

Traditional Food Entrepreneurs in Sabah and Selangor States: A qualitative perspective

**Adilah Md Ramli^{1*}, Mazni Saad²,
Mohd Shazali Md Shariff³, Joko Sulisty⁴**

**Corresponding Author*

¹ Faculty of Food Science and Nutrition, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. ² Kulliyah of Languages and Management, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Pagoh Campus, Muar, Johor, Malaysia. ³ Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Selangor, Malaysia. ⁴ Faculty of Tourism, Ciputra University, Surabaya, Indonesia.

m_adilah@ums.edu.my; maznisaad@iium.edu.my, shazali@uitm.edu.my, joko.sulisty@ciputra.ac.id
Tel:+60168317565

Abstract

This study aimed to explore local entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sabah and Selangor states. Twenty participants from the selected business categories were identified and interviewed using a semi-structured question. Two themes: Food category (coded: categories of food; type of food) and Business criteria (coded: experience, customer, type of business). Entrepreneurs from both states adapt to the changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing new methods to sustain their business, customer, and type of business. The concerned entrepreneurs must adapt to the changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing new methods to sustain their business life.

Keywords: Local entrepreneur; Traditional food; Qualitative; Covid-19

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1.0 Introduction

Food is central to our sense of identity, especially in a group eating ritual, as it asserts diversity, hierarchy, and organisation. Food is also central to individual identity, which is constructed biologically, psychologically, and socially by the food he/she incorporates (Fischler, 1988). Food also has been starting as a central field in cultural communication, for example, in economic and political terms, using traditional food to create a regional identity (Telsstrom et al., 2006). Food has also been incorporated into the culture and identity of a nation; it is shaped and moulded by factors such as social background, language and beliefs (Ratnasingam, 2010). With the aforementioned factors, nations could establish and define their country identity, especially their food identity.

2.0 Entrepreneur Classification

The tourism sector is primarily made up of micro, small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), SMEs represent around 80% of all tourism enterprises worldwide (Kukanja et al., 2020). Furthermore, SMEs account for over 90% of all business entities in the EU (Secinaro et al., 2020). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are entrepreneurs that need to meet the government's criteria, such as the number of employees and turnover (Gvelesiani et al., 2020). The criteria are different depending on each country. For example, in Malaysia, small enterprises must have employees from 5 to less than 30, whereas medium enterprises from 30 to at most 75 employees (SMEE Corp Malaysia). Compared to Georgia, the total number of employees for small businesses is 50 and for medium enterprises is 249 (Gvelesiani et al., 2020). Furthermore, in Canada, SMEs need fewer than 500 employees and less than \$50 million in annual revenues (Ibanescu et al., 2019). Manufacturing and services are the two sectors of SMEs. Furthermore, the tourist industry is classified as a service sector. Successful SMEs include capabilities like taking a chance, developing and producing products, and, most importantly, spotting opportunities wherever to start a business or improve it.

2.1 Changes in Traditional Food Consumption During COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to changes in traditional food choices and consumer habits (Quintiro-Angel et al., 2022). The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to modifications in the food system, such as the purchasing process, preparation, packaging, distribution and access to food. Colombia, which prioritises traditional corn-dough foods, such as *tamales*, *champús* and *empanadas* for dietary purposes, have reduced the intake of such foods (Gomez-Corona et al., 2021). This is because of the fear of people who think that traditional foods such as corn that involve human contact during food processing may lead to the spreading of the contagious COVID-19 epidemic. In addition, many food operators that provide heritage food stopped wholesale of traditional food products due to the closure of premises during the pandemic (Quintiro-Angel et al., 2022). In this study, traditional food is considered as part of the heritage of one country or

community as it represents their unique origins, dietary pattern and part of their cultural identity (Almansouri et al., 2021). It also promotes local development of agro-food (e.g., local cuisine and ingredients) and crafts which attract not only local people but also tourist who want to experience the local food while visiting the local community (Bessiere & Tibere, 2013). Therefore, this study aimed to explore local entrepreneurs' profile criteria in Sabah and Selangor states during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.0 Methodology

The qualitative approach was employed by using a semi-structured interview which is reviewed and finalised by a peer's review from the academic's background. An alteration has been made based on their suggestion. The key participants for the qualitative method were local entrepreneurs that sold traditional food listed under the national food heritage from Selangor and Sabah states. About ten (10) participants from each state were identified for this research, representing various local entrepreneurs from stalls, restaurants, SMEs and home-based businesses. Berg (2004) argued that five (5) to twenty (20) key informants for the qualitative study approach are sufficient.

The identified entrepreneurs participants from Selangor and Sabah had been invited via telephone and email to obtain their willingness to participate in the study. Upon agreement, the researcher conducted the interviews. Twenty (20) participants agreed to be interviewed individually within the study's time frame from October 2020 to December 2021. The interview dates and times were arranged based on the convenience of the participants. Regrettably, one (1) participant from Selangor had to withdraw from the interview due to unavoidable circumstances. The research aimed to ensure confidentiality, develop trust and encourage the interviewee to provide complete information voluntarily. The key participants' names will not be revealed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews conducted using online video and telephone were tape-recorded, and each session lasted between thirty (30) and forty (40) min.

Semi-structured interview questions for the qualitative approach aligned with the study's objectives were adapted and developed based on several works of literature (Ramli et al., 2015; Md Ramli et al., 2016). Ten (10) semi-structured questions were developed and used in the interview sessions. The semi-structured question for the interview was open-ended to obtain in-depth and detailed information. To easily understand and explain the in-depth interview, Bahasa Malaysia or English was used as a medium language during the interview and translated into English during the transcribing process, using three steps: categorisation, coding and evaluation as the analytical tools. An interview was transcribed and transformed. The transcribed interviews were categorised using the scheme of emerged categories, allowing the contents to be systemically verified (Tellström et al., 2006). The interviewed data were categorised by using Atlas. ti, a scientific software development for qualitative data analysis that facilitated the description, analysis and interpretation of research data collected through unstructured or semi-structured data collection methods.

4.0 Results and Discussion

Twenty (20) participants were asked about "the type of food being sold?" and "business and customer profile" during the interview session. The finding showed two (2) themes: Food category and Business criteria, as shown in Figure 1. The following paragraph explains the participants' profiles and coding under each theme.

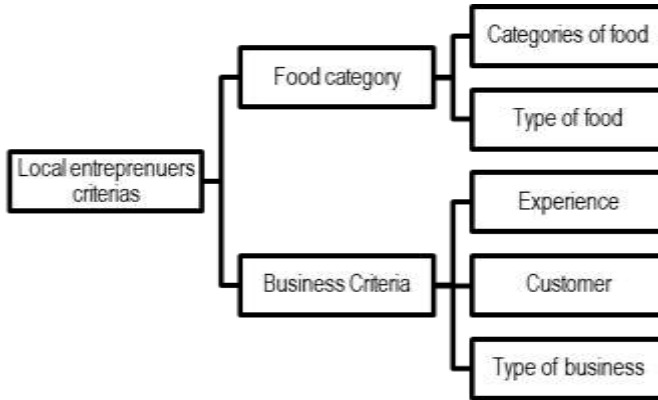


Figure 1: Theme under Local entrepreneur criteria

4.1 Participant's Profile

Twenty (20) participants were involved in the interviews. All participants were 30 to 71 years old with various business food categories backgrounds, such as restaurants, stalls, home-based catering and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The participants had business experience from two (2) to twenty-four (24) years. There was a difference in business experiences between Selangor and Sabah participants in the traditional food business. The only differences for Selangor participants mainly were Malays, and Sabah participants had different ethnic backgrounds, such as Dusun, Jawa, Brunei, Bajau and Bugis, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant profile

<i>Code</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnic background</i>	<i>Business experiences</i>
PRSG* 1	-	Malay	23
PRSG 2	52	Malay	22
PGSG 3	56	Malay	10
PGSG 4	67	Malay	3
PGSG 5	61	Malay	24
PGSG 6	40	Malay	22
PGSG 7	48	Malay	4

PHSG 8	56	Malay	7
PHSG 9	37	Malay	7
PHSB* 1	30	Dusun	2
PGSB 4	32	Jawa	8
PGSB 6	52	Dusun	5
PRSB 7	55	Malay	7
PRSB 8	31	Brunei	10
PRSB 9	71	Bajau	7
PRSB 10	34	Bajau	7
PRSB 11	25	Bugis	13
PSMESB 1	49	Dusun	5
PSMESB 2	36	Dusun	6
PSMESB 5	44	Dusun	7

*Location: Selangor – SG; Sabah- SB

*Type of business: PR- Restaurant; PG- Stall; PH- Home-based catering; PSME-Small medium enterprise

4.2 Theme 1: Food category

Under the theme food category, two codes have been identified: i) Categories of food and ii) Type of food, as shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

i. Categories of food

The participants from Selangor, such as restaurant owners (PRSG), sold gravies and accompaniments, rice, and appetiser categories. In contrast, stalls and home-based catering participants (PRSG and PHSG) concentrated on the cake, porridge, dessert, appetiser and beverage categories. Meanwhile, participants from Sabah, such as home-based catering, stalls and restaurant owners (PHSB, PGSB and PRSB), concentrated on cake, porridge and dessert, rice, gravies, and accompaniments categories than SME participants (PSMESB) focusing on selling food under appetiser; gravies and accompaniments; cake, porridge & dessert and lastly the beverage categories. The food categories under National Heritage are referred to Jabatan Warisan Negara website (Ramli et al., 2016).

ii. Type of food

Tables 2 and 3 show the type of food sold by the entrepreneurs from Selangor and Sabah, which covered a variety of traditional food sold from *nasi lemak* to *cendol* and dessert cakes. This showed the participants sold a variety of food (e.g., *nasi lemak*, *curry*, *sambal goreng*, *kuih akok*) or concentrated one dish such, as satay and *cendol*, with the majority of the dishes under the National food heritage list (Ramli et al., 2016).

Table 2. Categories and type of food sold by Selangor participants.

Code	Categories	Type of food
PRSG 1	Gravies & accompaniments	Masak Lemak, Rebung Perut, Masak Lemak Daging Salai & Gulai

PRSG 2	Rice; Appetiser	<i>Lontong, Nasi Minyak, Soto, Nasi Briyani, Sambal Goreng, Tempe</i>
PGSG 3	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Kuih Talam, Koci</i>
PGSG 4	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Murtabak</i>
PGSG 5	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Pau, Donut, Keria, Kasturi, Ketayap, Lempeng, Karipap, Bingka Ubi, Kuih Koci, Pulut Panggang</i>
PGSG 6	Appetiser	<i>Satay</i>
PGSG 7	Beverage	<i>Cendol</i>
PHSG 8	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Kuih Akok, Tepung Pelita</i>
PHSG 9	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Kuih Talam Tradisional, Kuih Seri Muka, Kole Kacang, Kuih Lapis, Kuih Cara Berlauk, Nona Manis, Popia</i>

Table 3: Categories and type of food sold by Sabah participants

Code	Categories	Type of food
PHSB 1	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Tausi Homemade, Bambanggan, Hinava</i>
PGSB 4	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Kuih Sapit, Kuih Jala</i>
PGSB 6	Cake, Porridge & Dessert	<i>Hinava, Tuhau, Ambuyat</i>
PRSB 7	Rice; Gravies & accompaniments	<i>Nasi Lemak, Curry gravies, Umbut Pisang</i>
PRSB 8	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Cendol, Kuih Muih (variety)</i>
PRSB 9	Cake, porridge & dessert	<i>Ambuyat, Ikan Ampap</i>
PRSB 10	Cake, porridge & dessert; Gravies & accompaniments	<i>Hinava, Ikan Bakar, Latok, Agal-Agal</i>
PRSB 11	Rice, Gravies & accompaniments	<i>Chicken Rice, Ikan bakar, Nasi Kuning</i>
PSMESB 1	Appetiser	<i>Sambal Tuhau, Sambal Lada</i>
PSMESB 2	Cake, porridge & dessert; Gravies & accompaniments	<i>Serunding Tuhau, Bambanggan</i>
PSMESB 5	Appetiser	<i>Sambal Tuhau, Sambal Lada</i>

This finding showed that participants from Selangor and Sabah covered various food categories. They represented the states as well as part of Malaysian cuisine. Nevertheless, as for the type of food, participants from Selangor concentrated mainly on Malay dishes, while participants from Sabah covered multiple ethnic dishes such as Brunei, Kadazandusun, Jawa, Dusun, Bajau, Malay, and Chinese.

4.2 Theme 2: Business criteria

For the theme under the business criteria category, three (3) codes were identified: i) experience, ii) customer profile, and iii) type of business, as shown in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

i. Experience

The participants from Selangor in this research had three (3) to twenty-four (24) years of experience in the traditional food business, as shown in Table 1. The most experienced were restaurant owners (PRSG) and stall owners (PGSG). Table 4 shows the statement of

participants from stall owners in Selangor state asserting that they gained experience in the business from their relative's experience in the same business (PGSG7).

Table 4: Participants' experiences

"... the origin of it is actually from aunt's mother who have already been making this cendol for a long time, about ten years..."	PGSG 7
"... I started selling satay in the year 2000, if I'm not mistaken, about 20 years .. more or less..."	PGSG 6
"... for the kuih the ladies started it, family recipes... some of the recipes are used for these products..."	PRSB 8
"... within the past 4 years, for the bambangan pickle... we only make them during the bambangan season..."	PSMESB 2

As compared to participants from Sabah, their experience in running a traditional food business was 13 years and below, which is relatively young, as shown in Table 1, and they gained experience in producing and selling the food due to their heritage backgrounds, such as continuing the family recipes and their knowledge on local ingredients. For example, participant PRSB 8, the restaurant owner using family recipes, produced traditional food for his restaurant. As for the participant, PSMESB 2, an SME business owner that sold pickle products by using local ingredients, such as bambangan pickles, which are daily consumption by local consumers such as Kadazandusun, Dusun and any other ethnic in Sabah as shown in Table 3.

ii. Customer's profile

From the findings, the researcher was able to identify that Selangor and Sabah had similar customers backgrounds, such as local customers and also from other states that came to eat on their premises or bought their food. Some business owners also had international customers, such as tourists, as shown in Table 5.

Participant PFSG 3 stated that most of his customers were locals within Selangor and from Melaka. PRSG1 stated that his customers were locals from nearby the restaurant and international tourists who came to the establishment because it was near with the tourist attraction place.

As for the participant from Sabah, PHSB 1 was a home-based catering owner with local customers that were from different ethnic backgrounds, such as Dusun, Malay, Chinese and Indians. Whereas participant PGSB 6 stated that his customers were not only locals but also tourists that showed interest in the sold food product, as listed in Table 3.

Table 5. Customer's profile

"...the majority of them are locals... all around it is locals who come they can taste the variety of traditional kuih from Melaka and those from Shah Alam..."	PGSG 3
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“... our visitors are more of the ordinary crowd... we have civil servants, police officers... there are also foreign tourists, quite a number because they visited the bird park... the butterfly park... it is nearby to our restaurants...”	PRSG 1
“...most of the buyers are the Kadazandusun people... but also amongst the buyers are Malay, Chinese and Indian..mainly Sabahans... the Dusun people...”	PHSB 1
“...most of the buyers are Dusun people and tourists... they want to try this traditional food because they do not always come here.. they like to try traditional food...”	PGSB 6

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the customer’s profile was more concentrated on the locals due to restricted movement (MCO). However, there was still a demand for traditional food, similar to findings by Skalkos et al. (2021) and Petrescu-Mag et al. (2020), that customers would purchase and consume traditional food if they could access to them.

iii. Type of business

The type of business that the participants from Selangor carried out, such as selling at their premises and using an online application. This can be seen in Table 5, showing participants PGSG 3 and PHSG 8 taking orders in large quantities through catering and hotel events. They also did their delivery. They also implemented online purchasing by using WhatsApp due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited their movements. As for participants from Sabah, PGSB 6 and PSMESB 5 also used electronic media such as Facebook and WhatsApp to promote and take orders. They usually deliver to their customers in large quantities, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Type of business

“...we are more towards catering and hotels... it is usually in large quantities... such as catering or feasts, events... if it is for a gathering we will deliver it of course... we have our own vehicle for deliveries...”	PGSG 3
“...makkik only makes a little... after that anything left over is sold online using Whatapp application because makkik would not put it at the stall...”	PHSG 8
“...we do it ourselves... we make food delivery..yes.. I use Facebook and WhatsApp...”	PGSB 6
“...there are two types... the daily and bulk buyers which we send it over with local supermarket... initially I sold via WhatsApp to friends and at Tamparuli day market every Wednesday... where I started trading every week...”	PSMESB 5

Table 1 displays the demographic background of the participants, who were all aged between 40 and 55. They shared their experience using Facebook and WhatsApp in business transactions and promotion as an alternative way to sell their products during the pandemic. Petrescu-Mag et al. (2020) suggested that entrepreneurs can choose between traditional methods or technology to maintain their business and appeal to new customers, particularly with the rise in online purchases. It was different from Skalkos et al. (2021),

whereby the customer would buy traditional food products mainly from supermarkets or grocery stores if they had access to the food product, and the purchase using online is still very low despite the tendency for more online shopping due to the pandemic.

5.0 Conclusion and Summary

To summarise, entrepreneurs from Selangor and Sabah have similarities in their food categories and business criteria, particularly in customer profile and business type. However, their level of experience running the business is similar. Most entrepreneurs from Selangor have been in the industry for more than 24 years, while those from Sabah have less than 13 years of experience selling traditional food products. This difference may be attributed to the age of the participants, with the youngest entrepreneur from Selangor being 37 years old, while the youngest from Sabah is 25.

Age can affect how individuals adapt to changes, which is especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic when new business methods must be implemented. Despite the challenges, traditional food businesses have managed to sustain themselves. With the country opening its borders to international tourists in April 2022, these businesses are anticipated to attract local and international customers interested in traditional food, which is listed as part of the national food heritage.

Studying and documenting traditional food-based entrepreneurs in the local area is essential to preserve cultural heritage. However, it is important to note that the study mainly involved Malay individuals from Selangor state, whereas Sabah has a more diverse range of ethnicities. This could lead to biases when interpreting information about multiculturalism in Malaysia. Furthermore, since this is a qualitative approach, participants can operate from various locations, such as home-based catering or online businesses, without needing a permanent establishment.

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Article Contribution to Related Field of Study

State how this article has contributed to the related field of entrepreneurship, tourism and gastronomy study.

Authors Declaration

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