

Analysing the importance of Malaysian gastronomic tourism campaigns and tour packages in attracting tourists to visit

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Abstract

A recent trend that showcases gastronomy as the main tourist product has shown the importance for travel and tour operators; hoteliers; and local authorities to develop effective strategies to attract local as well as international tourists to visit Malaysia. Described as one of the jewels for gastronomic tourism in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is well-known for its rich food heritage with diverse and vibrant eating surroundings. As the competition to attract tourists increases in the Asian region, it is worth putting forward Malaysian gastronomy as a valuable source of attraction. The task of attracting tourists lies in the gastronomic tourism campaigns and tour packages offered by hoteliers, travel agencies, and the respective bodies of authority. This study focuses on the antecedents of gastronomic tourism marketing in a destination, in particular the analysis of gastronomic tourism campaigns and tour packages which varied according to the hoteliers; travel and tour operators; and local authorities who had planned them. The qualitative content analysis approach was used on selected Malaysian cuisine marketing collateral—including travel guides and webpages—to extract relevant data for this study. By looking at the tourists' quest for authentic local cuisines and experiences, there is a need to recognise the role of effective marketing tools to attract tourists—both local and international— to favour Malaysian gastronomic products. Gastronomic packages and campaigns which emphasise local ethnic cuisine experiences and

activities should be aggressively promoted by all relevant parties. Additionally, the local food scene and culture may also be introduced as another attraction for future visits.

Keywords:

Gastronomic Tourism, Gastronomic Tourism Campaign and Tour Package, Destination Marketing, Local Cuisine, Malaysia

1 Introduction

As one of the categories of the tourism macro-niches (Robinson & Novelli, 2005), gastronomic tourism has become an important source of income and job generator for many countries. As asserted by Ignatov (2003), the growth and development of gastronomic tourism provide numerous prospects for hospitality and tourism associations. Kivela and Crofts (2006) further suggested that gastronomic tourism should be looked upon as a crucial marketing plan, in which its significance differs by the traditionally or non-traditionally apparent setting for quality food and wine. This has shown the importance of recognising the contribution of this niche tourism segment as an important source of economic growth for the nation.

With the arrival of 26.1 million tourists and an MYR86.14 billion receipt of revenue contribution for the year 2019 (Tourism Malaysia, 2020), Malaysia's tourism sector is still growing strong despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The food and beverage industry expenditure contributed MYR11.46 billion, a growth increase of 1.6% from the previous year, which has indicated that food can be a valuable entity in attracting tourists to visit Malaysia. According to Sahin (2015), the rise in the interest in gastronomy and local cuisine studies has a great impact on tourism income, and at the same time provides public and financial aids to the local community. Additionally, the public awareness on food quality; health and diet concerns; aggressive food campaigns through various social media and platforms; and the interest to try new cuisines have changed the consumption patterns of the locals and tourists. This notion is supported by Sahin (2015) who stated that gastronomy has an essential role in marketing the tourist destination.

In order to increase the number of foreign tourists coming to Malaysia, the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB) has designed various activities to stimulate Malaysian tourism and related activities. Serious attention has been given by respective marketers and the Malaysian Government towards the local cuisine in advertising materials such as travel guides, brochures, and websites to market Malaysia as a tourist destination (Abdullah & Isa, 2020; Jalis, Che, & Markwell, 2014). Moreover, there are also a number of television programmes devoted to cooking; for instance, the ones on the Asian Food Channel have portrayed Malaysian cuisine as one of the main cuisines of interest (Nahar et al., 2018).

Despite the efforts taken by the Malaysian Government in marketing and promoting local food and cuisine globally, issues still arise on the effectiveness of the marketing campaigns and the representation of the Malaysian food identity. Although several studies on tourists' perceptions and acceptance towards Malaysian food and cuisine

have shown positive results (Abdullah & Lui, 2018; Jalis, Zahari, Zulkifly & Othman, 2009; Karim, Chua, & Salleh, 2009; Leong, Othman, Adzahan, & Karim, 2012; Yusoff, Zahari, Kutut, & Sharif, 2013), the extent of the marketing tools and Malaysian food acting as a vehicle to promote gastronomic tourism remains a question. Therefore, the aim of this study was to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of marketing campaigns—including marketing collateral and local tour packages—in attracting tourists to visit Malaysia. By employing qualitative content analysis, this study explored the dimensions of marketing tools used to market Malaysia as a gastronomic tourist destination.

2 Literature Review

As an integral part of the travel experience, local cuisine plays an important role in attracting tourists to visit a destination. The increased interest in searching for new experiences through culture and tradition exploration (Babolian Hendijani, Sambasivan, Ng, & Boo, 2013; Breakey & Breakey, 2015; McKercher, Ho, & Cros, 2004; Seo, Yun, & Kim, 2017), along with the motivation for tourists to seek something exciting, such as consuming local cuisine, has been found to have an impact on the intention to revisit a destination (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Choe & Kim, 2018). Furthermore, in a study by Abdullah and Lui (2018), it was found that local cuisine images contribute to good cultural experiences, having a strong influence on tourists' satisfaction (Ab Karim & Chi, 2010; Ling et al., 2010) and their intention to return to the destination (Lertputtarak, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising to see that there is an increase in the activities related to gastronomic tourism as there is a newfound appreciation that encourages the tourists to travel for this experience (Blakey, 2012; Everett, 2019).

According to Lee, Packer, and Scott (2015), gastronomic tourism can be defined as “a journey in regions rich in gastronomic resources that generate recreational experiences or have entertainment purposes, which includes visits to primary or secondary producers of gastronomic products, gastronomic festivals, fairs, events, cooking demonstrations, food tasting events, or any event related to food”. On this journey, the tourists will have a closer connection to a different lifestyle by experimenting; learning from different cultures; and accumulating knowledge of culinary tourism qualities and of specialties that the region offers (Gheorghe, Tudorache, & Nistoreanu, 2014). Babolian Hendijani et al. (2013) further asserted that a variety of food-related characteristics such as preparation, cooking style, presentation, dining customs, food culture, and food consumption can be included in the constructs of experiences that tourists would encounter at the tourist destination. Each of these aspects not only would make the trip memorable, but would also deepen the tourists' experience of a different culture when travelling.

In ensuring the longevity of gastronomic tourism, it is important for any tourist destination to continue promoting their tourism products and services to the world. According to a survey by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) (2012), gastronomy is a strategic element in defining the brand and image of a destination. Locally produced food is a fundamental component of a destination's attribute, adding to the range of

attractions and the overall tourist experience (WTO, 2012). Therefore, effective marketing tools and strategies should be considered by the local authorities along with key hospitality and tourism operators in ensuring the success of their gastronomic tourism industry. Regarding marketing and promotion, it was discovered that organising events, producing brochures, advertising, and dedicating websites to food tourism are the most popular marketing and promotional tools used to promote gastronomic tourism (WTO, 2012). This was followed by lower-level promotional tools such as tourism guides, blogs, and familiarisation trips for journalists and tour operators. Social networks, on the other hand, are the least used marketing tool to promote gastronomic tourism globally (WTO, 2012).

From the Malaysian perspective, several studies have been conducted by numerous scholars to show the relationship between gastronomic tourism and destination marketing (Jalis et al., 2014; Karim et al., 2009; Leong et al., 2012; Ling et al., 2010; Noor et al., 2019; Zainal, Zali, & Kassim, 2010). Jalis et al. (2014) asserted that the Malaysian Government has incorporated the local cuisine as part of its national multicultural identity by utilising the term “fusion cuisine” as the destination’s food tourism theme. The development of the “Promotional Plan” by MTPB under the Ministry of Arts, Tourism, and Culture (MOTAC) was one of the initiatives to promote local cuisine as part of the tourist experience (MTPB, 2013). Nevertheless, Malaysia faces challenges in marketing its cuisine which is largely derived from migrant traditions. Fortunately, Zainal et al. (2010) stated that in attracting the tourists to visit Malaysia, the Malaysian Government has planned to come out with the “Food Trails” initiative based on the distinct specialties of states, regions, and communities for the participants to experience local cuisine. This strategy has shown that the Malaysian Government is serious about putting local cuisine forward as part of the tourism industry experience.

3 Methodology

The sample for this study, derived from four relevant government websites and one independent food tour agency website (see Table 1), presented information related to gastronomic tourism campaigns and tour packages from January 2019 until December 2020. Additionally, only one travel guide included a compilation of 16 brochures published by MTPB from the available e-brochure collection. These brochures were used as another important sample for this analysis.

For this study, content analysis was used as it allows the researcher to explore the conceptual and theoretical issues to enhance the understanding of the data as suggested by Krippendorff (2018). In fact, Kassarian and Kassarian (1988) contended that content analysis is the most used method to examine the ways marketing materials represent aspects of place and culture research.

The text and photographs obtained from the brochures and websites were analysed using content analysis. Selected media releases and tour packages found in the relevant sources were reviewed comprehensively to examine the major findings for this study. For this study, 191 photographs were visually coded according to themes. After the

coding process, the categorisation process was employed by allocating the photographs to the category that best represented them. Once the photographs had been analysed, results of the analysis were used to make inferences about the text, the audience, and the culture, which are significant to the study.

Table 1: Content Analysis Materials

Materials	P	e	Publication
Travel Guide			
Malaysia Travel Guide	-	X	November 2019
Official Websites			
	MOTAC	MATRAD	MTPB
https://www.tourism.gov.my/promotional-kit/ebrochures	-	-	X
https://www.tourism.gov.my/media?keyword=food&month=	-	-	X
https://www.malaysiakitchen.co.uk	-	X	-
Gastronomic Tourism Packages Websites			
https://www.malaysia.travel (Government)	-	-	X
https://www.foodtourmalaysia.com (Independent)	-	-	-

*P = Printed; e = Electronic; **MOTAC** = Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture; **MATRADE** = Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation; **MTPB** = Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board; X = Found; - = Not found

4 Findings

From the analysis conducted on the selected websites and travel guide, it is worth mentioning that there is a significant relationship between gastronomic tourism campaigns and tour packages—the independent variables—and the attraction of local and international tourists to visit Malaysia—the dependent variable. The following paragraphs attempt to provide answers to the pertinent questions from two different perspectives respectively.

4.1 Gastronomic Tourism Campaigns

From the analysis conducted on Malaysia Travel Guide, it was discovered that gastronomic tourism campaigns were not listed under the special interest holiday in comparison to other niche areas such as “Sun, Sea and Sand”, “Diving”, “Eco-Adventure”, or “Shopping”. Instead, gastronomic tourism campaigns were categorised under “Essential Information”, specifically under the “Dining” category. Within this category, the types of delicacies related to each of the states were listed accordingly, and the locations of eateries were highlighted (see Table 2).

Apart from focusing on the types of delicacies and local eateries, the marketing collateral also featured photographs of Malaysian food from a close-up angle. As stated

by Jalis et al. (2014), these photographs usually devoid of any social or cultural context are sufficient for the marketers to generate interest in the cuisine and by extension, the destination. Isolating the meal from its setting would not only enhance the viewer’s attention to the meal, but would also convey the aesthetic values of the meal and its distinctive characteristics through its shape, colour, and texture (Jalis et al., 2014; Leong et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the brochure also featured images of food stalls, food markets, fruit farms, and bazaars as part of their marketing efforts. This is another important strategy as suggested by Karim et al. (2009) who contended that since tourists are likely to rely on images, the elements used to form the food image—such as media advertising, travel agents, and promotional tools—should be fully utilised. Through the projection of a positive image on Malaysian food, the tourists’ selection of their holiday destination may be influenced.

Table 2: A Compilation of Local Delicacies and Eateries from Malaysia Travel Guide 2019

Regions	Local Delicacies	Local Eateries
Central Region		
Kuala Lumpur	N/A	Kampung Baru; Petaling Street; Jalan Alor; Little India or Brickfields; Bukit Bintang; KL Citywalk
Selangor	Satay; tapioca and banana chips; Indian food; seafood	N/A
Putrajaya	N/A	Food trucks, <i>pasar malam</i> (night market), cruise dining
Southern Region		
Negeri Sembilan	<i>Masak lemak cili api, apam johol, lemang, satay tulang Jelebu, nasi ulam, air jando pulang, seafood</i>	N/A
Malacca	<i>Satay celup, cencaluk, gula melaka, chicken rice ball, seafood, Nyonya food, Chitty food, Portuguese food</i>	N/A
Johor	<i>Johor laksa, nasi briyani gam, mee bandung, lontong, seafood</i>	N/A
Northern Region		
Perak	<i>Ikan pekasam, nasi kandar vanggey, rendang tok, chicken rice with bean sprouts, seafood, pomelo, Ipoh white coffee</i>	N/A

Penang	<i>Char kway teow, assam laksa, nasi kandar, Hokkien mee, psembor, rojak</i>	N/A
Kedah	<i>Kuala Kedah laksa, pekasam, nasi ulam, seafood</i>	N/A
Perlis	<i>Perlis Laksa, grilled catfish, Kuala Perlis grilled seafood</i>	N/A
East Coast Region		
Pahang	<i>Lemang periuk kera, mee calong, Pahang laksa, opor Pahang, puding raja</i>	N/A
Terengganu	<i>Laksam, nasi dagang, satar, keropok lekor, otak-otak, nekbat, Terengganu laksa, ketupat sotong</i>	N/A
Kelantan	<i>Ayam percik, nasi kerabu, nasi dagang, budu, serunding, desserts</i>	N/A
East Malaysia Region		
Sabah	<i>Tuaran mee, ambuyat, hinava, tuhau, kelupis</i>	N/A
Sarawak	<i>Sarawak laksa, mee kolok, bubur pedas, manok pansuh, ikan terubok masin, Sarawak layer cake, bird's nest soup, Sarawak pepper, Sarikei pineapple</i>	N/A
Labuan	<i>Lamban, punjung, jelurut, coconut pudding</i>	N/A

Source: Malaysia Travel Guide (MTPB, 2019)

Moreover, the analysis conducted on the relevant websites' materials revealed that continuous gastronomic tourism campaigns were organised by MTPB in promoting Malaysia as a food destination haven from the year 2019 until 2020. Programmes such as the "Malaysia Mega Familiarisation Programme" and "Sandakan Food and Agricultural Festival 2019" have not only acted as a platform to introduce the local delicacies, but have also forged a closer relationship between MTPB, the tourism private sector players, and the media (MTPB, 2019).

In addition, MOTAC through MTPB has also collaborated with international media influencer Trevor James, also known as "Food Ranger" through food exploration vlogs entitled "The Ultimate Malaysian Road Trip". In this series of food exploration vlogs that were uploaded to James' YouTube channel and Facebook page, numerous attractions throughout the country along with traditional and popular local delicacies from different destinations in Malaysia were showcased (MTPB, 2020).

Another important campaign related to the promotion of Malaysian gastronomic products is the “Malaysian Kitchen Programme” (MKP) which was launched in 2006. In this programme introduced by the Malaysian Government through the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), Malaysian cuisine was not only introduced to attract the international consumers to try the food, but also to become a platform to increase the export of processed food, food ingredients, and agricultural products of the nation (Bernama, 2012; Nahar, Ab Karim, Karim, Ghazali, & Krauss, 2018, Nordin, 2010; Sanip & Mustapha, 2020). In order for the restaurateurs to be selected for this programme, the food served must comply with the guidelines set by the Malaysian Government and must be Malaysian food that is traditionally and customarily consumed by Malaysians (Sae, 2015; Sanip & Mustapha, 2020). To date, there are about 647 restaurants that have registered with MKP globally, acting as a “mouth-watering ambassador” in promoting Malaysian cuisine and gastronomic tourism effortlessly.

4.2 Gastronomic Tourism Tour Packages

In relation to the gastronomic tourism tour packages, it was found that there were 17 tour packages offered through the government website while another nine tour packages were offered by an independent travel agency. Both websites offered different kinds of packages to cater to the demand of the tourists who seek either activity-based food-related experiences, or sensory and cultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2018).

Based on the government website, it was discovered that the website emphasised photographs of Malaysian food and local attractions to attract the viewers’ attention. From the total 164 photographs reviewed, 66 photos (40.24%) featured local delicacies such as laksa, nasi lemak, and satay, along with local desserts and beverages. This can be looked upon as a very effective marketing strategy particularly in improving the Malaysian food image in the minds of the tourists, as asserted by Karim et al. (2009). Meanwhile, another 39 photos (23.78%) featured dining settings that offered a wide range of Malaysian cuisine and beverages, which may create the feeling of excitement while experiencing Malaysian cuisine (Leong et al., 2012).

Apart from these photographs of Malaysian delicacies and dining settings, 41 photos (25.00%) featured on the website portrayed the beautiful scenery of different locations in the country, whilst 18 photos (10.98%) featured the lifestyle of the locals such as fishing and farming, as well as paddy planting. Showcasing the lifestyle of the locals may enhance the interest of the tourists to participate in a wider range of food-related activities, such as visitations to sites of food production, cooking classes, or food-themed events (Che, 2006; Ellis et al., 2018).

Another finding from the government website analysis revealed that the tour packages offered were segregated according to the region, similar to the Malaysia Travel Guide brochure. Under the “Deal and Packages” content, for example, potential tourists may choose a tour that suits their travel plans together with the corresponding price quotation. Further, by clicking the selected “Food Feast” categories under the “Wander Your Way” selection, the viewer can get more comprehensive information related to the

food trip of interest. In addition, the website also included the events and festivities which were celebrated during the selected time. Informing the potential tourist on current events would not only enrich their experiences through the food-related activities (Park, Kim, & Xu, 2020), but would also facilitate the cultural learning and knowledge transfer of the destination.

In contrast to the government website, the independent travel agency website focused more on the food tour packages. Instead of offering the package according to the region, the travel agency aimed the packages at tourist hot spot locations which included Kuala Lumpur, Perak, and Penang. For each of these locations, different tour categories can be chosen to suit the tourist's schedule. For instance, within Kuala Lumpur, four types of tours were offered, namely "Off the Eaten Track", "Kuala Lumpur Walk Tour", "Off the Rail Food Tour", and "Kuala Lumpur Market Tour". Each of these tours offer different information and content, along with different prices and times. Besides these packages, the travel agency also deals with cruise or custom tours whereby the tourists can customise their own food tours in a small group setting. As for the combination package, tourists are offered discounted fees for two types of tours. Regarding photographs, a total of 27 photos were featured on the independent travel agency website. Nine photos (33.33%) represented local delicacies such as roti canai, fried noodles, satay, and murtabak. Several photos showing street hawkers preparing the local cuisine were also observed (6 photos or 22.22% of the total). The rest of the photographs (11 photos or 40.74%) featured dining settings, food stalls, and local attractions. Interestingly, there was only one photograph showing the iconic king of fruits of Malaysia, the durian. This photo may stimulate the desire of international tourists to experience the exotic delicacy.

5 Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that the Malaysian Government; travel and tour operators; and other industry players have taken aggressive efforts in marketing Malaysia as the leading gastronomic tourist destination among other Asian countries. As asserted by numerous scholars, local cuisine is the key component of a tourist destination (Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Jalis et al., 2014; Monika, 2019). Hence, it is important for the local authorities as well as hospitality and tourism agencies to develop proper marketing collateral and strategies to increase tourist arrivals in the destination.

From the gastronomic tourism campaign analysis, the results evinced that the Malaysian Government, through MTPB and MATRADE, has put in a great deal of effort into promoting Malaysian cuisine using promotional brochures, travel guides, and websites, as well as Malaysian restaurants abroad. The content analysis of travel guides revealed that each state in Malaysia has their own specialty cuisine and attractive local eateries which may attract tourists to travel to experience the food. Recognising the unique culinary spectrum and gastronomic routes of the country in the travel guide would promote remarkable local food; strengthen the local image and regional identity; and help promote local heritage and culture (Zainal et al., 2010).

Local and international gastronomic campaigns such as “Malaysia Mega Familiarisation Programme”, “Sandakan Food and Agricultural Festival 2019” or the MKP can also be looked at as excellent platforms in creating the awareness of Malaysian cuisine. In the meantime, the collaboration with international food influencer James Trevor or “Food Ranger” who documented his food journey in his vlogs would not only expose the international viewers to the range of cuisines that can be found in this country, but would also create a feeling of excitement for potential international tourists to experience the cuisine of Malaysia. As posited by Hanifawati, Dewanti, and Saputri (2019), the content generated by social influencers on social networks can influence consumers to experience and consume a product. Due to the visual presentation in the promotional videos or pictures, consumers would be triggered to try the product and therefore, would be encouraged to travel in order to get the experience of eating the food.

The overall analysis of the photographs from the websites has shown that Malaysia is not only famous for its diversity of races, cultures, and attractive environment, but also for the plethora of Malaysian food. The close-up images of local ethnic food and foodways, as well as the pictures that portray the activities of the local communities may not only entice the tourists to travel to Malaysia (Jalis et al., 2014), but could eventually increase the visibility of Malaysia as a gastronomic tourist destination.

In a nutshell, it is important for hospitality and tourism industry players and the Malaysian government to co-operate in creating an effective marketing tool, particularly in gastronomic tourism. Even though the Malaysian Government has demonstrated serious efforts through various marketing campaigns and collateral added with the support from the industry players, there is still room for improvement in the existing marketing strategies. Hopefully, by enriching the tourists’ sensory experiences through different aspects of the food-related experiences—such as cooking classes or local food-themed events—the tourists are encouraged to choose Malaysia as their gastronomic tourist destination.

6 Contribution/Practical Implications

As part of promoting Malaysia as a gastronomic tourist destination, this study has presented the important strategies and initiatives taken by the Malaysian Government and the hospitality industry players in promoting Malaysian ethnic cuisine through various marketing collateral including brochures, e-digital platforms, and websites. Additionally, social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and food influencers have also played an important role in enhancing the knowledge and information related to Malaysian cuisine.

From the viewpoint of hospitality industry players, the contribution of this study would support and assist the hospitality and tourism operators in developing an all-inclusive marketing strategy which focuses on gastronomic tourism. By utilising the findings of this study, local authorities along with industry players can recognise the best marketing efforts to promote Malaysian gastronomic tourism in the global market. Thus,

the collaborations between hospitality and tourism operators; government authorities; and other local stakeholders are crucial to increase the satisfaction level of tourists when visiting Malaysia.

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7 Author's Biography

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