic food. In this study, a combination of cognitive, hedonic as well as emotional drivers is examined in the purchase intentions of tourists in the Sabah region of Malaysia towards ethnic food. Since little is known about these psychological motivators in food tourism, this study follows a simple qualitative investigation in an attempt to draw more details about the behaviour of tourists. Five participants (three local tourists of Peninsular Malaysia and two international tourists of China and Korea) took part in the in-depth semi-structured interviews (collected the data). Theme and thematic analysis was done manually to see a pattern and recurring theme. Four overall themes were identified: a sense of unusualness and appeal, food authenticity, and safety, emotional appeal, and, the power of social and contextual factors. The findings indicate that visual appeal, cultural stories and emotion connection increases probability of the tourists to sample ethnic foods. The current paper would add to the food tourism literature by providing a conceptual framework, which would combine psychological aspects with the food decision-making. Marketing and tourism agencies practical implication is also discussed.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Factors, Ethnic Food, Food Tourism, Hedonic Experience, Qualitative Inquiry, Tourist Behavior

## INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized society, where tourism grows quickly, people prefer to explore different cultures through local foods. Using food, we can better appreciate the history, character, and traditions of a specific community. The local community's rich cultural traditions are demonstrated in Sabahan foods like Hinava, Pinasakan, Tuhau, and Nuba Laya. Nonetheless, while ethnic foods hold promises for increasing tourism, there is little knowledge about what influences tourists' decision to try them.

Other studies have highlighted that what people experience emotionally and mentally can shape how they behave when making choices in food tourism. Cognitive factors include what tourists know, believe, and feel about ethnic foods, including their authenticity, safety, and special characteristics. While hedonic effects relate to the enjoyment and satisfaction of food, emotional factors include the feelings of nostalgia, happiness, and cultural links that come with eating [1], [2]. Despite this, there is still limited knowledge of how these three variables impact the purchase of ethnic foods among tourists, especially in Sabah. Reference [3] mentioned that tourists are more likely to buy food when they think it is safe and authentic. Likewise, [4] noted that having positive emotions during ethnic food experiences may encourage tourists to discuss them online, impacting how other tourists decide to travel.

Moreover, a recent study by [5] concluded that people's opinions about ethnic foods are impacted by how they look; hence, taste and feelings work together to determine if someone wants to purchase them. Notably, raising

the emotional or pleasure side of reviews online increases the probability that people will be influenced to purchase ethnic foods, according to a study by [6]. Although scientists have examined these areas separately, they have yet to integrate all three into one formal framework. For this reason, this study investigates the relationship between these variables and the buying intentions of tourists toward ethnic food in Sabah.

Food is a rich communication of culture, pleasure in the senses, and emotional involvement, and becoming at the center of contemporary tourists [2], [3]. More specifically, ethnic foodstuffs are a channel through which tourists can indulge themselves in the ways and cultures of various localities. Sabah, Malaysia has a profound cultural and ethnic spread of more than 30 ethnic groups, which provide a distinctive environment to learn and study the intricacy between culture, emotion and food related choices.

Even though the popularity of food tourism is increasing, there still is a major gap of understanding the effects on the logical processes in tourists regarding intention of buying the ethnic food. It has been observed that most of the studies have been into demographic factors or even socioeconomic factors and a lot has been left out about the cognitive factors, the hedonic factors, the emotional factors with regard to their influence on food choice [5], [6]. These processes, including the beliefs, perceptions, pleasure-seeking behaviour and the emotional responses of the tourists, are especially important in those destinations, where food is novel, exotic or where the food has a high cultural value [1].

The inadequacy of knowledge concerning these psychological elements restricts the efficacy of ethnic food marketing strategies and minimizes the prospects of food tourism towards building up the local economies. In addition, tourists fear to consume strange food ethnic food because of poor understanding of taste, hygiene, and emotional unease, particularly, when it comes to cross-cultural interactions [8], [11]. Without mitigation of such barriers this produces a situation where tourists do not have a high level of exposure to local cuisine which undermines the tourist experience as well as the role that the tourist experience plays as a source of cultural exchange and economic growth.

This research gap has been addressed by conducting a simple qualitative inquiry process in researching the issue of how cognitive, hedonic, and emotional influences facilitate the buying intentions of the tourists towards ethnic foods in Sabah.

The study design was a case of in-depth interviews with five participants i.e. local tourists in Peninsular Malaysia, international tourist in China and Korea. To derive the main themes and patterns in participant narratives, the manual thematic analysis was used.

The present study adds to the increasing amount of research in the field of food tourism through the provision of a psyche perspective with which to decipher tourist food behavior. It can also provide an effective model that lay downs an emotionally effective and culturally stimulating approach the food experience by hospitality and tourism stakeholders. Policy wise, it is critical to develop a sense of these dynamics, in dealing with destination branding and the creation of supporting and maintaining the food heritage, as well as in nurturing small ethnic food enterprises.

This paper is structured as follows: the background knowledge and the research gaps are discussed in the literature review section; the methodology section gives the explanation of the qualitative design and the processing of the data analysis findings; the results section is an overview of the main themes identified in the interview; and, the conclusion and recommendations conclude the paper.

## **Problem Statement**

Although promoting ethnic food in tourism is gaining popularity, only little is understood about what influences a tourist's intentions to buy ethnic food. Suppose the factors are unknown; in that case, marketing and product development approaches for ethnic foods may still work by chance. Additionally, there is minimal research into how tourists view the true, safe, and exciting qualities of different cuisines. Most research into local food has dealt with its physical characteristics or basic facts, yet little attention has been given to how people think about it. This is especially true among international tourists, who tend to be less familiar with

Sabah's local food culture [7], [8]. Note that ignoring these aspects in detail may discourage tourists from enjoying ethnic menus and reduce the use of food to sustain the tourism industry.

## Study Objectives

Based on the stated problem, this study sets two specific objectives:

1. To identify cognitive, hedonic, and emotional factors that influence tourists' purchase intentions towards ethnic food.
2. To analyze tourists' perceptions and beliefs regarding cognitive aspects such as authenticity, safety, and uniqueness of ethnic food in the context of food tourism.

## Significance and Contribution of the Study

The study offers many useful findings both for research and for practical applications. The information gathered can be applied by the government to guide tourism policies for promoting heritage food and cultural tourism. Using knowledge of emotions and what people find pleasant, government agencies like Malaysia's Ministry of Tourism and Culture can organize campaigns more in tune with tourists' emotions and identities [9].

For local groups, participating in this study offers them opportunities to strengthen their food heritage. Knowing what tourists appreciate will enable locals to continue enjoying their traditions while offering food that visitors enjoy. Accordingly, the study's findings can direct the tourism and food industry on how to serve food and make meaningful connections for visitors. Meanwhile, people working in tourism, catering services, and hospitality can use information on tourism motivations to benefit consumers [10], [11]. Related to the academic field, this study enhances previous theories about food tourism by focusing on how people's thoughts, experiences, and feelings affect their decision to buy food. It also helps broaden the knowledge of cultural tourism, gastronomy, and consumer psychology [12].

## Scope of the Study

This study focuses on two main groups of tourists, namely:

1. Local tourists who have visited Sabah and had the opportunity to try local ethnic food.
2. International tourists who have traveled to Sabah and have had the experience of trying Sabah ethnic food at least once.

Exploring ethnic food related emotions and experiences will mainly depend on information from these two groups. The research in this study does not cover promotions or supply chain problems; it exclusively examines tourist psychology related to buying ethnic foods.

## Article Organization

There are several main parts to this article. The second section summarizes what other researchers have discussed and the theories used. In the third part, the authors describe what research methods were used. The fourth section presents the key findings of the study. In addition, this article mentions what the study implies, what was missing in the study, and where future research can help.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE LITERATURE REVIEW

People are noticing ethnic food tourism more often as an essential part of traveling, especially when they visit a diverse area such as Sabah. The research aims to examine how tourists' cognition, enjoyment, and feelings play a role in their buying decisions for ethnic food. To plan the best marketing strategies for local food tourism and make them successful, one requires a firm grasp of these dimensions.

## Key Themes and Topics

### 1) Cognitive Factors in Tourist Purchase Intention

Cognitive factors cover the experiences, beliefs, and thoughts tourists have about ethnic food, including whether it is authentic, safe, and one-of-a-kind. Reference [13] revealed how authentic ethnic food is believed to strongly affect tourists' decision to buy, especially when linked to their awareness of the regional culture.

### 2) Hedonic Dimensions in Food Experience

Taking pleasure and getting satisfaction from ethnic food is part of the hedonic dimension of tourism. An article by [6] emphasized that trying ethnic cuisine can greatly affect tourists' desire to purchase. Furthermore, dining in a local restaurant can improve what tourists experience from their trip and persuade them to share about it online.

### 3) Emotional and Nostalgia Factors in Purchase Decisions

The emotions tourists experience after having ethnic food can affect whether they want to buy more. It was reported by [14] that gastronomic activities that stimulate good emotions can increase tourist evaluations and affect if they plan to purchase ethnic dishes.

### 4) Research Gaps

While several studies examine ethnic food tourism from the perspectives of mind, feelings, or taste, none have yet to explore them all simultaneously. In this context, there is no wide-ranging research featuring Chinese and Korean tourists exploring the ethnic food in Sabah. As a result, it is impossible to clearly explain how these factors affect tourists' choice to try local foods.

### 5) Development of a Conceptual Framework

Past studies indicate that the conceptual framework fits cognitive aspects (seeing food as authentic, safe, and different), hedonic factors (how much people like and enjoy eating food), and emotional aspects (experiencing nostalgia and excitement) as critical influences on purchasing ethnic foods. The model includes the idea that experiential value and impression of the destination can change how these factors affect purchasing choices.

### 6) Key Findings and Controversies

Reference [4] demonstrated in their study that tasting ethnic foods inspires people to consider traveling to the place of the food's origin. This suggests a strong relationship between the experience of food and choosing a travel destination. However, there is a disagreement about whether emotions or thoughts play a bigger role in affecting purchase intentions. While some findings stress that emotions matter most, others suggest that mental views on authenticity and safety are also fundamental. It highlights that more studies are necessary to explore how these factors are related to ethnic food tourism.

The research included here presents why understanding cognitive, hedonic, and emotional factors plays a role in affecting tourists' desires to purchase ethnic foods. Previous research has prepared the ground for investigating this topic, though very little has explored these three areas altogether in relation to Sabah's international visitors. For this reason, this study tries to clarify how these factors influence the buying habits of tourists towards local ethnic foods.

Food tourism has become an important platform regarding cultural interaction and economic growth, particularly when dealing with cuisine having strong heritage. Specifically, ethnic food stems out as an important factor in molding the tourist experience, acting as a window to culture and identity [2], [10]. Although researchers have recognized the importance of local food in boosting the satisfaction level of the tourists, little has been done to unravel the underlying psychological behavior that guides tourists' decision when they come to acquire the ethnic food mostly in a cross-cultural environment such as Sabah in Malaysia.

Cognitive Factors are the way tourists understand food in the light of perceptions, authenticity, safety and information. Such aspects play a crucial role in the conditions when food is foreign, and possibly dangerous, to the perception [3]. Often, the visual attractiveness of a food, exposure of its ingredients, and the manner of locals determine how tourists will decide to approach new flavors and ethnic meals [4], [5]. As an example, [11] indicate the cultural familiarity (national and regional) as the factor affecting the possibilities of tourists to consume ethnic food.

Hedonic Factors, in their turn, are related to pleasure, enjoyment and aesthetic consideration of food. Sensory appeal, including taste, smell, and presentation, has a great influence on hedonic consumption [9]. Tourists can be charmed into visiting the country based on the ethnic cuisine that is aesthetically pleasing or having an unusual taste. In line with this, [6] established that hedonic enjoyment has a direct influence on the online behavior of tourists, particularly to participate in eWOM.

A further less investigated dimension is Emotional Factors. The feeling of nostalgia, euphoria, and cultural fascination can also be emitted by the tourists whenever they eat traditional or ethnic foods and do it in places where people can tell their cultures and interact [9]. [13] point out that food consumption emotions leave a permanent memory, being subject to revisit and referral. On the same note, [8] concluded that neophobia was solved, and the resulting tourists usually attach to the traditional foods emotionally positively.

Whereas several studies have explored these cognitive, hedonic, and emotional domains separately, little has been done so far to study the effect of the combination of those domains in a single model. Further, the food tourism in Sabah has not got sufficient representation in literature in spite of a rich culture and gastronomic delights. In this paper, the study is aimed to address this research gap by combining these three psychological concepts with qualitative approach that will present a more comprehensive view of tourist behavior.

These studies theoretically rely on the constructs of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theories. The TPB plays a role in establishing the factors behind the influence of attitudes (cognitive), subjective norms (social cues), and perceived behavioral control (risk perception) in terms of the importance of intents [23]. This is supplemented by the SOR model which identifies emotional and stationary stimuli to be a part of the decision process [3].

The past studies have hardly captured the dynamics of emotions and cognition in shaping the behavior of food choice among tourists. Other studies that have recognized the role of emotional triggers are [6], [2] which did not relate them to more general constructs, such as the perception of safety or cultural uniqueness. Moreover, examined the antecedents of ethnic food consumption yet implied the need to obtain additional qualitative knowledge to enrich their quantitative evidence and enhance their theoretical connotations.

What this research can provide is a conceptual framework where cognitive beliefs, hedonic pleasure, and emotional engagement as well as dimensions can explain the purchase intentions in the context of tourists. It is cumulative to the past empirical works with the incorporation of psychological theories in the development of the model in food tourism behavior.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study relies on a qualitative method with Basic Qualitative Inquiry to determine the role of cognitive, hedonic, and emotional factors in shaping the decision of Sabah visitors to purchase ethnic food. It allows researchers to learn about people's views and experiences in a given social setting and do so outside of a rigid theory [15].

### Research Design

Basic Qualitative Inquiry was selected since it is well-suited for research that attempts to discover what individuals think and feel about their experiences. Using this design, researchers communicate with participants face-to-face and obtain detailed and valuable data, which helps complete the study's goals [16].



## Data Collection

Researchers gathered information through semi-structured interviews with local visitors from other states, plus international tourists coming from China and Korea. Researchers were able to learn about the participants' experiences and views on ethnic food in Sabah from the interviews. This choice was made as semi-structured interviews ensure the researcher can explore key questions without ignoring any crucial issues [17].

## Sampling

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who understood first-hand what ethnic foods in Sabah are like. Only five participants were selected since qualitative research values detailed information more than huge sample groups. Furthermore, since no new themes were discovered after several interviews, the sample size was considered to have reached data saturation [18].

## Data Analysis

The data were manually analyzed using thematic analysis. The process consisted of finding themes and patterns in the data linked to what the study was trying to achieve. Thematic analysis was selected as it helps discover and study the themes reported in qualitative data to ensure investigators can explore the meanings of participants' experiences [15].

## Ethical Considerations

The study respected all research ethics norms. Prior to interviewing the participant's, informed consent was obtained from everyone involved. No one learned the identities of the participants, and steps were taken to ensure the data remained secure and private [16].

## Data Validity and Reliability

Several actions were taken to guarantee the data's validity; one of these was to have participants examine the summaries of their interview sessions. For extra assurance, documentation of the analysis was added, and the researchers also examined their own biases [18].

Using this method, the researcher was able to investigate what influence tourists' choices when purchasing ethnic food in Sabah. The research used interviews based on Basic Qualitative Inquiry, thematic analysis and a qualitative approach to exceedingly understand what the participants thought and experienced, as set out in the research objectives.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to determine how cognitive, hedonic, and emotional factors affect tourists' decisions to purchase ethnic food in Sabah. Manual thematic analysis conducted on interviews with five participants, as well as local and international tourists (from Korea and China), led to the identification of four main themes, which are listed in **Table 1 and displayed in Figure 1: Thematic Map**

Table I Main Themes and Coding

Theme	Coding
Uniqueness and Appeal of Ethnic Food	Unique taste, excitement, unusual smell, visual presentation, local celebration
Perception of Authenticity and Safety	Confidence in hygiene, fresh ingredients, observing locals eating the same food
Emotional Experience When Enjoying the Food	Nostalgia, excitement, admiration, food memories, desire to repeat the experience
Influence of Social and Promotional Context	Influence of tour guides, digital promotions, friends' recommendations, restaurant ambiance

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Fig. 1 Thematic Map Based on Interview Findings

Themes in this category are centered on making ethnic food eye-catching and unique.

Many participants mentioned that what inspired them to try ethnic food was its exclusive mix of taste, presentation, and cultural details that differed from their usual meals. Some examples were the sour taste, a strange smell, and using natural ingredients, including banana leaves.

For example, Participant 3 from China shared:

“Mmm... The Nuba Laya... people covered their food with leaves. For a moment, nasi lemak came to mind, and then I found out it was glutinous rice. At first, it seemed unusual, but trying it made it different. I felt part of Kadazan Dusun culture.

It suggests that different visuals and styles help people become interested in trying new dishes.

Coding covers a unique scent, a flavor not everyone enjoys, an exciting atmosphere, and ways food is presented locally.

Theme: Ethnic food stands out as it is unique and attractive.

Theme 2: How Authentic and Safe a Brand is Perceived

The majority of people mentioned that they first questioned the cleanliness and safety of ethnic food. Observing everything from start to finish, fresh ingredients, and enjoying the meal with locals offer them confidence again.

Nurul Afiah expressed the following:

“Skepticism about cleanliness came over me to start with. Through watching them cook in real time, I felt more prepared. I think it really gives a sense of realism...”

After the participants saw the labels and learned what was in the products, their acceptance of new cosmetics improved. According to the study, how authentic and safe people believe the food determines whether they will try ethnic dishes.

Having positive feelings about the cleanliness, the use of fresh ingredients and seeing the locals as regular diners. These results highlight that confidence in cleanliness, the visibility of fresh ingredients, and observing locals dining together enhance tourists' perceived safety and authenticity of ethnic food.

Tourism theme: Guests find things genuine and safe.

Theme 3: The Feelings Someone Has While Eating

People mentioned that the experience of eating at ethnic restaurants made them feel nostalgic, excited, and in awe. The food experience reaches a person not only through taste but also by affecting their mood and emotions.

As an illustration, Participant 1 from Malaysia shared:

It kind of reminds me of my grandmother's food, so it feels a little nostalgic. It is simple, but it comes across as very touching.

Participant 5 from Korea expressed that:

"Excited! I put photos of everything onto my Instagram. I am happy that I gave myself the chance to try strange and delicious meals. It's unusual to have that experience.

This indicates that delightful food moments can make someone more likely to buy and encourage them to share their experiences (electronic word of mouth [eWOM]). Consuming food more often leads to emotions including satisfaction, pride, and wanting more.

Coding: feeling of nostalgia, excitement, admiration, memories of food, wanting to repeat those moments.

Engagement: Sharing Emotions Experienced when Enjoying Delicious Food.

Theme 4: Impact of Social Surroundings and Marketing

Friends, the atmosphere of a restaurant, tour guides, and promotions online also affect people's decisions to try out new ethnic foods.

Participant Two noted:

Once, I was told by a friend about the Pinasakan game. I was told by him to definitely try it. For that reason, I became curious after that.

Participant 4 from Korea also added:

For me, it was because the guide was enthusiastic about talking about the cuisine. That was the reason I decided to give it a go.

Thus, outside factors, including eWOM and stories about restaurants and their setting, influence people to investigate and want to try them out.

Coding: impacted by the tour guide, online advertising, a story from a friend, and how the restaurant was arranged.

Theme: How Social Context and Promotion Play a Role

The key observations and significant findings include:

What influences someone to try a certain food is how authentic and safe it seems, which also strengthens their wish to share the experience.

Enjoying food that is linked with feelings makes the whole travel experience more memorable and motivates people to want to visit again.

The idea of uniqueness and culture leads foreign visitors to sample. Food photos and stories about the food play a significant part in drawing in people who are unfamiliar with it.

Social surroundings are vital when it comes to deciding what to buy: People are more likely to prefer ethnic food when encouraged by promotion, atmosphere, or others around them.

The results of this test are in harmony with the elements of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) according to which the behavioral intention of the individual is also formed under the influence of attitudes, subjective



norms and the perceived behavioral control [23]. Specifically, cognitive factors found, including (but not limited to) the examples based on the perception of food authenticity, food cleanliness, and use of natural ingredients, are closely related to the Perceived Behavioral Control component of the TPB as they may refer to how easy or hard tourists feel about making a food-related decision.

Also, hedonic and emotional factors, including excitement, nostalgia, and admiration, are associated with the Attitude component of TPB and are the positive emotional associations with the behavior (eating ethnic food in the case) that leads to the further development of the intention and behavior (Pham et al., 2023). Lastly, the impact of social environments including tour guides and eWOM responds to the component of Subjective Norm of TPB, where the perceived social influence and suggestions of trusted persons carry a lot of weight in the behavioral intentions of the tourist.

In this way, the study not only confirms the applicability of TPB to the sphere of ethnic food tourism but also illustrates that the combination of the cognitive, hedonic, and emotional constructs would be valuable when explaining how the intention to make a purchase ethnic food can be shaped among both local and international tourists.

## FINDINGS

The conceptual model called “Factors Influencing Tourist Purchase When Touring Ethnic Food” was built from the results of a qualitative study completed by five local and international tourists. Depending on the model, tourists are investigated for purchasing or deciding to consume Sabah’s ethnic food when they travel. Four things were revealed to influence whether someone intends to buy the product. First, people’s trust in the traditional values, safety, and uniqueness of new flavors is classed as a Cognitive Factor. Second, Hedonic Factors are about the pleasure and satisfaction people experience when enjoying food through the flavor, touch, and visual appeal. Third, Emotional Factors pertain to emotions like nostalgia, excitement, and satisfaction from eating. Fourth, the influence of Social and Contextual factors can be observed in tour guides, restaurant settings, and snippets from friends’ tours on social media.

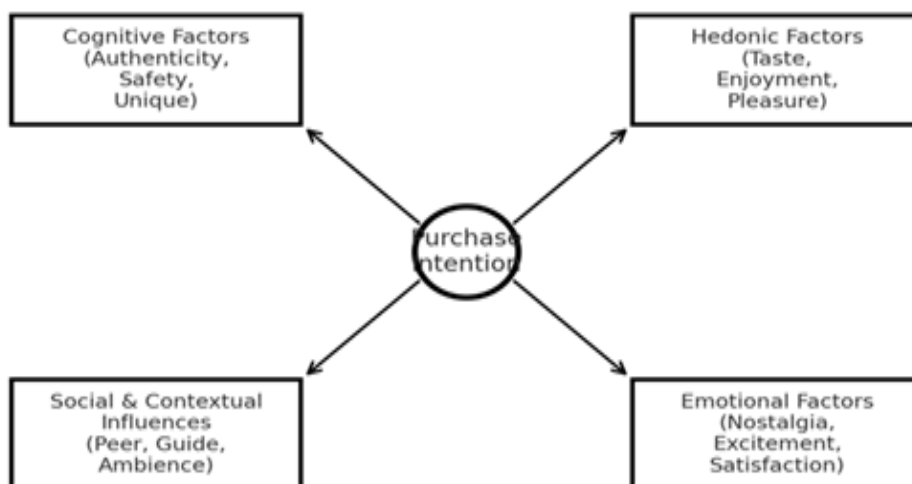


Fig. 2 Conceptual Framework: Factors Influencing Tourist Purchase Intention for Ethnic Food [5], [7], [11], [13]

This model asserts that a mixture of logical and emotional factors creates tourists’ intentions to try ethnic cuisine. It advises tourism and food businesses on designing experiences that address all of these aspects well and honestly.

According to the interviews, taste, sensory impressions, and advice from friends affect people’s decisions to experience ethnic cuisine and rational factors like what foods are considered safe or unhealthy. All four themes, food uniqueness, safety perception, feelings, and social effects, work together to determine what a person decides to buy.

Recognizing these factors supports tour operators and ethnic food restaurant operators in devising better solutions, for example, through stories, attractive displays, and engaging food styles.

According to the findings, tourists' decisions to purchase ethnic food in Sabah are affected by many factors, such as their views, experiences, and what others influence them. Notably, this study with five participants reported that there are other influences on tourist food choices beyond logic and cognitive thoughts. This includes what is special about the meal, its emotional pull, and the social environment.

Ethnic food, in particular, was a topic that was highlighted as unique and appealing to many participants. Many participants shared that they were attracted by the special manner of serving traditional foods like Nuba Laya or the appealing taste of Tuhau and Hinava. Chen Meili mentioned: "I noticed that the Nuba Laya in China were wrapped up in leaves. I was reminded of nasi lemak, but it was actually glutinous rice. At first, I found it unusual, but after trying it, I liked it. I experienced a kind of connection with the Kadazan Dusun culture." The statement emphasizes that attractive factors for foreign tourists may be the visual appearance and unique early experiences in the food.

In addition to being different, the factor of trust in food also has a significant influence. When the participants observed how the food was prepared or trusted that the ingredients were fresh, their thoughts changed. Participant 2, Hariz, expressed: "I actually asked a lot of people what was going on. I felt relief when I saw everything just out of the oven. I consider the food to be very genuine. This book is definitely original." It suggests that knowing how food is created and handled, tourists will feel encouraged to try dishes they do not usually eat.

Feelings and emotions evoked by food can encourage people to decide to buy the product. Things like nostalgia, excitement, and admiration form a link between food and important experiences in our lives. It was Nurul Afiah who stressed that trying the dish brought up moments from her childhood with her late grandmother. Despite being simple, it is still very moving. As a result, eating brings back memories or helps people share their culture with others.

In addition to what a tourist has experienced personally, their choices can be affected by promotions online, influences from friends, and the ambiance of places they eat. Participant 4, Kang Hyun-woo from Korea, felt that the energetic stories told by the tour guide inspired him to try local food: "I was inspired by the tour guide's interest in the food and tried some. It was for that reason I decided to give it a try." This demonstrates how the information is delivered, and the narrative itself leaves an impression on tourists, mostly those visiting Sabah for the first time.

However, some surprises did arise during the experiments. First, a few of the international participants were unsure about how the food would look and smell, making them uncomfortable. In the end, the skepticism yielded positive when they tried cooking in a friendly and helpful setting. This suggests that people's first thoughts about a service can be altered by a thoughtfully created and understanding experience.

## **LIMITATION**

The study followed a qualitative method and included tourists who had only visited Sabah. Therefore, it is possible that the findings do not apply to every international tourist [15].

Firstly, the research encompassed only five participants hailing from relatively confined cultural backgrounds specifically, two individuals from Korea, two from China, and one from Malaysia. Consequently, the results may not accurately reflect the perspectives of tourists from a more varied array of cultural contexts, who may possess divergent interpretations of taste, perceptions of cleanliness, emotional responses, and the significance of food. Furthermore, the limited sample size and qualitative methodology of the study constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future inquiries should engage a larger and more culturally heterogeneous participant cohort to yield more comprehensive insights. The integration of a mixed-methods approach, such as the amalgamation of interviews with surveys or direct observations, is also advocated to enhance the validity and profundity of understanding across diverse tourist demographics [21], [22].

## Research Implications

The outcome of the study adds value to the existing work since it demonstrates that several factors connected to thinking, pleasure, mood, and interaction can have an impact on what choices someone makes when eating out. It supports the proposal by [4], [11] to extend the Theory of Planned Behavior framework to include emotions and experience. In addition, Basic Qualitative Inquiry indicates that this design efficiently explains the meaning of going on vacation for tourists [16]. However, it would be helpful to have future research consider people from a wide range of cultures and utilize various research approaches for a better view of the topic [19], [20].

## Practical Implications

Study findings can assist food and tourism businesses in designing strategies for tourist experiences centered on cultural stories, views, and feelings, which may boost tourist desire for ethnic dishes [5], [9]. The results of the present research have a number of useful suggestions that can be given to tourism authorities, food-related businesspeople, and hospitality providers. Firstly, ethnic food operators in Sabah ought to leverage visual presentation and storytelling to portray individuality and tradition since the mentioned elements were demonstrated as stimulating and compelling tourists in terms of interest in the products being offered as well as hedonic reactions [2], [3]. Classical features like packaging food with banana leaves, sour tastes as well as coarse cooking environs can be focused to improve authenticity.

Second, appeals like nostalgia and cultural pride can be added by tourism marketers and government agencies into their promotional campaigns. Consumer relationships and shrinkage of trust can also be established through the use of eWOM and influencer marketing that underlines personal and emotional experiences [6], and the tour guides and front liners in the tourism service provision should be trained to become cultural food ambassadors to make informed story telling to enable the tourists overcome hygiene or unknown ingredients doubts. This matches with the results of this study that social interaction has significant influence on positive purchase intention. Through matching market and service activities with the psychological and emotional choices of the visitors, the ethnic food industry in Sabah will be able to intensify competitiveness and remain competitive in the long term through the cultural tourism.

## Community and Policy Implications

When approaching the problem through a policy angle, the tourism boards in Malaysia ought to market ethnic food, not as a commodity but rather as a cultural experience that is modest in the area of its safety, heritage, and its emotional focus. It should engage in public-private partnerships in order to train the food entrepreneurs in experiential branding, hygiene norms, and digital marketing that accords primacy to authenticity and storytelling. This would be in line with national efforts in boosting gastronomic identity with regard to putting Malaysia in the global gastronomic map [10].

## CONCLUSION

All things considered, it is evident from the findings that tourists try ethnic food as a result of how they think about, feel about, and are encouraged by food-related experiences. When tourists eat authentic food, experience culture, and listen to a special story, they can build a meaningful connection with local food. The findings state that tourists' interest in ethnic food comes from the influence of different psychological factors such as thinking, joy, and emotions. Notably, the objective of the study, which was conducted using a Basic Qualitative Inquiry design, was achieved. In particular, it identifies and looks into the factors that shape tourists' plans to taste ethnic food in Sabah. Interviews with five participants, among them two Koreans and two Chinese, revealed the findings to have four main interrelated themes: liking ethnic food, opinions on its authenticity and safety, emotions during eating, and factors from social surroundings and promotion.

Other studies have also discovered that cognitive perceptions like authenticity and safety are critical when it comes to adopting ethnic food. Reference [3] reported that tourists can rely on how the food is made, and if they see local people eating it, they are more eager to try ethnic dishes. Meanwhile, a further study by [7]

indicated that people's decisions to buy food are affected by well-being and perceptions of how clean and healthy the food is. After seeing fresh ingredients and hearing about cooking from locals or tour guides, people in the study felt very secure about the food. The data revealed that enjoying food and having fun and memories from it are important factors connecting tourists to ethnic food, as [5], [6] concluded. Someone from the study noted that the food had a taste similar to that of their grandmother, and the foreign tourists believed eating ethnic meals was a privilege and wanted to share it on social media. In addition, Reference [2] asserted that people's emotions greatly influence what and where they eat while traveling, as reported by [2] in their study about consumer feelings and street food.

Furthermore, what others share with regard to the product and marketing campaigns plays a significant role in shaping a person's intention to buy. According to [11] and [9], meeting friends, listening to stories from guides, and browsing on social media are the primary ways for travelers with minimal background in ethnic food to be aware of it. In line with this, participants reported that accounts of the origins and meanings of dishes shared by friends or guides sparked their curiosity and made them want to try the dish.

On the whole, this research is helpful for both food tourism and how consumer psychology affects tourism. This study clarifies that a desire to eat local dishes is significantly linked to the wider culture and the kinds of experiences travelers go through. This study agrees with [1], [4], [13], who stressed the role of an experiential approach in creating food marketing strategies. Therefore, tour operators and local food providers should focus both on how the food tastes and how it represents the culture, as well as on the feelings linked to it. Correspondingly, researchers can then investigate the cultural factors that explain ethnic food in different tourist communities. At the same time, the study argues that food is more than a physical meal; it allows tourists to bond with native communities and learn about their culture better. The study has given important information on the impact of cognitive, hedonic, emotional, and social-contextual issues on influencing the intention of tourists to purchase ethnic foods in Sabah. Future researches, however, can be increased by conducting a mixed-methods study, increasing the sample of participants to five and fostering generalizability and theory testing [22].

It has also been suggested that the conceptual framework be tested by the quantitative confirmation of the causal relationships among variables across the various tourist segment using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Additionally, cross-cultural differences across cross-national tourists of various nationalities (e.g. China, Korea and Western countries) could unveil subtle differences in food-related behavior.

Here, it is also possible that in future research, the influence of digital marketing and food influencers on the perception and mood of passengers, especially how the visual food narrative (e.g. Instagram and Tik Tok videos) mediates hedonic and emotional reactions to ethnic food, may be examined. To predict the long-term effects of such experiences on destination loyalty, it would also be interesting to conduct more research on post-consumption behavior like eWOM, repeat visits etc.

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