

PROMOTING MALAYSIAN ETHNIC RESTAURANTS: EXPLORING THE STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES OF TOURISM AGENCIES IN MALAYSIA

ISHAK, F. A. C.^{1*} – JIE, K. C.¹

¹ Faculty of Food Science and Technology, University Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author
e-mail: farahadibah[at]upm.edu.my

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Abstract. Ethnic restaurants, which reflect Malaysia's culinary diversity, are significant in attracting tourists and contributing to the country's economy. Despite their value in enriching the cultural tourism landscape, these establishments often receive limited visibility within national tourism strategies. Despite the cultural significance of ethnic restaurants, limited research explores how tourism agencies strategically promote them, creating a gap in understanding their role in culinary tourism. Additionally, financial constraints limit the promotional activities by restaurant businesses. Limited marketing resources for advertising and inadequate support by the tourism agencies also cause the restaurants to face difficulties in promoting themselves effectively. Thus, this research aims to investigate the tourism agencies' strategies in promoting Malaysian ethnic restaurants, and to explore the challenges faced by them in these efforts. This study adopted a qualitative research approach, in which 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with purposive sampling technique of tourism agencies in Malaysia, allowing a comprehensive understanding of their strategies and challenges in promoting Malaysian ethnic restaurants. These interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol to facilitate in-depth exploration of the research topic. Data were analyzed thematically where codes, categories and themes were formed. The findings of this research suggested that the strategies to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants are the strategic selection of restaurants, collaboration with different stakeholders, effective marketing, preservation of heritage and culture, enhancing tourist experiences, and data and feedback management. Furthermore, the challenges found include the limitations of restaurants, complication of restaurant owners, collaboration issues, unclear restaurant locations, resource limitations, and difficulties in preservation. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in culinary tourism by specifically focusing on tourism agencies and offers practical recommendations by assisting them in developing appropriate solutions to navigate the challenges faced, contributing to the success of Malaysian ethnic restaurants, making them an outstanding tourism destination in Malaysia.

Keywords: *ethnic restaurants, tourism marketing, restaurant promotion, challenges, cultural heritage*

Introduction

Malaysia is known for its rich multicultural and multiracial society, where diverse ethnic groups such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities coexist harmoniously. This cultural diversity is expressed through various elements, including ethnicities, races, languages, traditions, and cuisines. The country's unique multiculturalism offers a wide range of culinary experiences, with each ethnic group contributing distinct flavours and cooking traditions. Ethnic restaurants in Malaysia serve as cultural touchstones, not only reflecting the cultural diversity by serving different types of cuisines to the consumers (Aybek and Özdemir, 2022), but also contributing to the increase of tourists through the immersive and authentic dining experiences (Ishak et al., 2023). In this context, ethnic restaurants significantly enhance Malaysia's appeal as a tourist destination. Both public and private tourism agencies in Malaysia play essential roles in promoting ethnic restaurants in Malaysia. Their

collaborative efforts in developing and implementing strategies are essential in implementing strategic marketing initiatives to effectively showcase Malaysia's culinary diversity to both domestic and international tourists. Statistics from Tourism Malaysia indicate that food and beverage consistently rank among the top three tourist expenditures over these years, underscoring the sector's economic significance (SPDTM, 2024). Furthermore, another statistic also reported that 45.5% of the tourists visited Malaysia in 2023 for the purpose of enjoying local cuisines (MTPB, 2024).

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of ethnic cuisine in tourism promotion. For instance, Putra et al. (2024) states that promoting ethnic food significantly increases tourists' return rates. Similarly, Chen and Huang (2021) found that local food enhances tourists' loyalty to a destination. However, specific research focusing on the promotion of ethnic restaurants related to Malaysia's tourism agencies is limited. Hence, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the strategies that are currently employed by tourism agencies and identifying the challenges they have encountered in promoting Malaysian ethnic restaurants. Through this analysis, this study seeks to provide valuable insights that could be helpful in the development of more effective promotional strategies, thereby supporting the growth of Malaysia's culinary tourism sector and economic development. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in culinary tourism by specifically investigating the strategies and challenges of tourism agencies in promoting ethnic restaurants in Malaysia, as existing research has primarily focused on general tourism promotion but not culinary tourism. It will also highlight the effectiveness of different promotional approaches in enhancing the visibility and appeal of ethnic restaurants. Practically, by investigating the challenges faced to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants, this study particularly offers practical recommendations for tourism agencies, assisting them in developing appropriate solutions to address these challenges effectively. Moreover, by making ethnic cuisines more accessible and visible in the tourism sector, tourists are able to explore more of Malaysia's diverse culinary heritage, leading to a more immersive tourism experience for tourists.

Literature review

Malaysian ethnic restaurants

Malaysian ethnic restaurants are the food service establishments that serve traditional cuisines that represent the diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities such as the various ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak (Shafii, 2009). These restaurants play an important role in preserving and promoting Malaysia's rich culinary heritage by offering authentic dishes. According to Ghosh et al. (2023), traditional food is prepared using traditional recipes, cooking techniques, and locally sourced ingredients. Malaysian ethnic restaurants contribute significantly to the tourism industry by offering tourists an opportunity to taste the authentic local flavours of food. It is important for the tourism agencies to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants as part of the tourist destinations. In this study, Malaysian ethnic restaurants are defined based on several key characteristics. First, they must primarily serve the food that reflects the cultural and culinary identity of a specific ethnic group in Malaysia. For example, Malay restaurants serve nasi lemak and beef rendang; Chinese restaurants serve char kuey teow; and Indian restaurants serve roti canai. Next, Malaysian ethnic restaurants should incorporate traditional cooking

methods and ingredients (Ghosh et al., 2023). Indian dishes are usually infused with spices like cumin and cardamom; while indigenous restaurants rely on the local resources such as wild herbs and meats. Besides, Malaysian ethnic restaurants have the cultural ambience and decorations that reflect the diverse heritage of the ethnics. The designs used by the Malay restaurants are usually woods, plants, and stones to create a “kampung” environment (Wong, 2023); while Chinese restaurants use traditional lanterns to create a cozy ambience, and the colour scheme is usually red.

Tourism agencies

Tourism agencies refer to the organizations, whether government or private entities, that are responsible for promoting and facilitating tourism-related activities, including destination marketing, tour planning, and tourist engagement. These agencies play a crucial role in enhancing a country's tourism sector by developing digital marketing, collaborating with stakeholders, and implementing promotional campaigns to attract both local and international tourists. In the online portal indicates that the key stakeholders in tourism promotions include the public institutions, tour operators, travel agencies, tourism promotion committees, hotels, resorts, restaurants, influencers, residents and tourists. For this research, tourism agencies are defined as the institutions or businesses that are involved in the marketing and promotion of tourism-related experiences, specifically focusing on the food tourism sector and the Malaysian ethnic restaurants. Tourism agencies are the key players in promoting Malaysia as a tourist destination, with food tourism becoming an important sector. These agencies include government bodies that develop tourism campaigns and programs to promote Malaysia's cultural and culinary heritage; and private agencies such as tour operators and travel agencies that design and market tour packages that feature dining experiences in Malaysian ethnic restaurants. Mat Som et al. (2019) also suggest that the travel agencies and tour organizers should offer tour packages that focus on food culture and ethnic cuisines, so that the tourists can have a better understanding of Malaysia's cultural heritage.

Concept of promotion

Promotion is a critical component of the marketing mix that involves communicating the information of a product or service to potential customers. In the context of tourism, promotional strategies are essential for creating awareness and attracting visitors to a destination, such as Malaysian ethnic restaurants. Effective promotional strategies typically involve the use of various platforms, including social media, advertising, campaigns and events to reach the target market. For example, the use of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are able to target specific audiences based on their interests, and enhance the audience interaction (Herdhiana, 2024). In this study, promotion is defined as the marketing strategies and initiatives implemented by the tourism agencies to increase the recognition of Malaysian ethnic restaurants as part of the tourism sector. Previous research has highlighted that food and beverage promotion can significantly influence tourist decision-making. A study by Hall and Sharples (2004) showed that promotional campaigns related to local food often result in increased tourist engagement and higher return rates. The examples of promotional efforts for food tourism include the social media engagement, food festivals, food exhibitions, and collaborations with other businesses and influencers. These effective

promotions help Malaysian ethnic restaurants to gain a competitive advantage in the tourism industry, attracting more tourists to Malaysia and contributing to the Malaysian economy.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate the strategies and challenges of the tourism agencies in promoting Malaysian ethnic restaurants. According to Tenny et al. (2022), qualitative research is able to gather more information and understand the data easier, compared to quantitative research that primarily focuses on numerical data. The location of the data collection was in the Selangor and Kuala Lumpur areas. These areas attract a large number of local and international tourists to visit. According to Siddharta (2024), in 2023, there were 27.58 million local tourists visiting Selangor, making it to be the most popular domestic destination in Malaysia, followed by Kuala Lumpur, with around 22 million local tourists. As the capital city of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur is home to a wide variety of ethnic restaurants that represent the Malaysian culinary heritage. Similarly, Selangor is the most urbanized state in Malaysia (Hashim and Shuib, 2012). Thus, it also has a growing number of tourist attractions, with numerous numbers of ethnic restaurants that provide authentic cultural dining experiences. This study adopted a purposive sampling approach to select participants directly involved in the promotion of ethnic restaurants within Malaysia's tourism sector. Informants were drawn from both government and private tourism agencies that actively shape the country's culinary tourism strategies. Their roles included planning, executing, and evaluating promotional initiatives that reflect Malaysia's multicultural food heritage. In total, 12 individuals participated in the study with 5 representing government agencies and 7 from private sector organizations. The sample was considered sufficient after reaching thematic saturation, where no new insights emerged and the data provided a comprehensive view of stakeholder perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, allowing flexibility in responses while maintaining focus on the research themes. An interview protocol was used to guide discussions, helping ensure clarity and consistency across sessions. Informants were approached through a combination of emails, telephone calls, and personal visits, with interviews scheduled at times and locations convenient to them. Depending on availability, interviews were conducted either in person or online. All sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of participants to preserve the accuracy and integrity of the information shared. Analysis of the interview data followed thematic and content analysis procedures. Transcripts were carefully examined and systematically coded using ATLAS.ti software, enabling the organization of meaningful data patterns. Similar codes were grouped into categories and further developed into broader themes that reflected the participants' perspectives. In cases where interviews were conducted in languages other than English, coding was completed in the original language before translation, ensuring the preservation of nuance and meaning. The credibility of the findings was strengthened through triangulation with supporting materials such as agency documents, digital media content, and promotional materials. Consistency in interpretation was maintained through repeated cross-checks and thorough review of all transcripts.

Results and Discussion

Strategies employed by tourism agencies to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants

Analysis of interviews with tourism agencies' staff revealed several strategies to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants. These strategies include: (1) Strategic selection of restaurants, (2) Collaboration with different stakeholders, (3) Effective marketing, (4) Preservation of heritage and culture, (5) Enhancing tourist experiences, and (6) Data and feedback management. Each strategy comprised of several categories, as shown in Figure 1.

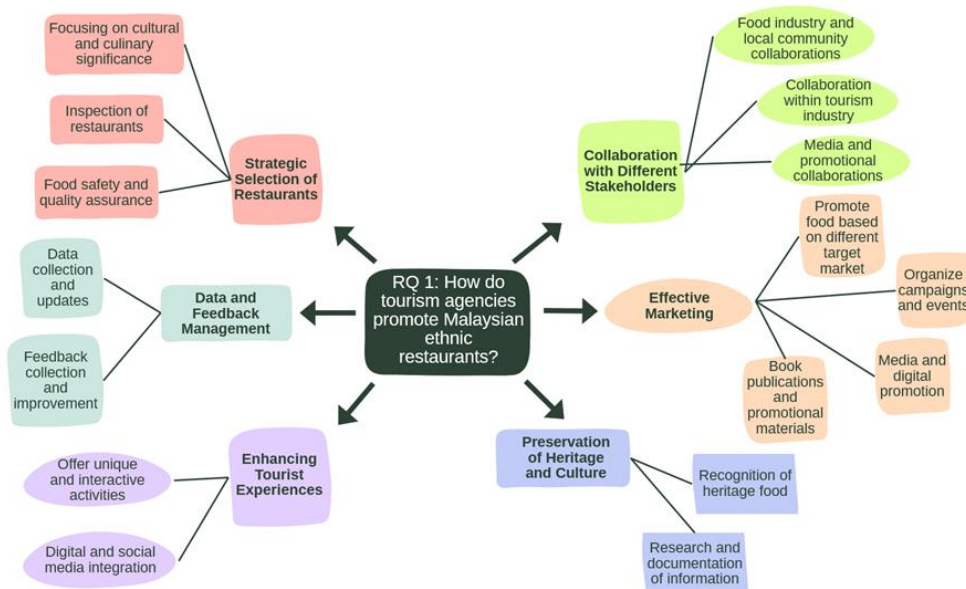


Figure 1. Strategies of tourism agencies to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants.

Strategic selection of restaurants

It was found that both public and private tourism agencies pay attention to the cultural, culinary, food quality and food safety of the restaurants by visiting the premises before selecting them to be promoted. Cultural elements allow the tourists to experience Malaysia's diverse culinary traditions, thus creating a memorable dining experience for them, increasing their return rate. The traditional food, particularly different ethnic cuisines, are the elements that attract tourists to visit restaurants in Malaysia. Tourism agencies also focus on the unique dining experience in restaurants such as special ambience, cultural performance, cooking demonstration, and farm-to-table concept. These features have offered the tourists a richer cultural experience, making the restaurant more appealing as a tourist destination.

"We begin the selection by identifying the restaurants with high-rated cultural significance." (I7)

"We focus on authentic food, especially the restaurants that serve traditional food." (I10)

"We focus on the restaurants that offer unique dining experiences, like the ambience of the restaurants have special decorations, or they provide the cultural performances, and some restaurants may have cooking demonstrations." (I5)

Tourism agencies also conducted inspections on the ethnic restaurants before selection, in which they will inspect the restaurants by themselves to ensure that they meet the criteria to be promoted as a tourist destination. They also read the reviews and comments in the website to identify the restaurants that are suitable to be selected for promotion. Aureliano-Silva et al. (2021) also claims that online reviews can help the agencies to assess a restaurant's popularity, service quality, and overall reputation. Besides that, the tourism agencies are also very aware of the food safety and hygiene of the restaurants. For the restaurants with franchise systems, the tourism agencies are concerned with every branch's food quality, thus they will make regular visits to all the branches in different areas to ensure the consistency of the quality provided in the restaurants.

"We will inspect the premises ourselves to select the suitable restaurants that meet our criteria." (I5)

"We pay attention to the online reviews on Google to see the performance of the restaurants." (I6)

"No negotiation for the hygiene of food. It is the most important element in a restaurant." (I9)

"For the restaurants with franchise systems, not only their HQ, we will also visit their branches in other areas to check and ensure their food quality is the same." (I1)

Collaboration with different stakeholders

The collaboration with ethnic restaurants is crucial in the tourism promotion to obtain the most updated information regarding the premises, and tourism agencies also share their recipes collected to the restaurants. It shows that collaboration is a win-win strategy for both tourism agencies and restaurant owners. Moreover, some public tourism agencies also collaborate with the ethnic restaurants in terms of developing tour packages. The collaboration with local communities allows the identification of potential heritage food through obtaining the recipes from locals, and publishing them as a book. Then, public tourism agencies also work with the overseas agencies and influencers to exchange the information, develop tour packages, and make video contents to promote the Malaysian cuisines and ethnic restaurants. The collaboration across states and different agencies in Malaysia also provide insights into the tourism industry promotion.

"Our department also collaborates with the ethnic restaurants. If there are any changes of restaurant information, the owner will inform us and we will update in our database." (I1)

"We collaborate with the local communities. We visit each state in Malaysia to identify the potential heritage food. We obtained the recipe from the local residents and documented it in a book to be published." (I11)

"We promote ethnic restaurants through partnerships with travel agents in other countries to share information with each other." (I7)

"If there are programs such as food exhibitions or entrepreneurship activities, we will collaborate with other agencies to involve the ethnic restaurants as a way to promote their food to the communities." (I1)

Tourism agencies are collaborating with travel agencies to develop tour packages that relate to the local food and ethnic restaurants. This is because there are tourists who are foodies, and they love to explore different types of traditional food in Malaysia. In terms of media and promotional collaborations, the agencies have collaborated with the book writer to publish the books related with the heritage food and their recipes. One of the books is the "Authentic Recipe from Malaysia" written by Hutton and Tettoni (2012). This book contains 62 recipes with detailed descriptions of Malaysian cooking methods and ingredients. Tourism agencies also collaborate with the influencers as a strategy to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants through their dining experiences and preparation of traditional food. With their high influence, the tourists are attracted to visit these restaurants.

"We collaborate with the travel agencies, and make the ethnic restaurants as one of the locations to be included in their tour packages." (I11)

"We collaborate with the book writers by providing our input to them. Then they will publish books related to heritage food recipes. The examples of books are 'Authentic Malaysian Recipe' and 'Warisan Makanan Negeri Johor'." (I11)

"We make videos related to food. We invited chefs with high influence, such as Dato Chef Ismail, Chef Fikri, Chef Asma to show the cooking method of the food. Then they will also post the video on their social media." (I12)

Effective marketing

In order to promote different ethnic foods in Malaysia, the tourism agencies should not be bias against any specific ethnic, to showcase the cultural diversity of Malaysia. As foreign tourists come from various countries around the world, they would have different dietary preferences. As a tourism agency that provides travel packages to these tourists, it is important to promote the restaurants that align with their preferences, ensuring the food matches their tastes. Next, tourism agencies are focusing on the promotion of traditional food by exposing traditional cooking methods and ingredients to the younger generation, allowing a better understanding of their cultural heritage. This effort helps to preserve traditional culinary practices, and this would contribute to the attraction of tourists. The emphasis on halal certification in restaurants also ensures that the tourists can enjoy their travels without concerns about food authenticity.

"We are not biased against any specific ethnic, we promote all ethnicities and all states in Malaysia." (I11)

"The tourists are coming from different countries. So, we will promote the restaurants based on their races to ensure the flavours of the food matched with their preferences." (I1)

"The tourists are coming from different countries. So, we will promote the restaurants based on their races to ensure the flavours of the food matched with their preferences." (I1)

"For halal restaurants, we emphasize their certification and ensure that they are included in the packages targeted at Muslim tourists." (I6)

Organizing food festivals serves as an effective strategy for promoting Malaysia's diverse ethnic cuisines and preserving its rich culinary heritage. By featuring different traditional foods, the food festivals provide a platform to show the uniqueness of each ethnic cuisine, allowing visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the cooking techniques, ingredients, and traditional equipment used in heritage food preparation. Some agencies also mentioned that organizing roadshows is one of their strategies to expose traditional food and ethnic restaurants to the local communities and tourists. Visit Malaysia Year 2026 is also a program that eventually promotes the ethnic restaurants by attracting tourists to taste the food. The Malaysian Kitchen program was also organized in the past to promote Malaysian food in foreign countries. This statement supports the study by Rockower (2012), who claims that the Malaysia Kitchen program is introduced to promote Malaysian cuisines to an international level.

"Every year, we organize the food festival with the concept of food demonstration and sales. We demonstrate the technique and cooking method, including the equipment used, as a way to promote the heritage food." (I12)

"We organize roadshows or booths to expose the traditional food and ethnic restaurants in Malaysia to the local communities." (I2)

"In conjunction with the Visit Malaysia Year 2026, we are going to increase the number of gazetted heritage foods in Malaysia." (I11)

"In the past, we had the Malaysian Kitchen, in which we owned the restaurants in London, New York, Dubai and Sydney. These restaurants serve satay, rendang, nasi lemak, laksa, roti canai, and curry laksa." (I8)

The use of digital media, particularly video content, has become a powerful tool in promoting traditional foods. By creating food-related videos with the influence of famous chefs, tourism agencies effectively enhance the popularity of different Malaysian foods. Social media are also used to share restaurant reviews and food package promotions. Some agencies uploaded the information of gastronomic tourism in their official portal, through e-brochure and e-booklet. This is proved by Mohd Sanip et al. (2021), in which they found that the Malaysian Government had put in a great

effort to promote Malaysian cuisines using brochures and travel guides, increasing the visibility of Malaysia as a gastronomic tourist destination. They also provide physical books and booklets for free to the local communities. Brochures and flyers are utilized as effective promotional tools to highlight ethnic restaurants featured in the tour packages.

"We make videos related to food. These videos can be found on YouTube. We invited chefs with high influence, such as Dato' Chef Ismail, Chef Fikri, Chef Asma to show the cooking method of the food. Then they will also post the video on their social media." (I12)

"Social media is our primary channel to promote the food packages, especially the platforms like Instagram and Facebook." (I6)

"The information related to gastrotourism can be found in the e-brochure and e-booklet in our official portal." (I1)

"We provide a booklet named 'Splendid Selangor Industrial Tourism'. We have listed out the premises in Selangor to be promoted. We will provide the booklet for free to the communities during the roadshows or booths." (I2)

"We include the restaurants in our brochures and flyers for our tour packages. After getting permission from the restaurant owner, we also add the photos of their food inside our brochures. This can help us to attract customers and promote the restaurant at the same time." (I5)

Preservation of heritage and culture

Tourism agencies put in great effort to promote heritage food to an international level, in order to attract more foreigners to visit the related ethnic restaurants in Malaysia. Until 2018, there are a total of 213 dishes being officially recognized as national heritage foods (JWNM, 2025). Tourism agencies aim to increase this number to strengthen Malaysia's food tourism appeal. Once the food is officially gazetted, this has ensured its recognition as part of Malaysia's national and a potentially UNESCO-listed heritage. Tourism agencies have actively pursued UNESCO recognition for Malaysia's heritage foods to enhance global awareness and attract international tourists. By collaborating with other countries through multi-nomination, they strengthen the cultural significance of shared traditional dishes.

"As for now, there are a total of 213 gazetted heritage foods. A strategy for leading up with Visit Malaysia Year 2026 is by increasing the number of gazetted foods. After a food is nominated to heritage status, we will conduct research to collect data, then the inventory data is assessed by the stakeholders. They will discuss the declaration of heritage food, and this declaration will be published." (I11)

"We manage the recognition of heritage food by UNESCO to attract more foreigners to Malaysia." (I12)

Encouraging research on local food history also further strengthens the appreciation and preservation efforts, making heritage cuisines become a key attraction in food tourism. Tourism agencies also highlight traditional cooking methods and equipment in food festivals to promote heritage food. The concept of demonstration showcases how traditional cooking methods influence food texture and taste. This approach not only preserves culinary heritage, but also attracts tourists who seek a healthier dining experience. Researches are conducted to collect data of the potential heritage food, then the findings are compiled into inventory data to document and preserve information on heritage food. This systematic approach ensures that valuable culinary knowledge is recorded, supporting future heritage recognition and promotional efforts.

"The importance of cuisine history is one of the criteria for us to promote these foods. We encourage more people to do research on the history of local cuisines." (I11)

"When we are promoting heritage food, we are focusing on their traditional cooking method and the equipment used. The texture of food would be different if the restaurant uses traditional equipment instead of modern technology. This would be able to attract the tourists to taste the food." (I12)

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Enhancing tourism experiences

Tourism agencies organize food-themed tours as a strategy to attract tourists by offering immersive culinary experiences. They also enhance their tour packages by incorporating interactive experiences like cooking classes. These activities allow tourists to learn traditional cooking techniques, explore local ingredients, and gain hands-on experience in preparing Malaysian dishes. Moreover, they also support ethnic restaurants by leveraging digital tools to enhance their visibility. By creating QR codes linked to Google Maps or Waze, they provide easy access to restaurant locations. This digitalization efforts improve convenience for tourists, encouraging more visits to the ethnic restaurants in Malaysia. They also assist ethnic restaurants in creating an "instagrammable" corner to attract tourists and social media influencers. These spaces encourage visitors to take photos and record videos in the restaurants, sharing their experiences in the social media, thus improving the restaurant's visibility and promoting food tourism in Malaysia.

"We offered different themes of food tour packages before. This strategy allows us to attract lots of tourists." (I8)

"We always give support to the cooking classes, for example the Spice Garden in Penang, they will show the tourists about the types of herbs, the place where they source the ingredients, and they will teach the tourists how to cook." (I8)

"We help the ethnic restaurants from the aspect of digitalization to improve their visibility in Malaysia. We will create QR code for Google Maps or Waze, and upload in our portal. The users can just click the link or QR to show the direction to the restaurants." (I1)

"We encourage and help the ethnic restaurants to create an instagrammable corner for the tourists, and the tiktokers can also record videos as a content to promote these restaurants." (I1)

Data and feedback management

Tourism agencies gather information on ethnic restaurants from online sources, food bloggers, and social media influencers, ensuring that the most relevant restaurants are included in their promotions, attracting more tourists to visit those restaurants. Besides, tourism agencies collect data from local communities to identify hidden or lesser-known ethnic restaurants. After the tourism agencies collect sufficient data, they will produce a database of ethnic restaurants and tourism products. This database is regularly updated to provide the latest information to the visitors. The agencies utilize customer feedback through surveys and online reviews to assess the success of tour packages offered, by allowing them to identify areas for improvement, guiding both the agencies and restaurants in enhancing menu offerings and overall service quality to meet the tourists' expectations. They also collect the reviews from media teams to enhance the visibility of ethnic restaurants. The reviews are collected from the media visits, in which the agencies will arrange them to review the restaurants. These reviews are then shared on social media platforms as a strategic promotional effort to attract more tourists.

"Our department will collect the information related to ethnic restaurants from the internet and influencers in social media." (I1)

"The information are collected from the local communities, they are able to recommend some small restaurants that have less recognition." (I5)

"Our department creates a database of tourism products. When we receive more detailed information, it will be updated in the database. We will always visit the premises to obtain more detailed information, for example these restaurants may have expanded their premise size or added more items in their menu." (I1)

"After the travel, we will provide the feedback forms to our customers. We will measure from different aspects of our tour packages, including the food to survey their satisfaction level. Then we will make improvements from there." (I4)

"We will pass the information collected to the Department of Promotion and Corporate, then they will bring the media team to visit these ethnic restaurants to give reviews. Then we will help to upload these reviews in our social media, as a strategy to promote the restaurants." (I1)

Challenges faced by tourism agencies to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants

Several challenges were faced by tourism agencies during the promotion of Malaysian ethnic restaurants. These challenges include: (1) Limitations of the restaurants, (2) Complication of restaurant owners, (3) Collaboration issues, (4) Unclear restaurant locations, (5) Resource limitations, and (6) Difficulties in preservation. Each strategy comprised several categories, as shown in *Figure 2*.

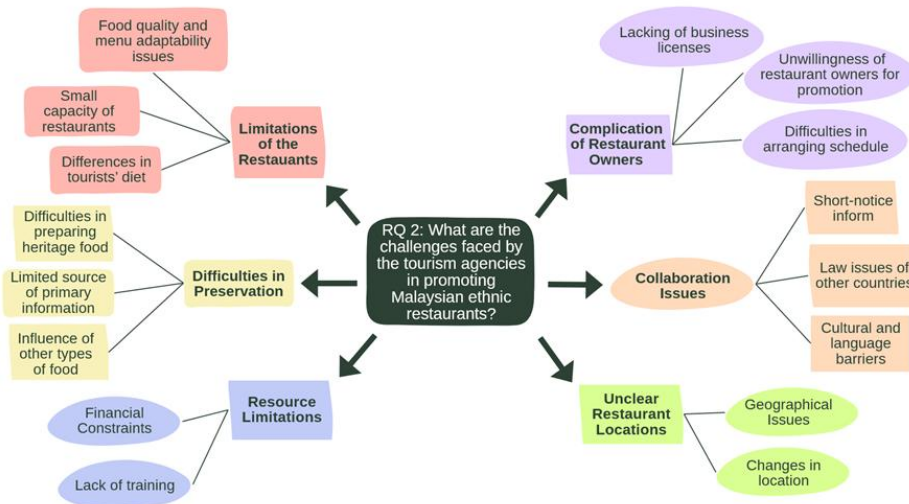


Figure 2. Challenges faced by tourism agencies to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants.

Limitations of the restaurants

This theme indicates that the restaurants face the difficulties to accommodate tourists' requests due to their limitations. Maintaining consistent food quality and flavour is a key challenge for tourism agencies, as repeat tourists will expect the same taste and experience. Variations in ingredients, cooking techniques, and staff skills can affect the consistency of the food quality. Adapting menus to cater to international tastes is also a challenge for restaurant owners, as they must balance authenticity with customer preferences. Limited capacity of restaurants also causes inability to accommodate large groups of tourists. Some agencies also face challenges in selecting restaurants that can accommodate the diverse dietary restrictions of tourists. Even though the tourism agencies have collected the dietary details of tourists before the reservations, they still face last-minute changes in dietary requirements. This unexpected modification makes it difficult for the agencies to coordinate with restaurants efficiently.

"One of the major challenges for us is ensuring consistent quality and flavour of food in the restaurants, because some of the tourists may come again to taste the same food." (I10)

"It is difficult to find suitable restaurants that are able to handle the special requirements of the international tourists because of their dietary restrictions." (I4)

"The major challenge is managing last minute dietary requests. Even when we have collected their dietary information during booking, they may still make last minute changes." (I5)

Complication of restaurant owners

There are some restaurant owners who did not give cooperation when the tourism agencies were preparing to promote their restaurants, causing the tourism agencies to be unable to provide their support. Tourism agencies face limitations in promoting restaurants that are not officially registered or lacking business licenses. Then, some restaurant owners are reluctant to be promoted by tourism agencies, as they think that overexposure may impact their business operations, making them unwilling to participate in tourism promotions. It is also a challenge for the tourism agencies to adjust their schedules according to restaurant owners' requests when they are planning to conduct site visits to the restaurants. This is because many restaurant owners are concerned that this could disrupt their regular operations. This limitation makes the agencies challenging to arrange the schedules for visits.

"We are unable to promote the restaurants that are not registered and do not hold a business license. This is because most of the ethnic restaurant owners, especially the indigenous restaurants, are lacking the knowledge to register their businesses." (I2)

"Some restaurant owners want to keep their restaurants as a hidden gem, they only want to serve their regular customers in a specific area. They think that too much crowd is not beneficial to them, and may cause their reputation to drop, they want to keep their restaurants as a secret place and do not want to be promoted." (I1)

"Normally, we have to arrange our schedules based on the request of the restaurant owners, because they do not want to affect their operation hours of the premise." (I1)

Collaboration issues

There are issues and problems encountered by the tourism agencies during their collaboration with different sectors. First, last-minute collaboration requests from agencies pose a challenge, as they require sufficient time to plan and coordinate effectively. The short notice makes the agencies difficult to arrange schedules. Next, during collaboration with foreign countries, the tourism agencies must navigate legal regulations regarding food transportation, especially when organizing international food-related events or tours. Language and cultural barriers are also a challenge when collaborating with small ethnic restaurants, as some owners may have limited English proficiency. This can create difficulties in communication, especially when catering to international tourists.

"There are some agencies that want to collaborate with us but give notice to us in a short time, this has made it difficult to schedule the collaboration." (I1)

"We have to understand the law of the country and what type of thing that we can bring it. Raw food is actually a very sensitive matter, so we have to know what can be brought in and what can be sourced from that country." (I8)

"Cultural and language barriers are common, because some restaurants may not be familiar when dealing with international tourists." (I10)

Unclear restaurant locations

The location of some ethnic restaurants presents a challenge, as they are situated in hidden areas without nearby tourist attractions. This makes it difficult to attract visitors. Furthermore, frequent changes in restaurant locations cause a challenge for tourism agencies to maintain accurate information. While some restaurant owners did not inform the tourism agencies about their relocations, this has made the agencies difficult to update databases and tour packages, leading to confusion among tourists and affecting the effectiveness of promotional efforts.

"Another challenge is the location. Sometimes the restaurants are located in hidden areas, and there is no tourist attraction." (I4)

"If the restaurant owners want to move their location, they will inform us and we will update in our database and portal so that the tourists can take note that the premise has changed its location. If they do not inform us, then we are unable to know their current location and cannot make the update in our database." (I1)

Resource limitations

Financial constraints limit the ability of tourism agencies to provide support to the ethnic restaurants. While funding is needed for small businesses to upgrade their facilities and attract tourists, limited budgets restrict the level of support available. Additionally, rising operational costs also make it challenging for small restaurants to sustain their businesses. Lack of training among restaurant staff is another challenge in catering to diverse tourist needs. Tourism agencies have to recognize the need for more training programs to enhance service quality and communication skills. Research indicates that worker training needs are the most important in customer service to enhance the overall tourist experience (Ohnoutka and Hughes, 2002).

"Our budget is not unlimited. We are unable to give too much financial support to the restaurants." (I1)

"More funding is required for small businesses to upgrade their facilities to attract tourists." (I7)

"More training programs are needed to improve the service quality at the restaurants." (I6)

Difficulties in preservation

There are some factors that cause the difficulty of preserving heritage foods, making them to be forgotten, thus affecting the visibility of ethnic restaurants. First, the complexity and long preparation time of traditional dishes make it difficult for the tourism agencies to preserve heritage food. This is because many young people are reluctant to learn these cooking methods, leading to concerns about the sustainability of these culinary heritages. Moreover, the high cost of certain ingredients makes it difficult for restaurants to prepare traditional dishes, leading to a decline in their availability. As a result, some heritage foods have become less common in recent years. Sustainable

sourcing strategies are needed to support the preservation of these traditional culinary practices.

"The cooking method is too difficult, and the preparation time also takes a long time. Young people nowadays don't want to make these foods." (I11)

"Some ingredients are difficult to source and very expensive. This causes these foods to disappear in recent years." (I11)

The process of gazetting heritage food also faces challenges due to the lack of primary sources and standardized information. This is because there are variations in recipes from various sources, it becomes difficult to verify the authenticity of the compiled data. The growing influence of modern food, such as western cuisines and fast food, have affected the preservation of traditional dishes, as they are being forgotten by the local communities. Therefore, the tourism agencies are focusing on the promotion of traditional food to the younger generation, allowing a better understanding of their cultural heritage, thus preserving the traditional culinary practices, contributing to the attraction of tourists.

"From the aspect of gazetting, we are lacking a primary source of information about food. It is difficult to identify which and whom to be referred to because everyone has a different recipe, we are unable to ensure that the information that has been compiled is the real and true information." (I11)

"Our main challenge is the influence of modern food such as western food and fast food causing traditional food to be forgotten." (I11)

Conclusion

The objectives of this study are to investigate the tourism agencies' strategies in promoting Malaysian ethnic restaurants, and to explore the challenges faced by them in these efforts. These objectives had been achieved successfully, in which six strategies were found, including strategic selection of restaurants, collaboration with different stakeholders, effective marketing, preservation of heritage and culture, enhancing tourist experiences, and data and feedback management. Six challenges were also identified, which are limitations of the restaurants, complication of restaurant owners, collaboration issues, unclear restaurant locations, resource limitations, and difficulties in preservation. The findings of this study provide an insight into the strategies and challenges of different tourism agencies in managing the promotion of Malaysian ethnic restaurants. With that, this study would be able to contribute to the success of Malaysian ethnic restaurants, making them an outstanding tourist destination in Malaysia. Despite the contributions of this study, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. First of all, this study is only focusing on the tourism agencies' strategies and challenges to promote Malaysian ethnic restaurants. This issue limits the insight from the other stakeholders that are also involved in tourism promotion. It is suggested that further research should expand the sample size by including the perspectives from different tourism stakeholders, such as restaurant owners, tourists, and local communities, in order to explore more detailed information regarding this topic. Other than that, this

study was only limited to the tourism agencies located in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur areas. Even though Selangor and Kuala Lumpur are the most popular domestic destinations in Malaysia (Siddharta, 2024), the effects of ethnic restaurants promotion in different areas in Malaysia are also important to be investigated. Therefore, it is recommended that further research can be conducted in different states of Malaysia, such as Johor, Penang and Melacca, in order to explore how different environments can affect the promotion of Malaysian ethnic restaurants.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in the fields of tourism promotion, food tourism, and marketing strategies. It fills the gap by providing insights into how different factors influence the tourism agencies' promotional effectiveness in culinary tourism. The study also highlights the importance of stakeholder's collaboration, cultural heritage preservation, and digital marketing strategies in enhancing the visibility of ethnic restaurants. Practically, this study provides valuable insights for tourism agencies and restaurant owners in enhancing the promotion of Malaysian ethnic restaurants. The findings offer essential recommendations for tourism agencies to refine their marketing strategies, optimize collaboration efforts, and address the challenges that affect restaurant promotion. Tourism agencies can utilize these findings to improve their promotional efforts to increase the visibility of ethnic restaurants among tourists. This research also emphasizes the importance of partnerships between tourism agencies, restaurant owners, and travel companies. By fostering stronger collaborations, these agencies are able to integrate ethnic dining experiences into tour packages, food festivals, and destination branding campaigns effectively. With that, the visibility and appeal of ethnic restaurants can be increased, thus contributing to the growth of Malaysia's food tourism sector.

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Conflict of interest

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

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