

Exploring Gastronomy Tourism as Potential Halal Tourism Products: Preliminary Study of Tourist Perception on Baba Nyonya Cuisines

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Abstract: Gastronomy tourism has gained prominence globally, offering local and international tourists unique experiences for their taste palettes. The demand for Halal food among Muslim tourists has significantly increased as more people seek authentic and culturally appropriate dining experiences when travelling. This paper examines gastronomy tourism from the perspective of Islamic tourism, focusing on the Baba Nyonya cuisine; a combination of Chinese and Malay flavors as a viable Halal tourism product, aligned with the growing demand for Halal-certified options in the tourism industry. Factors of Halal certification, cultural familiarity, food awareness, and involvement, were explored. A structured survey was distributed to 385 tourists around Banda Hilir, Melaka, to explore Baba Nyonya cuisine's potential as a gastronomy tourism attraction. Baba Nyonya cuisine was found to be a promising attraction for Halal-conscious tourists. Interestingly, the Baba Nyonya cuisine appealed more to non-Halal food enthusiasts compared to a Halal option among Muslim tourists, since few of the Baba Nyonya restaurants were not Halal certified. This study underscores opportunities to increase the variety of Halal-certified foods and provide insights for travel marketers and local cuisine operators to capitalize on Baba Nyonya cuisines, thus pinning Malaysia as a leading destination for Halal gastronomy tourism.

Keywords: *Gastronomy Tourism, Halal certified foods, Baba Nyonya cuisines, Islamic Tourism*

1. Introduction

Food connects people in numerous ways, acting as a universal language that transcends cultural, linguistic, and geographical barriers fostering a sense of belonging, community, and shared experience. Gastronomy tourism is an emerging field, however, limited research explored ethnic cuisine and tourism in Southeast Asia (Ting et al., 2020). According to Wong et al (2022), gastronomy is particularly important in defining the image and the attractiveness of a destination by offering an immense variety of delicious local dishes that could attract visitors. These traditional cuisines are not just about taste but also embody history and identity, making them powerful tourist attractions. Food heritage has become a major draw in tourism, as it preserves and showcases classical and traditional cuisines that are key cultural identity markers for different regions and communities (Rahim et al., 2020).

The Malaysian tourism industry recognizes gastronomy as a valuable tourism product, offering visitors unique culinary experiences that attract tourists globally (Xiong & Zhang, 2021). Malaysia has also made headway in establishing itself as a Halal Hub to take advantage of Islamic tourism by strategically positioning wide arrays of local dishes available to the world Muslim market (Khan & Callanan, 2021). Malaysia's strategic focus on gastronomy has positioned the country as a renowned culinary destination, supported by its thriving restaurant and food service sectors (Aziza et al., 2020). The fusion of cultures evident in Malaysian cuisine especially Malay, Chinese and Indian has created beautiful and enticing delicacies that have drawn the attention of many tourists (Konar et al., 2016).

While Melaka's historical sites have traditionally attracted tourists, there is growing interest in its culinary offerings (Elfrida et al., 2020). Jalis et al (2009) identified Baba Nyonya cuisine as a distinct and intriguing component of Malaysian gastronomy, with its rich history and fusion of flavors. Despite the abundance of Peranakan restaurants in Melaka, few hold Halal certifications. This is a concern as halal tourism has experienced significant growth in recent years, and incorporating Baba Nyonya cuisine into this market could present a valuable opportunity (Xiong & Zhang, 2021).

While the study highlights the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisine as a Halal tourism product, it may not delve deeply into the specific preferences and expectations of Muslim tourists, particularly from different regions (e.g., Middle East, Southeast Asia). Therefore, this research explores tourists' perceptions of Baba Nyonya food and its potential to attract Islamic tourism in Melaka, thus developing Melaka into a halal gastronomy hub. As the tourism industry explores new avenues for growth, the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisine as a halal tourism product warrants investigation.

The implications of this research are significant to various stakeholders. As stated by Battour and Ismail (2016), Halal certification significantly enhances the tourism experience, for government entities like the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) and JAKIM. These insights could encourage more local restaurant owners to get Halal certification, which not only will give assurance to Muslim consumers but consequently would open a broader halal customer base for local restaurant owners. Academically, the study encourages the integration of knowledge from different disciplines, which may inspire new courses related to halal tourism and gastronomy. In addition, it can enrich students' learning experience while providing valuable material for students and researchers interested in Islamic tourism and gastronomy tourism.

2. Literature Review

Gastronomy Tourism and Destination Appeal

The significance of food in shaping tourist experiences is well-established, with local cuisine often serving as a primary attraction for visitors (Ting et al., 2020). Malaysia's strategic position as a halal hub for Islamic tourism further enhances its appeal, particularly for Muslim travellers who prioritize halal-compliant dining experiences (Khan & Callanan, 2021). The cultural fusion embodied in Baba Nyonya cuisine, combining Malay and Chinese influences, yields unique dishes that augment Malaysia's tourism offerings and contribute to its competitive advantage (Konar et al., 2016).

Recent literature has highlighted the pivotal role of gastronomy in shaping tourist experiences and perceptions of destinations (Wong et al., 2022). Specifically, Khan and Callanan (2021) have identified Baba Nyonya cuisine as a significant contributor to the halal tourism market, with cultural familiarity playing a crucial role in its appeal (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). Furthermore, the halal certification has been recognized as a critical reference point for Muslim travellers, influencing their destination choice and loyalty (Xiong & Zhang, 2021). Gastronomy is increasingly recognized as a core component of the destination experience, serving as both an event attraction and a key driver of tourist satisfaction (Su & Horng, 2012). By enhancing the overall quality of tourist experiences, gastronomy can make destinations more appealing and competitive (Ting et al., 2020). Scholars have advocated for further research into the "gastronomy tourist" market segment that is influenced by culinary offerings to determine targeted marketing strategies (Kivela & Crofts, 2006). The strategic role of gastronomy in destination branding and marketing is well documented, underscoring its transformative potential within the tourism industry.

Cultural Familiarity

Gastronomy transcends mere sustenance; it significantly contributes to tourism by providing tourists with distinctive means to engage with the culture, narratives, traditions, and values embodied in the cuisine (Kivela & Crofts, 2009; Westering, 1999). Its function in tourism highlights the importance of fostering cultural comprehension and enriching tourist's experience. The role of cultural familiarity in shaping the food choices of Muslim travellers in gastronomy tourism is multifaceted and deeply influential. Cultural familiarity, defined as the frequency of exposure to a common culture of a country (Jang & Kim, 2015), significantly influences tourists' food preferences. One would prefer food that is familiar to their taste palette, as it gives comfort and assurance. Although tourists are often keen to sample new local dishes, they may feel uncertain and anxious about the taste, which would lead them to choose familiar foods (Xu & Cheng, 2022). Thus, increased cultural experiences can boost interest and willingness to try different localized cuisines (Shi et al., 2022).

In addition, cultural familiarity significantly influences Muslim travellers' acceptance of halal food options. Adherence to religious dietary laws is paramount, and familiarity with halal practices enhances comfort and willingness to explore local cuisines. Studies have shown that Muslim tourists often seek out halal food experiences that align with their cultural and religious values, viewing these options as essential for a satisfying

travel experience (Xiong et al., 2024; Zhu, et. al., 2024). Muslim travellers with a strong understanding of their culinary traditions are more likely to appreciate authentic local dishes that respect halal guidelines. This familiarity can lead to a greater appreciation for the cultural significance behind certain foods, enhancing their overall gastronomic experience (Chong et. al., 2023; Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). Prior experiences with specific cuisines significantly influence food choices among Muslim travellers. Familiarity gained from prior exposure can lead to increased acceptance and preference for certain foods, making travellers more adventurous in trying local dishes that they may not have encountered before (Thanasegaran, & Chandrashekar, 2023). This is particularly relevant for Muslim travellers who might be more open to trying variations of halal dishes they are familiar with. Moreover, familiarity with local food safety standards and health practices can increase their willingness to try new foods. When travellers feel assured about the hygiene and preparation methods of local cuisine, they are more likely to engage in gastronomy tourism (Chong et. al., 2023; Zhu et. al., 2024). Interestingly, according to Xiong et. al., (2024), recommendations from family, friends, or community members who share similar cultural backgrounds can also encourage Muslim travellers to explore specific culinary experiences. Familiarity within these social circles often leads to shared preferences for certain types of cuisine, further influencing individual choices (Rousta & Jamshidi, 2020). By acknowledging the importance of cultural familiarity, tourism industries can tailor their offerings to meet the specific needs of Muslim tourists, fostering a more inclusive and satisfying gastronomic experience. Therefore, based on previous research findings, it is proposed that:

H1: Cultural familiarity influences the development of potential Halal Baba Nyonya's gastronomy tourism attractions.

Food Awareness

Food awareness has emerged as a critical factor in gastronomy tourism, marking culinary experiences as a central aspect of travel (Tourism & Gastronomy, 2003). This trend highlights the consumption of local heritage through dining out while on vacation. Gastronomy tourism utilizes food as a cultural force, enriching the tourist experience and sustaining heritage tourism (Westering, 1999). Characterized by a quest for unique lifestyles and cultural immersion (Westering, 1999), modern tourists value food as a pathway to explore and comprehend different cultures. Shi et al. (2022) identified food awareness as similar to brand awareness, essential for building consumer loyalty and shaping perceptions. Hence, the awareness of halal places in non-Muslim countries can attract Muslim tourists and influence their intention to choose halal gastronomy tourism. This awareness is crucial for Muslim tourists who seek to ensure they consume halal food during their travels. Similarly, the quality of halal food is a significant factor that influences Muslim tourists' intention to choose halal gastronomy tourism. High-quality halal food can enhance the overall gastronomic experience and increase the likelihood of Muslim tourists choosing destinations that offer such options (Albattat, & Norhidayah, 2022). Furthermore, memorable halal food experiences and halal-friendly attributes also play a significant role in influencing Muslim tourists' visit intentions. Learning about halal food culture, conviviality, food experience intensification, and experiential satisfaction are important antecedents of memorable halal food experiences. These experiences can positively influence destination food image and purchase intention among Muslim tourists (Sthapit et al., 2024).

Halal-friendly attributes, both physical and non-physical, perceived value, and destination trust, influences visit intention (Sodawan & Hsu, 2022). With regards to Islamic tourism in Melaka, food awareness extends to ensuring Halal compliance. Halal certification assures Muslim tourists that the food adheres to Islamic dietary laws, thus influencing their dining decisions (Keller, 1993). Therefore, promoting Halal Baba Nyonya cuisine through local markets, festivals, and culinary tours not only meets the needs of Muslim tourists but also amplifies the cuisine's appeal and market reach. This strategic approach aligns with theories of consumer behavior, where heightened awareness translates into greater attractiveness and patronage (Tariq et al., 2017).

H2: Food awareness enhances the development of potential Halal Baba Nyonya's gastronomy tourism attractions.

Food involvements

A noticeable shift towards gastronomy tourism is apparent, where local cuisine and culinary heritage become a strong tourist attraction (Su & Horng, 2012; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). This niche tourism segment emphasizes that food significantly affects and motivates tourists' travel experience (Su & Horng, 2012). Integrating gastronomy into tourism enhances overall visitor satisfaction by engaging them deeply with local food cultures

(Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Regarding food products, consumer behavior is heavily influenced by involvement, a key personal factor that shapes consumption choices (Castellini & Graffigna, 2022). Higher levels of involvement indicate greater interest and autonomy in decision-making, leading consumers to evaluate and select products independently (Shi et al., 2022). This concept is demonstrated in various contexts, including the wine industry, where individuals highly involved in wine consumption tend to consume more (Charters & Pettigrew, 2006; Shi et al., 2022).

Food involvement significantly affects tourists' place attachment and destination loyalty. The emotional bond formed with a specific place or environment due to food experiences can lead to increased loyalty to the destination (Chen et al., 2023). Additionally, gastronomic experiences are becoming a fundamental factor that influences tourists' satisfaction and perceived brand of a destination. Past experiences and prior knowledge have a positive influence on the gastronomy experience, while tourists' prior knowledge affects the perceived quality of a destination's cuisine (Kovalenko, et. al., 2023). Furthermore, the quality and authenticity of local food significantly influence tourists' intention to choose gastronomy tourism. High-quality and authentic local food can enhance the overall gastronomic experience and increase the likelihood of tourists choosing destinations that offer such options (Chong et al., 2023). In the context of halal gastronomy tourism, halal food performance, halal place awareness, and food quality are critical factors that influence Muslim tourists' intention to choose halal gastronomy tourism (Albattat & Norhidaya, 2022). These factors can increase destination trust and attachment, which in turn influence Muslim traveller retention. Thus, in Melaka's Islamic tourism landscape, fostering a strong connection between tourists and Baba Nyonya cuisine hinges on cultivating high levels of food involvement. This approach, as supported by research on consumer behavior (Castellini & Graffigna, 2022), emphasizes the importance of nurturing interest and engagement to enhance the cuisine's attractiveness and influence tourists' dining decisions.

H3: Food involvement contributes significantly to the development of potential Halal Baba Nyonya's gastronomy tourism attractions.

Halal certifications

In the expanding global tourism market, Halal certification plays a key role, particularly in attracting Muslim tourists (Bon & Hussain, 2010). It ensures adherence to Islamic dietary guidelines, assuring Muslim tourists of the food's compliance, thus increasing their confidence in deciding on travel destinations (Nur'aini & Sucipto, 2021). Previous research stresses that halal certification not only addresses religious dietary needs but also enhances the overall tourism experience by transforming potential obstacles into unique attractions (Xiong & Zhang, 2021). Studies highlight that symbols, utilities, and sensory appeal associated with halal-certified food and dining environments significantly contribute to the attractiveness of gastronomy tourism offerings (Addina et al., 2020). Elfrida et al, (2020) in their study, supported that establishing a Halal assurance system is further required to enhance confidence in the consumption of Baba-Nyonya food products among Muslim consumers. Restaurant managers claimed that Halal certification in food outlets increases confidence and affirms that the food is clean and safe (Marzuki 2012).

Comparatively, recent findings reaffirm the strategic importance of integrating halal certification in developing and promoting gastronomy tourism. This approach not only meets the specific needs of Muslim tourists but also aligns with broader trends in the global tourism market, where cultural and culinary experiences actively influence destination choices (Nur'aini & Sucipto, 2021; Bon & Hussain, 2010). Additionally, halal certification can increase destination trust and attachment, which in turn influences Muslim traveller retention. The availability, health and nutrition, accreditation, cleanliness, safety and hygiene of halal food are critical factors that influence Muslim traveller retention (Han et. al., 2021). With the Muslim travel segment growing rapidly, destinations that offer Halal-compliant gastronomy can gain a significant competitive advantage in the global tourism industry. Based on previous findings and arguments, it is proposed that:

H4: Halal certification positively influences the development of Halal Baba Nyonya's potential gastronomy tourism attractions.

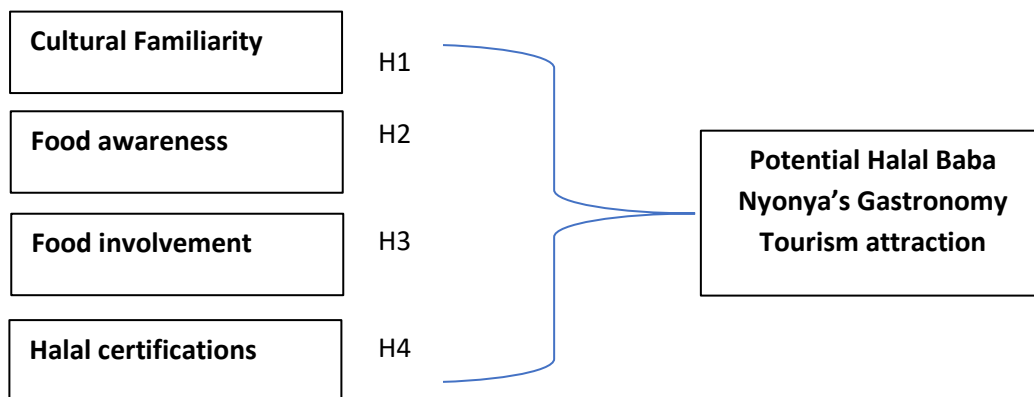
Theoretical Framework

This study undertakes an in-depth examination of the potential of gastronomy tourism through the lens of tourist perceptions of Baba Nyonya cuisines, guided by a multifaceted theoretical framework that integrates the cultural and religious significance of halal food in tourism. Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of

Seyitoğlu and Ivanov (2020) and Xiong and Zhang (2021), this framework posits that the unique culinary offerings of a destination, particularly those that cater to diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, can serve as a significant attractor for tourists. The heritage-rich tradition of Baba Nyonya cuisine, which blends Malay, Chinese, and other cultural influences, is particularly well-suited to enhance the appeal of gastronomy tourism, as noted by Son and Xu (2013).

The study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior, which provides a nuanced understanding of how cultural familiarity, food awareness, food involvement, and Halal certifications influence the attitudes and behavioral intentions of Muslim travellers (Hanafiah & Hamdan, 2020). Furthermore, the study considers the socio-economic factors and targeted marketing strategies that can optimize the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisine as a tourist attraction, as highlighted by Jalis et al. (2009). By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this comprehensive framework provides valuable insights for destination management and sustainable tourism development, ultimately contributing to the advancement of gastronomy tourism research.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



Source: Adopted from Shi et al, (2022)

3. Methodology

A quantitative approach and a structured questionnaire adapted from Okumus et. al., (2021) regarding food consumption among tourists were applied in this study. The questionnaire was adapted due to the similar variable used in this study (Okumus, et. al., 2021). Using screening questions, the survey targets tourists who have encountered Baba Nyonya cuisine in Malaysia, randomly selected in Melaka town. It aims to assess perceptions of cultural familiarity, food awareness, food involvement, and Halal certifications among respondents, measured on an agree-to-non-agree scale from 1 to 5. This study investigated four roles of cultural familiarity, food awareness, food involvement, and halal certifications on the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisines to be marketed as part of halal tourism offerings. The research design and objectives were guided by both the literature review and expert consultations, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the halal food tourism landscape in Malaysia. A quantitative survey of Muslim tourists was conducted to assess their perceptions, preferences, and experiences with Baba Nyonya cuisines within the context of halal food tourism.

This study focuses on a representative sample extracted from the visitor demographic in Melaka in 2024. According to Islamic Tourism Centre (ICT), it is estimated 230 million Muslim tourists arrive in 2024 globally and expenditures amounting to USD 225 billion, are dedicated to guiding and empowering industry players to tap into the Muslim tourist market, as mentioned by the Director Marina Muhamad that there is an increase in tourism activities post-pandemic, which leveraging new trends focusing on the Muslim market. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), for a population of 100,000, a sample size of 384 respondents was chosen for this survey, with a standard error margin of 0.05% and a confidence level of 90%. The data collection comprised in-person visits to several locations and attractions in Melaka City, with questionnaires being self-administered. Melaka was selected because of its designation as a Malaysian World Heritage Site and the presence of a Baba Nyonya population (Aziz, 2017). The survey was conducted within one month using three enumerators. The investigation employed descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression via SPSS version

26, to elucidate the impact of Baba Nyonya cuisine on visitor perceptions and travel decisions in Melaka. This methodological rigor aims to clarify the cuisine's influence on the local tourism scene.

The study examines gastronomic tourism from the viewpoint of Halal tourism, concentrating on travellers' perceptions of Baba Nyonya cuisine in Malaysia. Gastronomic tourism has gained significant popularity among international travellers, particularly Muslims, who want genuine culinary experiences (Xiong & Zhang, 2021). Malaysia's multifaceted culinary legacy, shaped by Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures, offers a captivating context for examining the allure of gastronomy tourism for both Western and Middle Eastern travellers (Jalis et al., 2009).

4. Analysis and Discussion

Descriptive analysis of the respondents

The total number of the respondents was recorded as (N=385). The findings revealed a predominant representation of female respondents, suggesting the importance of inclusive promotional strategies that cater to both genders. The largest age group interested in Baba Nyonya cuisine was adults aged 18 to 35 years, indicating a strong appeal among younger demographics for exploring diverse culinary traditions. Significantly, the majority of respondents identified as Muslim, underscoring a notable alignment between Baba Nyonya cuisine, which is known for its halal adaptations, and the preferences of Islamic tourists. This demographic insight reinforces the cuisine's potential to bolster Melaka's attractiveness as a destination offering authentic cultural and culinary experiences tailored to Islamic tourism preferences.

These findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the economic benefits of promoting local heritage and tailoring tourism offerings to diverse demographic preferences. By integrating Baba Nyonya cuisine into Melaka's Islamic tourism initiatives, the region can attract a broad spectrum of visitors who seek enriching and culturally immersive travel experiences, enhancing its overall tourism appeal.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	235	39
	Female	140	61
Age	18 - 25 years old	139	36.1
	26 - 35 years old	93	24.2
	36 - 45 years old	81	21
	46 - 55 years old	55	14.3
	55 and above	17	4.4
Religion	Islam	346	89.9
	Buddhism	20	5.2
	Hinduism	5	1.3
	Christianity	14	3.6

Table 2: Potential of Baba Nyonya Cuisine as an Attraction in Melaka: A Linear Regression Analysis Result

Model	R	R Square	Model Summary	
			Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.824	.709	.706	.48549

1.0 *** $r = .824$ and $R^2 = .709$

Table 3: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Model 1	Coefficients		
	UnStandardized B	t	Sig
(Constant)	.249	1.695	.091
Familiarity	-.006	-.145	.885
Awareness	.097	2.104	.036
Involvement	.191	5.594	.000
Halal certifications	.668	17.368	.000

The results of the regression analysis (Table 4.1) revealed that **halal certification** is the most significant factor influencing Baba Nyonya cuisine's potential as a halal tourism product ($B = 0.668, p < 0.001$). **Food awareness** ($B = 0.097, p = 0.036$) and **food involvement** ($B = 0.191, p < 0.001$) also played significant roles. In contrast, **cultural familiarity** did not significantly impact tourists' attraction to Baba Nyonya cuisine ($B = -0.006, p = 0.885$).

The findings of the study revealed that food awareness, food involvement and halal certifications significantly contribute to the development and potential of halal gastronomy tourism in Melaka. In contrast, cultural familiarity was not as significant, indicating that Baba Nyonya cuisine did not carry significant cultural barriers for Muslim tourists, which is consistent with the findings of (Septiana & Mohamad, 2018; Artadita & Hisyam, 2021; Prawira et al., 2023). The contrast in the findings highlights the complex multi-faceted nature of the halal tourism industry and the need for tailored, context-specific strategies to address the unique challenges faced in different destinations.

These findings suggest that while Muslim tourists may not require a high level of familiarity with a cuisine, they highly prioritize halal certification and food involvement when making dining decisions. This contrasts with previous studies that emphasized the role of cultural familiarity in gastronomy tourism (Kivela & Crofts, 2009).

Therefore, it can be summarised that Baba Nyonya cuisine's potential to be a major attraction in Melaka's Islamic tourism sector is significant. To understand the determinants of this potential, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted, examining the relationship between several independent variables of cultural familiarity, awareness, involvement, and halal certification. The dependent variable is the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisine as a tourist attraction. The findings offer valuable insights, especially when compared with contemporary research in gastronomy tourism.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 4: Summary of Hypothesis Result

Hypothesis	Statement of Hypothesis	Result
H1	Cultural familiarity influences the development of potential gastronomy tourism attractions. ($B = -0.006, Sig = 0.885$)	Not Supported
H2	Food awareness enhances the development of potential gastronomy tourism attractions. ($B = 0.097, Sig = 0.036$)	Supported
H3	Food involvement contributes significantly to the development of potential gastronomy tourism attractions. ($B = 0.191, Sig = 0.000$)	Supported
H4	Halal certifications positively influence the development of potential gastronomy tourism attractions. ($B = 0.668, Sig = 0.000$)	Supported

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisine as a Halal gastronomy tourism attraction in Melaka. By examining food awareness, food involvement, cultural familiarity, and Halal certifications, we offer a nuanced perspective that confirms some findings from previous research while presenting unique insights.

Our study confirms that food awareness ($B = 0.097$, $Sig = 0.036$) plays a crucial role in drawing attention to Baba Nyonya cuisine. This finding underscores the importance of heightened awareness to enhance its attractiveness. This result aligns with the study by Seo et al. (2013), which demonstrated that increased awareness of Korean cuisine significantly boosted its appeal among international tourists, highlighting the importance of effective marketing strategies. By emphasizing the role of food awareness in enhancing tourism appeal, our findings support the necessity for strategic marketing efforts to boost awareness of Baba Nyonya cuisine.

Our findings confirm that food involvement ($B = 0.191$, $Sig = 0.000$) significantly enhances the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisine as a tourist attraction. This is consistent with Mak et al. (2012), who found that tourists with higher levels of food involvement are more likely to seek out unique culinary experiences and participate in food-related activities. Both studies highlight the importance of immersive culinary experiences in attracting tourists. Comparing this with our findings, it is strongly suggested that reinforcing immersive culinary activities is essential in promoting Baba Nyonya cuisine.

Interestingly, our study presents unique findings regarding cultural familiarity. Unlike previous research, our results show that cultural familiarity has an insignificant relationship ($B = -0.006$, $Sig = 0.885$) with tourists' gastronomic interests in Melaka, indicating that it does not significantly influence their attraction to Baba Nyonya cuisine. This contrasts with Kivela and Crofts (2009), who discovered that cultural familiarity significantly impacts tourists' food preferences and their willingness to try new cuisines. However, Cohen and Avieli (2004) found that tourists are drawn to cuisines perceived as authentic and reflective of the local culture, with cultural familiarity enhancing their overall dining experience. These contrasting findings suggest that the impact of cultural familiarity might vary across different cuisines and cultural contexts. The current study implies that factors such as marketing and education may be necessary to increase cultural familiarity's role in attracting tourists to Baba Nyonya cuisine.

Moreover, Malaysia is well known for its rich multicultural heritage. Muhamad et al. (2023) found that elements of Malaysian culture, such as architecture, clothing, art, food, and pastimes, significantly influence cultural identity. Sibal (2018) noted that food is frequently utilized by people to maintain their cultural identity, with dietary preferences shaped by cultural backgrounds and ancestral origins. The Malaysian menu evolved from the assimilation of diverse ethnic influences, creating a unique and flavorful diet (Naili et al., 2018). This multicultural context highlights the distinct storytelling and history embodied in traditional Malaysian foods. Halal certification is crucial in attracting Muslim tourists by ensuring compliance with Islamic dietary laws. Our study confirms that Halal certification ($B = 0.668$, $Sig = 0.000$) is the most influential factor in the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisine as a tourism attraction. This aligns with findings by Bonne and Verbeke (2008), who found that Halal certification significantly influences Muslim consumers' purchase decisions, enhancing their trust and confidence in food products. Battour and Ismail (2016) also highlighted that Halal certification not only meets religious requirements but enhances the overall tourism experience through improved service quality and sensory appeal. These findings prove the critical role of Halal certification in improving gastronomy tourism experiences and attracting Muslim tourists.

The Challenges of Halal Foods Businesses in Malaysia

The emergence of halal tourism has presented both opportunities and challenges for destinations seeking to cater to the growing Muslim travel market. Malaysia, a nation celebrated for its diverse cultural tapestry and dynamic culinary scene, has made the incorporation of halal principles into its tourism industry a prominent priority (Sánchez & Moral, 2018; Sánchez & Moral, 2019; Artadita & Hisyam, 2021; Battour & Ismail, 2015). Yet, the successful integration of halal food into Malaysia's tourism offerings is hindered by a complex web of obstacles that warrant in-depth investigation.

One of the primary challenges lies in the realm of halal certification. While halal certification is a crucial aspect of ensuring the legitimacy and acceptability of halal food for Muslim tourists, the diversity of interpretations and standards has resulted in a lack of a single, unified system (Sánchez & Moral, 2018). This lack of cohesion can create confusion and uncertainty among both tourism providers and consumers, potentially undermining the confidence and trust that is essential for the growth of halal food tourism.

Beyond the certification quagmire, the issue of cultural familiarity also plays a significant role in shaping the halal food tourism landscape in Malaysia. Muslim tourists, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, may encounter unfamiliar culinary traditions and preparations that can create a sense of unease or discomfort, potentially deterring them from fully engaging with the local food scene (Sánchez & Moral, 2019; Sánchez & Moral, 2018; Battour & Ismail, 2015).

Additionally, the level of food awareness and involvement among Muslim tourists can also influence their experiences and perceptions of halal food tourism in Malaysia. Tourists with a deeper understanding and appreciation of halal food principles may have higher expectations and more stringent criteria when evaluating the suitability of the available offerings (Artadita & Hisyam, 2021; Sánchez & Moral, 2019; Battour & Ismail, 2015). Conversely, those with limited food awareness may be more receptive to a wider range of halal food options, potentially broadening the appeal of halal food tourism in the country. (Prawira et al., 2023) (Sánchez & Moral, 2019) (Artadita & Hisyam, 2021) (Battour & Ismail, 2015)

To address these challenges and unlock the full potential of halal food tourism in Malaysia, a multifaceted approach is required. Strengthening the halal certification system, fostering greater cultural awareness and understanding among tourism providers, and enhancing food awareness and involvement among Muslim tourists can all contribute to the development of a thriving halal food tourism sector (Aziz & Sulaiman, 2014; Addina et al., 2020; Bon & Hussain, 2010; Sánchez & Moral, 2019; Addina et al., 2020; Aziz & Sulaiman, 2014). The roles of accessibility and availability of halal food options, as well as tourist perceptions and preferences, are also critical factors in the success of halal tourism in Malaysia (Artadita & Hisyam, 2021; Sánchez & Moral, 2019). This study investigated four roles of cultural familiarity, food awareness, food involvement and halal certifications on the potential of Baba Nyonya cuisines to be marketed as part of halal tourism offerings. (Artadita & Hisyam, 2021; Sánchez & Moral, 2019).

The study gap remains in the lack of empirical studies examining the full range of factors influencing the success of halal food tourism in Malaysia, particularly with regard to the distinct cultural heritage and culinary traditions that contribute to the country's unique gastronomy offerings. The shift in demand for halal tourism offerings will alter the authenticity or diminish the heritage value of the Baba Nyonya cuisines. The development of halal food tourism in Malaysia requires a nuanced and multidimensional approach that addresses the interplay of halal certifications, cultural familiarity, food awareness, food involvement, and tourist perceptions (Prajasari, 2022; Prawira et al., 2023; Elfrida et al., 2020; Septiana & Mohamad, 2018). While the country boasts a rich culinary heritage and growing interest in halal tourism, the successful integration of halal principles into the tourism sector remains hindered by persistent challenges.

Limitations of the study

This study also has limitations in terms of generalizability, as it focused on a specific cuisine and destination within Malaysia. Further research is needed to explore the dynamics of halal food tourism in other Malaysian destinations and consider a wider range of culinary offerings. Additionally, qualitative insights from both tourism providers and Muslim tourists could provide a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities involved. This paper is limited in terms of sample size, and scope of the study and only covers Melaka regional only (Septiana & Mohamad, 2018; Elfrida et al., 2020). The findings are thus limited and cannot be generalized to the whole of Malaysia.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on halal food tourism by offering a multifaceted analysis of the key factors shaping the industry's development in Malaysia. Nevertheless, this study offers valuable insights into the critical factors shaping the halal food tourism landscape in Malaysia and provides a foundation for more comprehensive investigations into the opportunities and obstacles faced by destinations seeking to capitalize on the growing demand for halal tourism experiences.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of halal gastronomy as a new attraction that can encourage tourists to visit a destination. This study explores Baba Nyonya cuisine's potential to enhance Islamic tourism in Melaka. Insights suggest leveraging this culinary heritage to attract Muslim tourists and primarily promote its culture and heritage through food. Previous findings noted a shift in some Baba Nyonya restaurants towards pork-free menus, appealing to Muslim customers despite lacking halal certification. Atlantic Nyonya Restaurant Malim Jaya is Melaka's sole halal-certified option. Survey results indicated a widespread perception (212 respondents) that halal Baba Nyonya cuisine is easily accessible, possibly due to awareness or assumptions about non-pork, non-alcoholic venues. Clear communication about halal certification is crucial. Albattat et al. (2017) found limited awareness of Baba Nyonya culture among younger generations. While 81.9% of respondents were familiar with Baba Nyonya food, few visited Melaka specifically for it, suggesting untapped potential that requires improved marketing and education efforts.

The research has highlighted the crucial role of halal certification in developing and promoting gastronomy tourism, particularly in catering to the growing Muslim travel market. The authenticity of local food is able to attract Muslim travellers to a particular destination. The integration of halal certification into restaurant culinary offerings and marketing strategies can enhance the confidence, comfort, and overall satisfaction of Muslim tourists. Based on the findings, it can be seen that the potential of halal gastronomy tourism attractions in Malaysia is affected by several factors, such as halal certifications, food involvement, and food awareness. Meanwhile, cultural familiarity remains not a significant predictor for the development potential of halal gastronomy tourism products

According to the latest report from Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) 2023, Malaysia has ranked as the top destination for Muslim travellers. The annual report analyses data from 140 countries on which destination best suits the growing halal travel segment. Due to this encouraging trend, the Malaysian government is strengthening its focus on Muslim Friendly Tourism strategy. The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) through the Islamic Tourism Center (ITC) has initiated a comprehensive strategy to attract Muslim travellers. One of the strategies is to expand the relationship with Muslim communities in Malaysia and the untapped potential Muslim market which is China.

In summary, this study underscores the significant roles of food awareness, food involvement, and Halal certification in promoting Baba Nyonya cuisine as a Halal gastronomy tourism attraction. While the impact of cultural familiarity remains complex and context-dependent, the findings contribute valuable insights for destination managers and marketers aiming to leverage culinary heritage effectively. By aligning marketing strategies with these critical factors, Melaka can enhance its appeal as a leading destination for Halal gastronomy tourism. However, this research is geographically focused on Melaka, limiting its applicability to other regions, and relies on a potentially small and non-representative sample, which may not capture the broader tourist population's perceptions. Furthermore, the limited exploration of marketing strategies, particularly in the digital realm, leaves room for future research to better understand how Baba Nyonya cuisine can be effectively promoted to Halal-conscious tourists. Future research can explore other cuisines that are also being highlighted as part of Melaka tourist attractions, for example, the Chetty and Portuguese gastronomy. Future studies can also look at a more significant scope of tourists and consumers from domestic and international backgrounds, which will enhance the results for the generalization of the findings and provide a better understanding of halal Baba Nyonya cuisine consumption.

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