

PRESERVING TRADITION THROUGH YOUTH: THE SUSTAINABILITY OF LAKSA JOHOR AS MALAY CULINARY HERITAGE

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Abstract. This study explores the sustainability of Laksa Johor, a signature Malay heritage dish by examining how Johorean youth engage with its consumption, preparation, and knowledge transmission. Although Laksa Johor holds deep cultural significance, findings reveal that it is selectively consumed during festive or familial gatherings, and rarely part of daily meals. This reflects its symbolic role in reinforcing cultural identity rather than serving as a staple food. The study employed semi-structured interviews with five youths in Johor and used thematic analysis via NVivo. Key themes include frequency and context of consumption, meal setting, availability, intergenerational knowledge transfer, digital learning tools, and cultural identity. While traditional culinary knowledge is mainly passed down through mothers and grandmothers, digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have emerged as supplementary sources of learning. Despite declining everyday presence, Laksa Johor retains emotional and cultural resonance among youth. The study underscores the importance of integrative strategies combining family-based education, youth-centered heritage initiatives, and culinary tourism to ensure the continuity and relevance of Malay food heritage.

Keywords: *laksa Johor, culinary heritage, youth, food sustainability, traditional knowledge transmission, Malay cuisine*

Introduction

Culinary heritage plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, transmitting intergenerational knowledge, and sustaining community narratives. As a significant component of intangible cultural heritage, food embodies a community's shared memory, lifestyle, and value system (UNESCO, 2020). In Malaysia, the diverse culinary landscape reflects rich intercultural exchanges, with Malay cuisine often representing deep-rooted customs and ancestral knowledge. Among these traditional dishes, Laksa Johor stands as an iconic symbol of Johorean identity, distinct in its fusion of local and foreign culinary influences. It features Italian-style spaghetti paired with a richly spiced fish gravy, traditionally served with herbs, pickled vegetables, and sambal belacan, a combination that reflects adaptation, creativity, and cultural significance. Despite its importance, Laksa Johor faces the risk of cultural erosion. Factors such as urbanisation, globalisation, and changing lifestyles among the younger generation have led to declining consumption and knowledge of traditional foods (Mohd Fikri et al., 2021). The time-consuming preparation, unfamiliarity with traditional methods, and increasing preference for fast and convenient meals have further exacerbated this decline (Muhammad et al., 2013). As older generation's age and fewer young people learn to cook traditional dishes, the continuity of heritage foods like Laksa Johor becomes uncertain. Culinary sustainability, therefore, must go beyond environmental

considerations to include social and cultural dimensions. Preserving traditional foodways requires deliberate engagement with youth through education, digital media, and participatory family practices. Moreover, fostering awareness of cultural food systems contributes to national identity and community resilience (Kennedy et al., 2022; Gartaula et al., 2020). Unfortunately, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the specific dynamics between youth and the sustainability of Malay culinary heritage. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how Johorean youth perceive, consume, and engage with Laksa Johor. Through a qualitative lens, the study investigates the transmission of traditional food knowledge and the role of youth in ensuring the dish's cultural survival. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on sustaining Malaysia's intangible culinary heritage in an era of rapid change.

Literature review

Culinary heritage and cultural identity

Food is more than sustenance. It is a cultural artifact that reflects the identity, memory, and socio-cultural evolution of a community. Culinary heritage, particularly traditional dishes, serves as a tangible expression of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2020). In Malaysia, the multi-ethnic culinary landscape including Malay, Chinese, and Indian cuisines symbolizes the nation's diversity and historical narratives (Lee, 2017). Laksa Johor, with its unique integration of spaghetti, spicy fish gravy, and ulam, exemplifies this fusion of local adaptation and historical continuity. The dish stands not only as a symbol of Johorean identity but also as a living representation of how cultural heritage evolves. Heritage foods like Laksa Johor are essential for fostering cultural pride, continuity, and intergenerational connection. As noted by Bessière (1998), traditional foods play a central role in maintaining a community's sense of place and cultural distinction in the face of global homogenization. However, without deliberate documentation, practice, and transmission, such heritage is at risk of erosion.

The impact of globalisation and modernisation on food traditions

Globalisation has brought about increased food accessibility, diversity, and innovation, but also a gradual displacement of traditional diets (Trichopoulou et al., 2007). The influx of fast food, ready-to-eat meals, and Western-style dining culture has led to a marked shift in food consumption patterns among the younger generation. In Malaysia, studies reveal a rising trend among youth toward convenience-based food choices and a diminishing familiarity with traditional dishes like Laksa Johor (Muhammad et al., 2013). Modernisation also affects the contexts in which traditional foods are prepared and consumed. Formerly central to communal gatherings and festive occasions, heritage foods are now mostly relegated to special events, rarely cooked in everyday life. The time-intensive preparation process and specialised ingredients required for Laksa Johor further discourage its regular production. As noted by Mohd Fikri et al. (2021), such shifts contribute to the gradual detachment of young people from their food heritage, both cognitively and behaviourally.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer and culinary sustainability

The transmission of food knowledge within families is vital to culinary sustainability. Traditionally, food skills were passed down orally and experientially from elders to younger generations (Shariff et al., 2022). However, the breakdown of extended family living arrangements and the reduced time for home cooking have disrupted these knowledge pathways. Young people today are less likely to inherit cooking techniques or recipes firsthand, particularly those involving complex heritage dishes. Laksa Johor, often associated with older generations, is rarely taught or discussed in youth circles unless during special events. When food preparation shifts from everyday routine to symbolic occasions, the knowledge associated with it becomes less embedded in daily life. This situation is compounded when families view traditional recipes as burdensome or irrelevant, leading to selective amnesia of food culture (Cheng, 2017). Consequently, unless alternative avenues for knowledge transfer such as culinary schools, digital media, or structured documentation are introduced, the survival of these food traditions remains tenuous.

Youth engagement with heritage foods

Understanding how youth relate to their culinary heritage is crucial to any sustainability initiative. While some studies identify growing disinterest among youth in traditional cooking, others reveal nuanced perspectives shaped by nostalgia, identity, and access (Shaari and Abd Rahman, 2017). Many young Malaysians appreciate heritage dishes but are detached from the preparation process. The association of traditional food with festivity and family gatherings fosters sentimental value, even if practical engagement is minimal. Digital platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have emerged as unexpected tools for youth to engage with heritage cooking. These platforms allow youth to explore food heritage visually and socially, bridging gaps between interest and practice (Lee and Tao, 2022). However, this engagement is often fragmented based on trends, entertainment, or convenience rather than a structured effort to sustain food traditions. The question remains whether digital curiosity can translate into sustained cultural knowledge. Moreover, youth attitudes toward cooking are often shaped by socio-economic conditions, gender expectations, and educational exposure. In urban settings, where lifestyle is fast-paced, youth may lack the time, space, or encouragement to engage with traditional cooking. A 2020 study by Gartaula et al. found that youth-led food sustainability is more likely when institutions and families work collaboratively to integrate traditional foodways into contemporary life.

Laksa Johor as a case study in culinary resilience

Laksa Johor stands as a culturally rich representation of Johorean culinary identity. Unlike other laksa variants across Malaysia, Laksa Johor is distinguished by its unconventional use of Italian spaghetti in place of traditional rice noodles—a substitution attributed to royal influence during the reign of Sultan Abu Bakar in the late 19th century. This unique adaptation reflects the dynamic evolution of Malay cuisine and its openness to external influences, particularly from European culinary traditions. The dish features a thick, spicy, and aromatic gravy made primarily from ikan parang (wolf herring) or ikan selayang (round scad), simmered with coconut milk, kerisik (toasted grated coconut), dried shrimp, chili paste, galangal, lemongrass, and assorted Malay spices. The resulting flavour profile is complex and layered creamy, savoury, mildly spicy, and fragrant, highlighting the richness of Malay culinary techniques.

Traditionally, the dish is garnished with fresh ulam (herbs), bean sprouts, shredded cucumber, long beans, lime wedges, and sambal belacan, offering textural contrast and freshness (Lee and Tao, 2022). The consumption of Laksa Johor is also tied to cultural decorum. It is traditionally eaten by hand, with the spaghetti twirled using the fingers, symbolising communal identity and reinforcing the dish's role in fostering social cohesion during festive and familial occasions such as Hari Raya and weddings (Cheng, 2017). The preparation of Laksa Johor is often communal and ceremonial, involving multiple family members and promoting intergenerational interaction. Despite its cultural richness, Laksa Johor faces increasing threats to its sustainability. The dish is becoming less visible in daily life, especially among youth, who often perceive it as outdated, laborious, or irrelevant to their modern lifestyles (Muhammad et al., 2013). Many younger individuals lack the skills or interest to prepare it, due in part to the complexity of its ingredients and procedures, as well as the shift toward fast, convenient, and Westernised foods. As a result, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge is breaking down, and the dish risks becoming a symbolic rather than practiced tradition.

Current practices indicate a growing disconnect between youth and this culinary heritage. While some young people consume Laksa Johor during festive occasions, their role is largely passive, with limited participation in its preparation. Studies have highlighted that this gap, if unaddressed, could lead to the dish's gradual disappearance from household menus and daily cultural practices (Shariff et al., 2022). In addition, the influence of digital food trends often prioritises visual novelty over traditional technique and meaning, further marginalising heritage dishes in popular culinary discourse. Nevertheless, Laksa Johor continues to exhibit cultural resilience. Efforts by culinary educators, local NGOs, and heritage festivals are helping to raise awareness and appreciation among the younger generation. Documenting recipes, promoting family-based cooking sessions, and integrating traditional dishes into culinary education curricula are important steps toward ensuring its sustainability. Laksa Johor thus represents both the challenges of heritage food preservation and the potential for revival through intentional intergenerational engagement and cultural revalorisation.

Sustaining culinary heritage through education and policy

Preservation of culinary heritage must extend beyond household kitchens and into formal and informal education systems. Integrating heritage food studies into culinary arts curricula, tourism campaigns, and community-based projects can increase youth exposure and participation. Institutions such as culinary academies, heritage NGOs, and local governments can play transformative roles in sustaining traditional food practices. At the policy level, Malaysia's recognition of food heritage remains limited, with few institutional frameworks that protect and promote traditional dishes. Although certain foods have gained recognition under state initiatives or tourism branding, there is no comprehensive national policy for intangible food heritage preservation. Drawing on models from countries like Japan and South Korea, which protect foodways as part of national identity, Malaysia could benefit from structured policies that support local producers, document traditional recipes, and educate youth. The involvement of youth in such efforts is not optional but essential. As inheritors of culture, they must be equipped, empowered, and inspired to participate in culinary heritage preservation. Collaborative approaches, merging traditional knowledge with modern platforms can

help bridge generational divides and keep dishes like Laksa Johor alive in evolving foodscapes.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how youth perceive and engage with Laksa Johor in the context of preserving Malay culinary heritage. A qualitative approach was deemed suitable for capturing nuanced cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and intergenerational dynamics associated with traditional food practices. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their personal narratives and reflections in their own words. The study focused on youth aged between 18 and 30 years residing in various districts in Johor. Using purposive sampling, 5 individuals were interviewed based on their familiarity with Laksa Johor and their relevance to the research objectives. Participants came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and occupations, including students, freelancers, chef trainees, food bloggers, and junior cooks. Their level of involvement with Laksa Johor varied from passive consumption to active preparation. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved. Specifically, analysis of five transcripts yielded 28 unique codes. Notably, 78.6% of these codes were identified within the first three interviews, while the remaining 21.4% emerged from the fourth and fifth transcripts. No new codes or themes were identified thereafter, indicating a diminishing return of novel insights and confirming that the data had reached saturation. This ensured that the key dimensions of youth engagement with Laksa Johor were adequately explored and well-articulated.

The interviews were conducted either in person or via virtual platforms, depending on accessibility and participant preference. Interviews were held in Bahasa Malaysia or English, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with prior consent. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences with Laksa Johor, familiarity with its ingredients and preparation, consumption practices, cultural associations, and perceived relevance in contemporary youth identity. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, following six-phase framework. NVivo 12 software supported the coding and thematic development. Informed consent was provided by all participants, who were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the freedom to withdraw at any time. Coded identifiers (e.g., Y1, Y2) were used to protect participant identities.

Results and Discussion

A total of five participants (n=5) were involved in the interview. Participant include 20 per cent male participant (n=1) and 80 per cent female participants (n=4). The majority of the participants aged 30 years old indicated (60 percent; n=3) while both 20 per cent (n=1) aged 27 and 24. All participants involved in the study are from the state of Johor (*Table 1*). Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed a total of seven interrelated themes that provide insight into the ways youth engage with Laksa Johor in contemporary settings. These themes are grouped under two overarching domains: (1) consumption patterns and accessibility, which examine how, when, and where youth consume Laksa Johor and the factors influencing these choices; and (2) knowledge transmission and cultural significance, which explore how culinary knowledge is passed

down, the role of digital media, and the emotional and cultural meanings attached to the dish. Together, these themes illustrate the evolving yet enduring connection between Laksa Johor and Johorean youth, offering a nuanced understanding of its place within modern heritage preservation efforts (*Figure 2*).

Table 1. Demographic profiles of participants.

Group	Participant	Age	Gender	Residing Area
1	Y1	30	Female	Kluang
1	Y2	27	Female	Batu Pahat
1	Y3	24	Female	Pasir Gudang
1	Y4	30	Male	Ayer Hitam
1	Y5	30	Female	Kluang

Table 2. Identified themes.

Themes	Number of code
Consumption patterns and accessibility	
Frequency of Consumption	6
Meal Settings	5
Method of Consumption	3
Availability and Access	4
Knowledge transmission and cultural significance	
Integrational Knowledge Transfer	2
Media and Technology as Learning Tools	2
Culinary Identity and Cultural Value	2

Consumption patterns and accessibility

Selective consumption of Laksa Johor

Participants reported consuming Laksa Johor infrequently, mostly during family gatherings or festive events such as Hari Raya. This illustrates a symbolic attachment to the dish rather than daily engagement:

“I only eat Laksa Johor about three to four times a year, mostly when there’s a family gathering or during festive events.” [Y3]

These reflections highlight that Laksa Johor remains a dish that is prepared and consumed during special occasions and festive celebrations, maintaining its role as a culturally significant food rather than a daily staple. Despite its limited presence in daily meals, this selective consumption reinforces its symbolic value as a heritage dish. The act of preparing and sharing Laksa Johor during meaningful events allows youth to reconnect with their cultural identity, maintain family traditions, and participate in the continuity of culinary heritage. These occasions serve not just as meals, but as opportunities for transmitting values and reinforcing communal belonging.

Meal settings and social context

Participants overwhelmingly associated Laksa Johor with family settings, where the dish is prepared and consumed during meaningful occasions such as birthdays, reunions, and Hari Raya celebrations. These settings serve not only as culinary experiences but also as moments of familial bonding and cultural reinforcement:

“Usually with family, especially during Hari Raya or birthdays. That’s when everyone’s home, and my mom cooks Laksa Johor.” [Y2]

Some participants also mentioned consuming the dish with friends or spouses when dining out, suggesting that while the traditional context remains strong, youth are also negotiating new social spaces in which the dish retains its cultural significance. This indicates a dynamic continuity of heritage food practices within both intimate and evolving communal settings.

Method of consumption

The method of eating Laksa Johor varies depending on the social context. At home or in familial settings, youth expressed a preference for eating with their hands, which reflects a continuation of traditional Johorean customs:

“At home, I eat with my hands. It feels more enjoyable. But if I’m at a restaurant or alone, I’ll use a spoon and fork.” [Y4]

This flexibility in eating practices reveals how cultural traditions are maintained while also being adapted to suit modern environments. Eating with hands is often regarded as a more authentic and sensorial experience, reinforcing a connection to one’s roots and upbringing. However, the shift to using cutlery in public or formal settings highlights how cultural expressions evolve in response to social norms and convenience. These patterns suggest that youth are not abandoning tradition but are instead selectively applying it, balancing respect for heritage with the expectations of contemporary dining culture.

Availability and access

Participants noted that Laksa Johor is not always readily available, especially in certain urban or suburban areas of Johor. Accessibility, both in terms of physical availability and convenience, emerged as a key factor influencing the frequency of consumption:

“It’s hard to find Laksa Johor in Pasir Gudang. I usually eat it when my mom cooks during holidays.” [Y3]

This limited availability reflects how traditional dishes like Laksa Johor are becoming increasingly confined to home settings or specific eateries, rather than being widely represented in commercial food outlets. Geographic location plays a substantial role in shaping youths’ engagement with their culinary heritage. Those in areas where the dish is less accessible may develop weaker experiential ties to it. This disparity in access may contribute to generational detachment from traditional food practices, particularly if younger individuals rely on market availability rather than home-based preparation. Ensuring broader access, especially in urban centers, could be critical to sustaining interest and familiarity among youth.

Knowledge transmission and cultural significance

Intergenerational knowledge transfer

Participants reported learning about Laksa Johor from family elders, particularly mothers and grandmothers, through informal, hands-on experiences in the kitchen. This transmission of knowledge often occurs during the preparation of festive meals or special family gatherings:

“I learned from my grandmother.” [Y4]

Such practices underscore the crucial role of home-based, experiential learning in sustaining culinary traditions. The act of cooking together allows for the transfer of more than just recipes. It also conveys values, techniques, and cultural meaning. This intimate mode of learning fosters a sense of responsibility and connection to heritage, reinforcing food as a vessel for cultural continuity. However, the sustainability of this knowledge transfer may be at risk if family cooking practices are disrupted by modern lifestyles, smaller household sizes, or time constraints. Encouraging youth to engage in family-based food preparation may thus be key to ensuring that traditional culinary knowledge endures across generations.

Media and technology as learning tools

Youth increasingly turn to social media platforms, video tutorials, and online classes to learn how to cook Laksa Johor. These digital tools serve as accessible entry points into traditional cuisine, especially for those who may not have regular access to elder family members:

“I once took an online class to learn the recipe.” [Y5]

While such platforms offer visual and step-by-step guidance, participants acknowledged that they often lack the depth and nuance found in traditional, hands-on instruction. The complexity of Laksa Johor with its multiple components, intricate techniques, and cultural symbolism is not always fully conveyed through digital formats. This suggests that while media and technology are valuable supplements to heritage learning, they are most effective when used in conjunction with direct, experiential teaching. Bridging both modes may be essential to engage digital-native youth while preserving the richness of culinary heritage.

Cultural identity and heritage value

Laksa Johor is perceived by participants as more than just a traditional food. It is a powerful symbol of Johorean identity and cultural pride:

“Laksa Johor is a symbol of Johor’s heritage, not just food on a plate.” [EXP2]

This sentiment reflects the emotional and symbolic weight the dish carries, positioning it as a living representation of regional heritage. Its distinct preparation, ingredients, and customs serve as markers of cultural belonging that connect individuals to their roots. For youth, engaging with Laksa Johor provides a tangible link to familial and communal history, reinforcing a shared sense of identity. As such, the dish not only

satisfies appetite but also fosters cultural continuity, making it an essential element in the preservation and celebration of Malay culinary heritage in Johor.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that Laksa Johor continues to hold a significant place in Johor youth's cultural identity, traditionally prepared and consumed during festive events and special family gatherings. It has never been an everyday dish, but rather one reserved for meaningful occasions, reflecting its long-standing role as a symbol of Johorean heritage. This pattern of selective consumption aligns with broader cultural trends in Southeast Asia, where heritage foods are tied to rituals and celebrations rather than daily life (Mohd Fikri et al., 2021; Kuhnlein and Receveur, 1996). Studies have shown that traditional foods often serve as markers of communal memory and regional identity, especially when linked to ceremonial or symbolic contexts. The consumption of heritage dishes like Laksa Johor becomes a performative act that reinforces ethnic belonging, cultural continuity, and emotional attachment, particularly among younger generations. Intergenerational knowledge transfer remains vital in preserving Laksa Johor, with mothers and grandmothers passing down recipes and techniques through hands-on learning. Although youth are increasingly turning to platforms like YouTube and TikTok to supplement their knowledge, these digital tools are viewed as complementary, not replacements for the depth of traditional instruction (Bessi re, 1998). Despite its limited frequency of consumption, Laksa Johor retains strong symbolic and emotional value among Johor youth. This enduring connection presents opportunities for cultural preservation through educational initiatives, culinary tourism, and integration into youth-oriented heritage campaigns that emphasize identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. Preserving Laksa Johor as a vibrant culinary heritage thus requires a multifaceted approach, one that respects its traditional role, supports familial transmission, and engages youth within contemporary contexts.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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