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**CULINARY CHARMS:  
UNRAVELLING HOW FOOD IMAGE FACTORS AFFECT  
TOURISTS' SATISFACTION IN PENANG**

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**Abstract:**

This study aims to investigate the relationship between food image factors and tourist satisfaction in Penang, Malaysia. Penang is renowned for its rich culinary culture and diverse cuisine, making it a popular destination for food tourism. However, little is known about how food image factors impact the satisfaction of tourists who visited Penang for its culinary offerings. To address this gap, this study has collected data from a sample of tourists who have recently visited Penang and statistical analysis is used to examine the relationship between food image factors (i.e., cleanliness, taste, location, price, and food features) towards tourists' satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the data with mixed results. Limitations and recommendations are discussed to assist future researchers in improving the quality of their research in related fields.

**Keywords:**

Food Image Factors, Satisfaction, Penang, Tourist, Malaysia

## Introduction

The diverse cultural backgrounds of Malaysia are reflected in the country's cuisine. Even though Malaysian cuisine can be broken down into Malay, Indian, Chinese, Nyonya (Peranakan), or Eurasian sub-categories, there is also a long history of cross-cultural exchange, borrowing, adaptation, and hybridization within the country (Zainal Abidin et al. 2020), which has made it a favourite destination for food enthusiasts and a thriving segment of its tourism industry. The country's diverse food heritage, unique flavours and rich culinary culture have attracted tourists seeking a wide range of dishes that are known for their bold Flavors, aromatic spices, and varied cooking techniques.

Penang, which is known as the "Food Capital of Malaysia," is famous for its diverse food culture and its Nyonya cuisine. It reflects Penang cultural heritage by offering a unique and diverse culinary experience for tourists, making it a food paradise and a popular destination for culinary tourism in Malaysia. In addition, it is good for Penang's economy as it can increase Penang's gross domestic product (GDP), like the effect of food tourism in Thailand (Tai et al., 2023). In 2021, Penang received 2.5 million visitors, a decrease from pre-pandemic figures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Penang Tourism Board, 2021). Lack of visitors due to travel restrictions and lockdowns were the reasons of reduced footfall at food stalls, particularly in major tourist destinations like Georgetown and Batu Ferringhi. Additionally, movement restriction orders and border closures have impacted the availability of fresh ingredients, affecting the quality and diversity of foods supplied, and leading to challenges for food vendors, including limited operating hours or temporary closures (UCF Online, 2022).

The main aim of this research is to identify and analyse the key constructs or variables that influence Penang tourist satisfaction. We will delve into aspects such as cleanliness, taste, location, price, and food features. Understanding these essential factors is crucial, as they play a pivotal role in enhancing tourists' intention to return to Penang and, consequently, contribute to the region's economic sustainability.

## Literature Review

### *Underlying Theory Used in the Study*

According to the expectation-value theory, people's attitudes and behaviours are impacted by their expectations and perceptions of the value of a product or service. This hypothesis indicates that in the context of food and tourism, travellers' expectations about a place's culinary image, as well as their views of the value of that food, might affect their travel preferences (Kim et al., 2018).

### *Tourists' Satisfaction*

Aliman et al. (2016) defined tourist satisfaction as the level of pleasure and fulfilment that tourists derived from their trip experience, specifically regarding product or service features that meet their desires, expectations, and needs associated with the trip. Tourist satisfaction is the contentment that tourists feel throughout their trip, including the quality of accommodations, food, transportation, attractions, and service. Measuring satisfaction is crucial for businesses and destinations, as it can result in longer stays, repeat visits, positive reviews, and ultimately, growth and promotion.

### ***Relationship between Cleanliness and Tourists' Satisfaction***

Almanza et al. (2019), defined cleanliness as the general condition of hygiene and sanitation within the establishment, which included the cleanliness of surfaces, equipment, and facilities, as well as staff personal hygiene and the cleanliness of food preparation and storage areas. According to Gokmenoglu et al. (2018), a restaurant's cleanliness is defined as the lack of dust, stains, and unpleasant smells that might interfered with the satisfaction of its customers. In addition to indicating the safety of the food, restaurant cleanliness is a crucial factor in how clients assess and decide the quality of the dining facility and form opinions about it (Norazha et al, 2022). It played a crucial role in creating a positive reputation for tourism businesses and destinations, ultimately leading to increase tourist satisfaction. Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019) conducted a study on the relationship between restaurant cleanliness and tourists' satisfaction in Penang to find out that there is a significant relationship between restaurant cleanliness and tourists' satisfaction when it comes to eating and travelling in Penang.

### ***Relationship between Taste and Tourists' Satisfaction***

Breslin and Beauchamp (2013), defined food taste as the sensory perception of flavours and textures in the mouth, such as sweet, salty, sour, bitter, umami, and astringent tastes, as well as the mouthfeel and texture of a meal. The chemical makeup of food, the physiological reaction of taste receptors, and the individual's cultural and personal preferences are all influenced by taste. Taste is a significant aspect of the overall dining experience and can greatly influence the satisfaction of tourists. A restaurant or destination that consistently provides high-quality and delicious food can create a positive reputation and contribute to the overall satisfaction of tourists. Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019), concluded that the taste of food is positively associated with tourists' satisfaction with eating and travelling in Penang. The results showed that food taste had a significant relationship with tourists' satisfaction, with those who rated the food highly reporting higher satisfaction levels (Kim et al., 2021). The study included 80 respondents from each urban centre, and the results showed that food taste has a significant impact on tourists' satisfaction with eating and travelling in Penang (Slack et al., 2021).

### ***Relationship between Location and Tourists' Satisfaction***

Kimes (2003) defined location as the physical placement of a restaurant in relation to its target market and surrounding environment. Customer traffic, visibility, accessibility, and the general opinion of the restaurant brand may all be influenced by the location. The location of a restaurant is critical to its success since it influences the ease of access, visibility, ambience, and convenience for potential consumers. The location should be chosen after a thorough examination of the market, competitors, and consumer base (Cichy, 2014). Chua et al. (2020) concluded that location has a positive significant influence on tourists' satisfaction for tourists to eat and travel in Penang. Skinner et al., (2020) discovered that a restaurant's location had a positive significant influence on location and tourists' satisfaction for tourists to eat and travel in Penang while Ahmed (2019) has demonstrated that location positively influences tourists' satisfaction with eating and travelling in Penang.

### ***Relationship between Price and Tourists' Satisfaction***

Amarra (2020) defined pricing as a vital strategy used by food businesses to communicate value to their customers. A food product's pricing is the monetary amount that a customer must pay to obtain the commodity." According to Kotler & Armstrong (2016), pricing is an important component of food marketing because it influenced customer behaviour, affected

profitability, and effected the overall market positioning of the product. *"Pricing is a strategic marketing choice that involves determining the price of a product or service in order to meet specified marketing objectives"* (Mooij, 2018, p. 321). While price is a crucial factor for tourists when making decisions about their travel expenses, it may not necessarily create a positive reputation for tourism businesses and destinations. Rather, offering fair and reasonable prices for the quality of goods and services provided can contribute to the overall satisfaction of tourists and may help create a positive reputation in the long run. Chua et al. (2020) discovered that price had a positive significant influence on tourists' satisfaction for tourists to eat and travel in Penang. The results indicated that price is significantly related to tourists' satisfaction for tourism to eat and travel in Penang (Peters & Hervé Remaud, 2020).

### ***Relationship between Food Features and Tourists' Satisfaction***

Smithers (2014) defined food features are the inherent traits or aspects of food, such as flavour, texture, fragrance, appearance, and nutritional content. Food features were measurable and observable characteristics of food that affected its sensory and functional aspects, as well as impact consumer behaviour and pleasure (Stone & Sidel, 2012, p. 1). According to Duyff, 2017, food features were the physical, chemical, and biological properties of food that distinguished it, such as its origin, manufacturing process, packaging, storage conditions, and safety. Food features, such as quality, variety, and uniqueness, are significant factors that can influence the satisfaction of tourists. Providing high-quality and unique food options can create a positive reputation for tourism businesses and destinations, ultimately leading to increased tourist satisfaction. Peters & Hervé Remaud (2020) has proven that food features have a positive significant influence on tourists' satisfaction for tourists to eat and travel in Penang. Chua et al., (2020) research shown that food features have a significant relationship with tourists' satisfaction for tourists to eat and travel in Penang.

Hence, based on the discussion, the researchers proposed the following hypotheses:

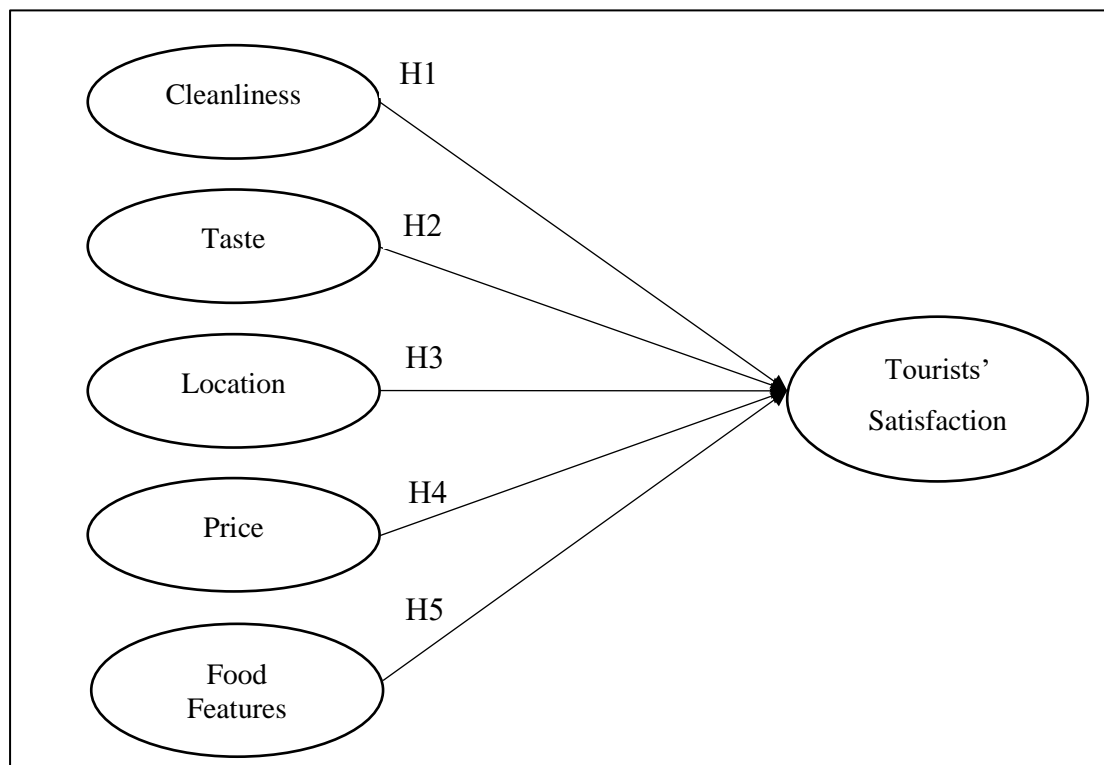
- H1: There is a significant relationship between cleanliness and tourists' satisfaction.
- H2: There is a significant relationship between taste and tourists' satisfaction.
- H3: There is a significant relationship between location and tourists' satisfaction.
- H4: There is a significant relationship between price and tourists' satisfaction.
- H5: There is a significant relationship between food features and tourists' satisfaction.

Figure 1 in the next page shows the proposed research framework with the constructs of interest and the five hypotheses.

### **Methodology**

This research employs a quantitative methodology utilising a survey approach. The respondents were asked to express their agreement levels using a 5-point Likert scale concerning both the exogenous and endogenous variables. To assess cleanliness, four items were drawn from the work of Karamustafa and Ülker (2019). The measurement of taste relied on five items from the study by Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2019). Location was evaluated using a set of five items adapted from Hanaysha (2016), while four items from Hanaysha (2016) were used to gauge price perception. The assessment of food features was measured using five items in the study by Gani et al. (2017), and food satisfaction was measured using four items derived from the study by Hassan et al. (2020).

Non-probability sampling method was employed since there is no sampling frame available (Saunders et al. 2009). The respondents were verbally asked for their voluntary participation and checking were done after the completion to ensure no missing value. Of the 235 questionnaires that were collected through a Google Form, 11 were excluded as 2 respondents reported no knowledge of food tourism and 9 did not meet the study requirements as they had not been on a food tour in Malaysia before. Thus, 224 valid questionnaires were used for analysis. All the respondents are aged 18 and above and have previously travelled to Penang, Malaysia.



**Figure 1 Proposed Research Framework**

**Results and Discussions**

**Table 1 Cleanliness Variable of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	The cleanliness of utensils in restaurants will affect preferences to eat and travel as a tourist.	3.55	1.010	3
2	I consider the restaurant's toilet cleanliness to eat at as a tourist.	3.41	1.007	4
3	I consider a restaurant's general cleanliness of the physical environment to decide whether to eat as a tourist.	3.58	1.118	1
4	My standards for hygiene at employee are high as a tourist.	3.50	1.092	2

Referring to Table 1, it can be observed that the statement “I consider a restaurant’s general cleanliness of the physical environment to decide whether to eat as a tourist.” has the highest mean score of 3.58. On the other hand, the statement “I consider the restaurant’s toilet cleanliness to eat at as a tourist.” has the lowest mean score of 3.41. This suggests that tourists may experience disappointment if a restaurant falls short of expected cleanliness standards, even when their expectations are relatively high of the cleanliness.

**Table 2 Taste Variable of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	I will be satisfied when the food is rich in flavours.	3.56	1.005	2
2	I will be satisfied when the food is tasty	3.42	.999	5
3	I will be satisfied when the food is aromatic.	3.58	1.117	1
4	I will be satisfied when the food is the popular cuisine in the world	3.50	1.092	4
5	I will be satisfied when the food is hot and spicy	3.54	1.112	3

Referring to Table 2, it can be observed that the statement “I will be satisfied when the food is aromatic.” has the highest mean score of 3.58. On the other hand, the statement “I will be satisfied when the food is tasty.” has the lowest mean score of 3.42. Taste is a fundamental component of the tourist's food satisfaction because it influences their perception of the destination, their overall enjoyment, and their likelihood of returning or recommending the place to others.

**Table 3 Location Variable of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	The Penang local food is in a populated area will increase my preferences to eat as a tourist.	3.64	1.032	1
2	The Penang local food location is ideal since it is convenient for me to get there as a tourist.	3.48	1.029	5
3	The Penang local food is located in a tidy area will increase my preferences to eat as a tourist.	3.60	1.083	2
4	The Penang local food is situated in a great area with easy access to parking will increase my preferences to eat as a tourist.	3.55	1.078	4
5	I will observe the restaurant because of its prominent location as a tourist.	3.57	1.102	3

Referring to Table 3, it can be observed that the statement “The Penang local food in a populated area will increase my preferences to eat as a tourist.” has the highest mean score of 3.64. On the other hand, the statement “The Penang local food location is ideal since it is convenient for me to get there as a tourist.” has the lowest mean score of 3.48. This study underscores the importance of bolstering destination branding initiatives that highlight Penang's distinctive culinary heritage and local food offerings.

**Table 4 Price Variable of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	The pricing structure of the Penang local food is the greatest one that can suit my expectations as a tourist.	3.49	1.007	1
2	I will be satisfied when the Penang local food charges a fair price for its food as a tourist.	3.39	1.032	3
3	From what I received; the prices of the Penang local food seem reasonable as a tourist.	3.49	1.156	1
4	Overall, compared to other service providers, Penang local food offers better price options will satisfy me as a tourist.	3.45	1.027	2

Referring to Table 4, it can be observed that the statement “The pricing structure of the Penang local food is the greatest one that can suit my expectations as a tourist.” and “From what I received; the prices of the Penang local food seem reasonable as a tourist.” Both have the highest mean score of 3.49. On the other hand, the statement “I will be satisfied when the Penang local food charges a fair price for its food as a tourist.” has the lowest mean score of 3.39. This observation suggests that tourists may experience dissatisfaction when their expectations for aromatic and flavourful food are not met, especially if they expect high-quality dining at reasonable prices and encounter subpar food offerings at elevated costs.

**Table 5 Food Features Variable of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	Local restaurants use a variety of cooking methods.	3.17	1.156	1
2	I will be satisfied when there are a variety of local specialities available.	3.11	1.137	2
3	I will be satisfied when there are various information guides on the local food.	3.08	1.163	4
4	I will be satisfied if the price of the food is reasonable.	3.10	1.238	3
5	I will be satisfied if the food has high availability.	3.07	1.300	5

Referring to Table 5, it can be observed that the statement “Local restaurants use a variety of cooking methods.” has the highest mean score of 3.17. On the other hand, the statement “I will be satisfied if the food has high availability.” has the lowest mean score of 3.07. Food features play a vital role in enhancing the satisfaction of tourists with their dining experiences. They encompass multiple aspects which contribute to the overall enjoyment of tourists during their travels.

**Table 6 Tourist Satisfaction Variable of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

No.	Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
1	I am satisfy with the Penang local food as a tourist.	3.54	.997	1
2	Penang local food lives up to my expectation as a tourist.	3.35	1.017	3
3	In the future, I would go back to the Penang local eatery as a tourist again.	3.39	1.127	2
4	As a tourist, I would advocate for the Penang local eatery to others.	3.54	1.175	1

Referring to Table 6, it can be observed that the statement “I am satisfied with the Penang local food as a tourist.” and “As a tourist, I would advocate for the Penang local eatery to others.” Both have the highest mean score of 3.54. On the other hand, the statement “Penang local food lives up to my expectation as a tourist.” has the lowest mean score of 3.35. Studying food satisfaction in Penang is not only important for the region's identity and culture but also for its economic growth, tourist attraction, and long-term sustainability. It contributes to the well-being of the community, promotes culinary innovation, and enhances the overall experience for tourists.

**Table 7 Reliability Test of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Cleanliness	4	0.941
Taste	5	0.956
Location	5	0.953
Price	4	0.942
Food Features	5	0.957
Tourists' Satisfaction	4	0.937

According to Table 7, all variables have alpha coefficients above 0.6, indicating high reliability. The variable with the highest alpha coefficient is Food Features at 0.957, demonstrating excellent reliability. The other variables, including Cleanliness, Taste, Location, Price, and Tourists' satisfaction, also exhibit excellent reliability, with alpha coefficients of 0.941, 0.956, 0.953, 0.942, and 0.937, respectively.

**Table 8. Multiple Regression Analysis Model Summary**

Model Summary							
Equation	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable	$r^2$	Adjusted $r^2$	Beta	Sig	F
1	Tourists' Satisfaction (TS)	Cleanliness (C)	0.143	0.124	0.241	<0.001	7.302
		Taste (T)			0.061	0.496	
		Location (L)			0.128	0.045	



		Price (P)			0.242	<0.001	
		Food Features (FF)			-0.050	0.573	
a. Dependent Variable: TS							

Multiple regression analysis was used to check on the proposed research framework model and for hypothesis testing. Based on Table 8, the value of  $r^2$  is 0.143, which indicates that 14.3% of tourist satisfaction is influenced by the five independent variables: cleanliness, taste, location, price, and food features. According to Ozili (2023), low  $r^2$  at least at 0.10 is acceptable within the social science context if most of the independent variables in the model are significance, albeit a weak relationship.

**Table 9 ANOVA of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
1	Regression	31.512	5	6.302	7.302	<.001 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	188.159	218	.863		
	Total	219.672	223			
a. Dependent Variable: TS						
b. Predictors: (Constant): C, T, L, P, FF						

Source: Developed for research

In general, the overall model has significance with F ratio of 7.302 and p-value of <.001 as can be seen in Table 9. This indicates that the model itself is statistically significance.

**Table 10 Coefficients of the Proposed Research Framework Model**

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
1	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
	(Constant)	1.220	.414		2.944	.004
	Cleanliness (C)	.245	.064	.241	3.834	<.001
	Taste (T)	.062	.091	.061	.683	.496
	Location (L)	.130	.065	.128	2.014	.045
	Price (P)	.240	.064	.242	3.769	<.001
	Food Features (FF)	-.045	.080	-.050	-.564	.573
a. Dependent Variable: Tourists' Satisfaction (TS)						

Table 11 shows the summary of the hypothesis testing results. The p-value of cleanliness, location, and price is lower than 0.05, with value of  $<.001$ ,  $.045$ , and  $<.001$ , respectively. However, the p-value of taste and food features is higher than 0.05, with the value of 0.496 and 0.573. Hence, cleanliness, location and price have significant relationship with tourists' satisfaction. Since three out of five independent variables have significant relationship with the dependent variable,  $r^2$  in this model is deemed to be acceptable.

**Table 11 Summary of the Result of Hypothesis Testing**

Hypothesis	Significant Value	Supported/Rejected
H1: There is a significant relationship between cleanliness and tourists' satisfaction	$<.001$ , ( $p<0.05$ )	Supported
H2: There is no significant relationship between taste and tourists' satisfaction.	$.496$ , ( $p>0.05$ )	Rejected
H3: There is a significant relationship between location and tourists' satisfaction.	$.045$ , ( $p<0.05$ )	Supported
H4: There is a significant relationship between price and tourists' satisfaction.	$<.001$ ( $p<0.05$ )	Supported
H5: There is no significant relationship between food features and tourists' satisfaction.	$.573$ ( $p>0.05$ )	Rejected

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study suggested that tourists' expectations are based on perceptions or actual performance, and it can influence their satisfaction level. A tourist may be disappointed with a dirty restaurant, even if they expected it to be clean. Similarly, if tourists anticipate high-quality food at a reasonable price, they may be dissatisfied with low-quality food sold at a higher cost. The value expectation theory provides a framework to comprehend how tourists form expectations of their travel experience and how those expectations can affect their satisfaction level. Tourists' satisfaction is not only based on the actual performance of the independent variables but also on perceived performance. This study emphasized the need to enhance destination branding efforts by promoting Penang's unique culinary traditions and local cuisine. Targeted marketing strategies can be developed based on tourists' preferences and behaviours related to food. Ensuring the quality of food offerings and improving tourists' dining experiences through service quality and hygiene measures can enhance overall satisfaction. Promoting local food through digital marketing, developing alternative food tourism models, and collaborating with local communities to sustain their livelihoods are some of the other recommendations derived from this study.

Every research conducted is not without its limitations, confounding variables, such as service, convenience, or atmosphere, which may have had a stronger impact on tourists' satisfaction than food features. The absence of a significant relationship between food features and satisfaction in the study may not necessarily indicate that taste and food features are not important to tourists' satisfaction, but rather that other factors may have confounded this relationship. Besides, the sample size of this study may affect the reliability and generalizability

of the findings. This lack of diversity in the study's sample may have contributed to the absence of a relationship between taste and food features and tourists' satisfaction.

Lastly, the future study may consider including a more comprehensive set of variables considering the weak  $r^2$  in this study, using advanced statistical techniques such as structural equation modelling (SEM), and utilizing a more diverse sample of tourists for a more robust analysis. This would provide a better understanding of the unique contribution of food features to tourists' satisfaction. Future research can consider the food waste intention among the tourists as Ting et al. (2023) noticed that such intention does not augur well with food sustainability and security in the foreseeable future.

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