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The Consumption of Malay Traditional Snack Food-Kerepek among Young Malay Adults

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Abstract

Kerepek is a Malay traditional snack food made from unripened fruits or root vegetables consumed by the Malay society for generations. However, with the availability and wide selection of modern and imported foreign snack foods in the local market, there are concerns about the continuity of traditional snack food consumption among the younger generations. This study explores the factors that are important to Malay young adults in their decision to consume *kerepek*. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews in Klang Valley, Malaysia. A total of fifteen informants were involved in the investigation involving young Malay adult traditional snack food consumers aged between 20 and 25 years old. Four factors were identified as important in the consumption of *kerepek*; familiarity, naturality, crispiness, and price fairness. The findings suggest that *kerepek* producers need to consistently deliver these elements that are desirable to the young traditional snack food consumers. An understanding of traditional snack food consumers' preferences may not only ensure the sustainability of the traditional snack food business but as well as promote continuous appreciation of Malay traditional food among the younger generation which is crucial in the context of culinary heritage management.

Keywords: Traditional Malay Snack Food, Traditional Food Consumers, Food Consumption Behaviour, Kerepek, Malay Young Adult.

Introduction

The consumption of traditional food among the younger generation is an essential aspect of traditional food knowledge transmission in ensuring the sustainability of ethnic food culture and tradition. Raji et al (2017) remarked that continuous traditional food consumption is crucial to preserving culture in general. The younger generation must be educated about their traditional food consumption practices because traditional food reflects the identity of a specific society.

To date, in the midst of modern and global food scene in Malaysia, local traditional snack foods have to contend with commercially produced and imported snack foods. Modern Malaysians

are blessed with endless snack foods widely available at local supermarkets, food stores, and vendors. Therefore, it is not unusual to suggest that the younger Malaysian generation's snack food consumption is a wide selection of commercial, international, and traditional varieties. Relatively, there are concerns among local researchers about the declining consumption of traditional snack foods in Malaysia. The younger generations are engrossed with convenience and modern food and have a loose grip on traditional snack food practices and consumption (Sharif et al., 2015). Aziz (2019) reveals that young Malaysian generations are more biased toward consuming foreign and other ethnic snack foods.

Since food is closely associated with cultural identity, the sustainability of traditional food consumption is imperative, particularly within the context of culinary heritage management. Relatively, it is equally important to ensure that the younger generations continue to appreciate and consume traditional food because it has great importance in promoting the growth of the agriculture sector and small and medium food industry of the country, which provide income and employment for the locals. Previous studies on traditional food consumption among the younger Malay generation focused mainly on understanding traditional food and its foodways (Aziz, 2019; Hamzah et al., 2015; Raji et al., 2017; Zahari et al., 2019). Only a few small groups of researchers emphasised on traditional food knowledge transmissions (Nor et al., 2012; Sharif et al., 2013, 2015). However, this study focuses on the sustainability of traditional food practices through consumption. Particularly, to explore the important factors to young adult traditional food consumers in their decisions to purchase and consume *kerepek*, the traditional chips of the Malay cuisine.

The paper is organised as follows: The following section provides a literature review on traditional snack food consumption and the consumption behaviour of young adults on traditional snack food, namely *kerepek*. Then, the research method is described. The subsequent section presents the results of the thematic analysis. The final section includes the discussion and conclusion of the study.

Literature Review

Traditional Snack Food Consumption

Galli (2018) defines traditional food as the food that is usually consumed during festive celebrations or events and typically passed on from one generation to another, made according to a culinary heritage, culture, and traditions with minor or no alteration. Relatively, Ramli et al (2016) asserted that Malay traditional foods are constantly consumed and produced by entire ethnic generations without significant modification in their original flavours. It has been reported that snack food is a type of food consumed any time at the day, between main meals and in a small portion (Hess et al., 2016). However, the definition of traditional snack food has yet to be established. Based on the definitions of traditional food and snack food it is fair to define traditional snack food as the cultural heritage food that commonly served and eaten between meals for generations.

Although there are various types of traditional snack food, this paper specifically focusing on *kerepek*, the Malay traditional fried chips. Ramesh et al (2018) described *kerepek* as thin, crispy, deep-fried snack products made mostly from fruits and vegetables. Malay style traditional chips are mainly made from root vegetables such as tapioca, sweet potato, yam, and young starchy fruits such as different types of bananas and breadfruit. It is important to

mention that there is another type of deep-fried traditional snack called *keropok*. However, the latter is different from the former. According to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, (2022), *keropok* is food made from a mixture of fish and sago flour, thinly sliced into pieces and deep-fried.

The Consumption of *Kerepek* in Malaysia

Dzul (2017) mentioned that a Malay traditional snack, especially *kerepek*, is regularly consumed by the Malay society at any festive celebration, such as Eid celebrations, religious ceremonies, and matrimonial events. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that *kerepek* is sold and consumed all year round just like any other types of snack. The availability of *kerepek* indicates that the traditional foodways is being passed down from one generation to another (Hamzah et al., 2015). Foodways plays an important role in influencing traditional food sustainability (Ishak et al., 2018). In general, Walch et al (2019) showed in their study about traditional food practices that the consumption of traditional foods had decreased over three decades. The younger generation's food choice and consumption are affected by the technology they grew up with, assimilation of mixed racial and broader choices, not restricted to only their traditional snack food (Nahar et al., 2018). Sharif et al (2016) also supported that in traditional food practice, the younger generations have certain limitations in consuming traditional snack food due to the abundance of convenience processed food, modernization of ingredients, and cooking equipment.

Many communities work hard to sustain their culinary heritage because many traditional foods have changed and assimilated into the urbanised environment (Perry, 2017). Previous studies have found that when the younger generations are too attached to modernization and technology, their snack food consumption preferences will change as they are no longer interested about the continuity of traditional snack food practices (Sharif et al., 2016). Ismail (2019) expressed that there are differences in the consumption and production of traditional snack food in Malaysia due to modernization. In this contemporary setting, *kerepek* is available in various flavours, such as cheese and salted egg flavours beyond the basic traditional salty or sweet and spicy version.

Young Adults Traditional Snack Food Consumption Behaviour

In general, traditional food consumers prefer food that can provide traditional values and nature (Roselli et al., 2018). Additionally, they are likely to consume traditional food because of its naturalness and familiarity (Galli, 2018; Renko & Bucar, 2014). Relatively, when traditional foods are readily available anytime, anywhere, and introduced in early childhood, food consumers are more driven to consume them (Dutton, 2010). According to Mielmann and Brunner (2019), young adults have a cultural reference for snacking on traditional food. Their snack choices are determined by their family's traditional food culture, practices, and familiarization with the traditional snack food at home. Similarly, Choi and Jeong (2019) concurred that young adults intend to purchase traditional snack food products if they are familiar with them. Familiarity is important when it comes to traditional snack food consumption because there is a relationship between traditional food and nostalgia in the context of identity, culture, and culinary heritage (Fikri et al., 2021; Renko & Bucar, 2014). In a slightly different perspective, when it comes to the younger generations' consumption of traditional snack food, Haryanto et al (2019) in their research about Indonesian traditional food consumer behaviours highlighted that young adult consumers' purchase decisions in

buying traditional snack food are simulated by product quality, the fairness of price, and convenience. In this instance, the experiences related to traditional food consumption can affect the consumer's attitude toward the value of traditional food, thus being willing to pay higher (Kocaman, 2018).

Methodology

The qualitative study was conducted at Banting and Meru in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Specifically, the investigation was conducted at these two locations because they are known as the centre of Malay traditional snack production of the Klang Valley. Thus, traditional snack food consumers are more accessible in these two locations. Informants for the study were selected using purposive sampling method. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) established that the method is useful in obtaining information from groups of people that can give the preferred data or information. Informants were approached at supermarkets, snack vendors, and convenience stores that sell *kerepek*. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore in-depth the factors that are important to young Malay adults in their consumption of the Malay traditional snack. Preceding the interviews, all informants were provided with an information sheet about the study and a consent form containing details of confidentiality terms. The informants were interviewed and probed with open-ended questions about their experiences, opinions, and understanding about *kerepek* consumption. Each interview lasted at most 60 minutes, was digitally audio recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. After fifteen interviews, it was deemed that the data had reached a saturation point. The collected data was organised and structured using the latest version of NVivo software and analysed using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis is an analysis through categorizing themes of sentences and phrases from transcribed interview data (Lebar, 2018; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) to provide various interpretations of the research topics being studied (Nowell et al., 2017).

All informants are young Malay adults consisting of 47% (n=7) males and 53% (n=8) females, aged between 20 to 25. One-third (n=10) of the informants were bachelor's degree holders, 27% (n=4) were diploma holders, and the remaining were STPM holders. As for income, 6% (n=10) of the informants were wage earners, while another 33% (n=5) were either students, self-employed or unemployed. The socio-demographic profile of the informants is summarized and presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Socio-Demographic Profile of Informants

Characteristic	Informants	Percentage
Gender:		
Male	7	47
Female	8	53
Age:		
20 to 21	5	33
22 to 23	6	40
24 to 25	4	27
Education:		
STPM	1	7
Diploma	4	26
Bachelor's degree	10	67
Occupation:		
Wage earner	10	67
Other	5	33
Ethnic Group:		
Malay	15	100

Result and Analysis**a) Familiarity**

Based on the interviews, all informants (n=15) confirmed that product familiarity influenced them to purchase and consume *kerepek*. The informants mentioned that it was the legacy of knowledge and consumption practices passed on from the older generations that familiarized them with the traditional snacks. The informants' grandparents and parents are role models that set forth Malay traditional snack food consumption practices among them.

Informant 14; "I know about *kerepek* from my older generation in the family. Malay traditional food has many types: snacks, appetizers, main dishes, and desserts. Since I was a little kid, I got the consumption practice from my family members. "

Informant 15; "As I mentioned before, I know about *kerepek* through hereditary from my family. My grandparents always have *kerepek* in their house for snacking."

Detailed analysis verifies that in some cases, the informants were exposed to *kerepek* consumption from early childhood because of their family's traditional snack food practices. As stated by Informant 8 and Informant 12:

Informant 8; "Since childhood, my parents always buy *kerepek*, from there I learned about the consumption of it."

Informant 12; "I learned about *kerepek* when I grew up in Malay's culture with my parent, who trained me to consume traditional snacks like *kerepek*. Thus, I become familiar with it as I become an adult."

The informants highlighted that cultural identity is important to product familiarity. According to them, food is an essential part of the identity of the Malay ethnicity. Traditional Malay food culture is still convincingly upheld by the community. Thus, to the informants, the consumption of traditional food stays relevant. Familiarisation with Malay traditional snack food like *kerepek* is integral to developing the informants' self and cultural identity. The result indicates that despite living in this modern era, Malay ethnic food culture, culinary heritage, and traditions are significant to the young Malay adults. To them, *kerepek* is a cultural symbol that signifies the Malay cultural and ethnic identity.

Informer 13; "Every ethnicity in Malaysia has its own identity. For the Indians, they have chapati, then for the Chinese, they have their own food, and so does the Malay. When people talk about Malay snack food, they will talk about kerepek itself."

Informer 14; "For me, our traditional snack food can be our country's identity snack food. This is the part of our food identity that does not have in other countries."

Additionally, twenty-seven per cent (n=4) of the informants associated the consumption of *kerepek* with festive celebrations and events. Informants regularly acknowledged *kerepek* as festive treats and that they were made familiar with consuming the traditional snacks during festive celebrations and events. Informer 1 and 6 voiced their opinion about *kerepek* in association with festive celebrations and events:

Informer 1; "Since childhood, we have been taught to consume kerepek and other traditional snacks, especially during Hari Raya, as a treat to the guests."

Informer 6; "In our culture and traditions, when it is Hari Raya, we should visit our relatives and friends. So, every house must prepare to serve upcoming guests, and kerepek is one of the snacks we serve to the guests."

All informants generally indicated that familiarity with a snack food product is important to them in their consumption decision. The informants are prone to purchase and consume *kerepek* that they grew up eating, especially those introduced by their elderly during festive celebrations and cultural events.

b) Naturality

Majority of the informants (80%, n=12) remarked that the naturalness of traditional snack food is one of the factors they seek in their decision to purchase and consume *kerepek*. According to the informants, naturalness refers to no significant modifications to the ingredients and flavours. Furthermore, the informants believed that the modification made to the ingredient would only deteriorate the value of traditional snack food in terms of flavour and taste. They viewed *kerepek* as an identity marker of the Malays and appreciated the traditional values in the traditional snack food. Informers 11 and 13 emphasised the importance of the naturalness of the *kerepek* ingredients and flavour:

Informer 11; "The important factors to me are cleanliness and the ingredients used in kerepek making. Kerepek should be made using natural ingredients with a little addition of salt, sugar, and chilli."

Informer 13; “Kerepek pisang should be simple and natural. It should consist of banana fruits and little ingredients. That is it. “

For some informants, adding or mixing new flavours to *kerepek* will only compromise the natural taste of the main ingredient. The informants highlighted that those additional flavours could affect the taste of *kerepek* and prefer *kerepek* in its original taste and seasoning. Remarkd by Informer 2, the prominent flavour of *kerepek* should come from the main ingredient itself, not the additional flavouring ingredient or seasoning.

Informer 2; “Personally, I like the *kerepek* original taste because the additional flavour usually can be too salty or too sweet.”

Informer 6; “My favourite *kerepek* is *kerepek ubi* without mixing in other flavours because the original taste of *kerepek ubi* has its own distinctive flavour.”

The informants valued naturality of the *kerepek* as the essential factor in their consumption of the traditional snack food. From the informants’ view, the traditional snack food flavour should come from the main ingredients, the flavour of banana, tapioca and breadfruits. To note, many *kerepek* is now flavoured with a variety of non-traditional flavouring ingredients such as cheese, tiramisu, seaweed and honey butter.

c) **Crispiness**

A deeper analysis shows that sixty per cent of the informants (n=9) associated quality of *kerepek* with the texture of the traditional snack food. In this context, the informants’ decision to buy and consume *kerepek* relies on the textural quality and, indirectly, the packaging of the traditional snack food. As explained by the informants, *kerepek* should be reasonably thin, not too thick, to provide a sensory pleasure to the consumer.

Informer 7; “If the *kerepek ubi* are soggy, do not bother buying them because we want it to be crispy. So, crispiness is the important element for me to purchase it. “

Informer 8; “I prefer the crunchy one but not that hard. Sometimes, it can be too hard to munch, so it does not taste good to consume. The level of crunchiness should be light.”

The packaging quality of *kerepek* also plays a vital role in determining the crispiness and shelf-life of traditional snack food. Some informants associated the quality of *kerepek* packaging as an important indication of a good quality *kerepek*. Some focused on the attractiveness of the packaging, and some of the informants focused on air-tight or well-sealed packaging. Regardless, all are essential details in determining the textural and overall quality of *kerepek*.

Informer 4; “The important element that I will look for is good quality packaging, that is air-tight, and *kerepek* is not soggy.”

Informer 5; “The elements I care about are its golden colour, not soggy, and crispy. Besides that, the air-tight packaging that prevents *kerepek* from soggy.”

In general, more than half of the informants (n=9) concurred that the crispiness of *kerepek* and the quality of the packaging are the determining factors that the informants considered when they intend to purchase and consume *kerepek*.

d) Price Fairness

The analysis further suggests that price is another critical factor in the informant's decision to purchase and consume *kerepek*. Nine of fifteen informants (60%) described that one of the Malay traditional snack food traits they would look into is price fairness. They all agreed that the price of *kerepek* sold in the market is fair.

Informer 3; "For me, I am still satisfied with the current market price of *kerepek* I think the local and traditional snack price is still affordable and makes sense for us to buy it."

Informer 4; "In my opinion, the market price for *kerepek* is still worthwhile and reasonable. I believe the fluctuation of the prices depends on the *kerepek* producer. "

In some interviews, informants compared the price of modern foreign snacks and *kerepek*. The informants highlighted that Malay traditional snack such as *kerepek* is cheaper than foreign snacks widely available in the market. From the informants' point of view, *kerepek* is reasonably priced, and the quality of local *kerepek* is at par.

Informer 1; "My favourite *kerepek* are local *kerepek* because they are cheaper and tastier to enjoy."

Informer 14; "In my opinion, the price of *kerepek* is still low and affordable compared to the modern snack in the market right now."

These results indicate that the informants are reasonably satisfied with the value and quality they get. Generally, the price charged by the *kerepek* producers is considered fair in exchange for the skills required in producing the traditional snack food.

Therefore, to promote continuous consumption of traditional Malay snack food like *kerepek*, it is important to provide these four elements in the production and retailing of traditional snack.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the thematic analysis indicate that familiarity, naturality, crispiness and price fairness are important factors in determining the consumption of *kerepek* among young Malay adult consumers. The results also show that the informants consumed *kerepek* because they have been familiarised with the traditional snack food since early childhood. Passably, the study finds that the Malay young adults emphasised ethnicity and cultural identity when it comes to *kerepek* consumption. The informants viewed *kerepek* as a cultural symbol and traditional snack food consumption signifies the Malay cultural and ethnic identity. The findings are in agreement with the notion that traditional food consumption reflects community identity in terms of culture and tradition (Fikri et al., 2021; Perry, 2017; Renko & Bucar, 2014). Indeed, the consumption of *kerepek* is associated by the informants with childhood memory and as suggested by Roselli et al (2018) traditional food delivers traditional

values. As a marker of identity, continuous consumption of traditional snack food acts as a mean for appreciating Malay culture and to the informants, as a medium to connect them to their cultural background.

Consistent with the literature, the study finds that the informants favours naturality over creativity when it comes to traditional snack food consumption. For them, any major modification will deteriorate the natural flavour of the main ingredient of the *kerepek*. This finding corroborates the ideas of Ramli et al (2016) who remarked that traditional food is frequently consumed without significant alteration. Correspondingly, Malay young adults are likely to buy and consume traditional snack food such as *kerepek* that has natural primary ingredient flavours and taste without being overpowered by any additional foreign flavours and seasoning. As suggested by the informants, *kerepek* made from tapioca for instance must taste like the root vegetable and shall not be added with extra flavouring ingredients.

Another important finding in this study is that the texture of the traditional snack food is one of the factors that are important to the Malay young adults in their traditional snack food consumption. This result is in accord with the recent study by Haryanto et al (2019) which indicated that young traditional food consumers' buying and consumption decision is influenced by product quality, and fairness of the price. Indeed, crispiness is the sensory quality that is highly regarded in deep-fried snack food (Ramesh et al., 2018). It is a primal quality indicator that the informants look for when buying *kerepek*. Previous studies have shown that young food consumers are more likely to consume traditional food if crispiness is one of the characteristics of the food (Kocaman, 2018; Renko & Bucar, 2014). Relatively, the crispiness of *kerepek* reflects the quality of the packaging as well. The informants associated the quality of the packaging as a determinant of the crispiness of the traditional snack food. The textural quality and shelf life of the food of the traditional snack can be preserved and prolonged if it is well packaged.

The final factor discovered in this study is price fairness. In reviewing the literature, Haryanto et al (2019) highlighted that price fairness affects the traditional food consumer's intention to purchase them. The finds accord with a previous study indicating that the informants perceived the price of traditional snacks such as *kerepek* as affordable and fair. A potential explanation for this is that, in the Malay young adults' perspective, the price of *kerepek* is consistent with the meticulous methods, skills and experience required to produce the traditional snack food. Also, from the Malay young adult standpoint, the traditional snack food price is cheaper in comparison to the imported snacks available in the local market.

Figure 1 concludes the four important factors in the informants' decision to consume *kerepek*. The findings suggest suggests that the Malay young adults' consumption of Malay traditional snack food depends on their familiarity with the food, naturality, crispiness and the fairness of the price of the food product. Therefore, to promote continuous consumption of traditional snack food such as *kerepek* among the younger generations, it is important that these criteria are met by the traditional snack food producers. Consequently, the continuity of Malay snack food consumption can lead to the sustainability of Malay culinary heritage and therefore the identity of the Malay community. Nonetheless, it is worth nothing that the findings of this study are limited to the specific location in Klang Valley where the investigation was

conducted. This study would have been much more advantageous if the investigation could be done at the various traditional snack food centres around Malaysia.

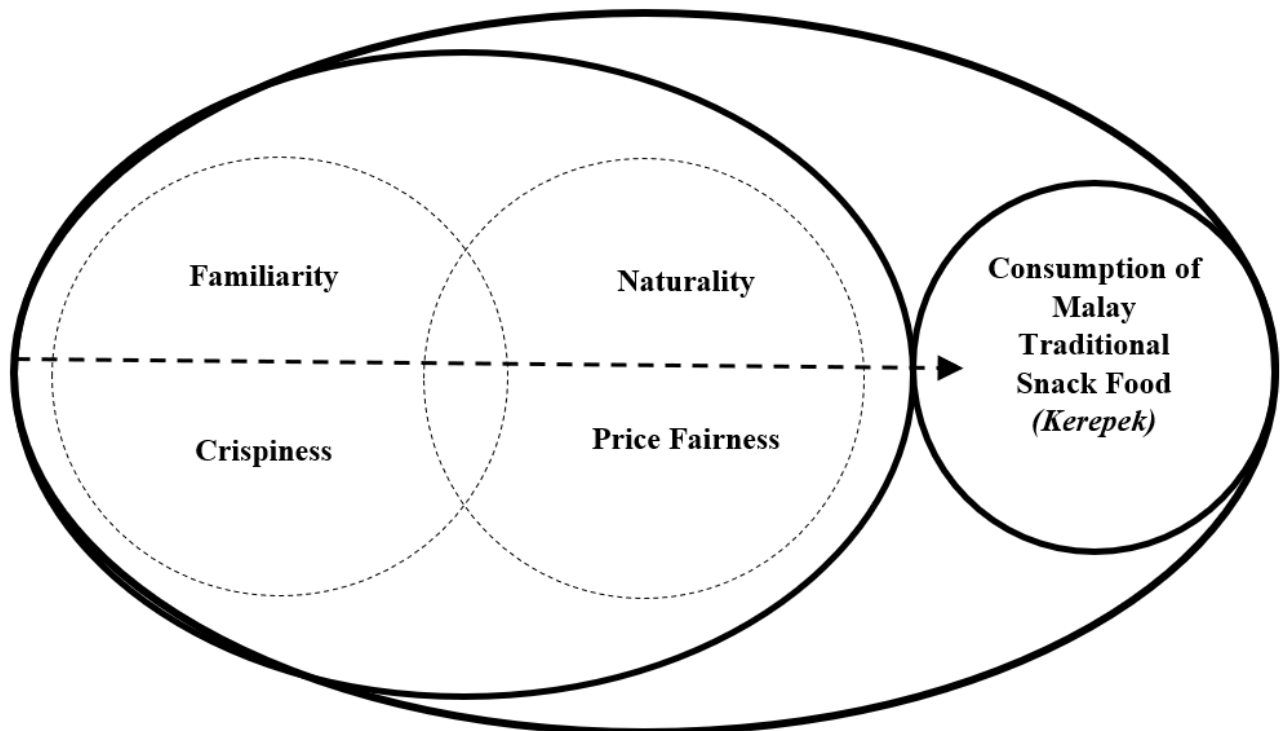


Figure 1: Factors that are important to the Malay Young Adults in the Consumption of Malay Traditional Snack Food, *Kerepek*

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