UNDERSTANDING GEN-Z'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS PENANG'S LOCAL FOOD: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL, PRESTIGE, AND QUALITY-VALUES

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Abstract. Penang's local food creates an important element of the state's cultural identity and serves as a key driver of tourism attractiveness. As Generation Z (Gen-Z) increasingly becomes a prominent consumer group in both the food and travel industries, understanding their perceptions and engagement with local food experiences has become increasingly important for sustaining culinary tourism and preserving cultural heritage. This study aims to examine the factors that contribute to Gen-Z's attitude towards Penang's local food by focusing on three variables which is emotional value, prestige value and quality value. A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was employed, utilizing a self-administered questionnaire distributed to 431 Gen-Z respondents aged 18-29 years in Malaysia who had prior experience consuming Penang's local food. Convenience sampling was used, and data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses. Results indicated that all three variables significantly influence Gen-Z's attitudes with prestige value emerging as the strongest predicator, followed by quality and emotional value. These findings suggest that social recognition, sensory satisfaction and emotional connections play an essential role in shaping young consumers' perception of local food. The study provides useful insights for tourism authorities, local food businesses, and cultural stakeholders to develop more effective strategies in preserving Penang's culinary heritage while aligning with the preferences of the younger generation in a rapidly digitalized and globalized food culture.
Keywords: *Generation Z, Penang's local food, culinary tourism, emotional value, prestige value, quality value*

Introduction

The increasing importance of culinary tourism has transformed local cuisine into a strategic cultural resource that contributes to destination identity and enhances tourists' experiential value. As one of the most well-known culinary tourism attractions in Malaysia, Penang is celebrated for its diverse and multicultural cuisine which reflects the influence of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Peranakan cultures (Bernama, 2025; The Star, 2025). Local cuisine not only satisfies the fundamental requirement for sustenance but also acts as a meaningful medium through which tourists and locals alike connect with the cultural character of a region (Ahmed et al., 2025). This is particularly relevant for Generation Z (Gen-Z), who seek authentic, immersive culinary experiences that facilitate cultural exchange and emotional engagement. In recent years, Gen-Z has emerged as a significant consumer group in the tourism and hospitality industry. According to Williams et al. (2021), Gen-Z travelers are increasingly shaping food tourism trends because of their digital fluency, openness to cultural diversity, and strong preference for authentic experiences. Their food choices are shaped not only by taste

and affordability but also by values such as sustainability, cultural authenticity, and social media appeal (Ivasciuc et al., 2025). As digital natives, they do not just eat, but they share, post, and interact with food experiences online, which indirectly shapes how local food is perceived and promoted (VisitScotland, 2026; Unilever Food Solutions, 2025).

Despite the growing importance of Gen-Z in the tourism market, limited scholarly attention has been paid to their specific attitudes towards local food in culturally rich destinations like Penang. Most existing studies have either focused on a single value dimension (such as taste value; Yeap et al., 2020) or examined broader demographic groups that do not capture Gen-Z's unique characteristics (Poyoi et al., 2024). These limitations are concerning because food-related experiences are well-documented as powerful drivers of destination satisfaction, tourist loyalty, and cultural appreciation (Yulius et al., 2024). Consequently, little is known about how multiple dimensions of consumption value (specifically emotional value, prestige value, and quality value) collectively shape Gen-Z's attitudes toward local food in culturally rich destinations like Penang. Thus, this study contributes to consumption value theory (Sheth et al., 1991) by extending its application to the specific context of Gen-Z food tourism in a multicultural Asian destination. By isolating Gen-Z and focusing specifically on Penang, this study refines theoretical understanding of how consumption values operate differently for younger cohorts in culturally rich settings.

This gap is not merely academic but carries practical implications. Penang's culinary heritage has long been recognized as a cornerstone of its tourism appeal and cultural identity (Abdul Aziz and Md Nor, 2022; Henderson, 2020). However, as Gen-Z emerges as a dominant force in the travel and food industries, a critical question arises: can this rich heritage remain relevant to a generation whose values are shaped by digital connectivity, authenticity-seeking, and social recognition (Pratap et al., 2022)? Recent findings by Yusof et al. (2026) highlight a troubling trend: traditional culinary heritage faces declining awareness among younger generations in Malaysia. This underscores an urgent need to understand how heritage foods can remain culturally relevant. Without empirical insight into what drives Gen-Z's food attitudes, tourism authorities, food vendors, and policymakers risk developing strategies misaligned with younger consumers' preferences which may potentially declining of culinary heritage and missing opportunities for sustainable tourism growth (Ardika et al., 2026). Thus, examining the relationship between Gen-Z's attitudes and local food experiences in Penang is not merely an academic exercise but a strategic imperative for sustainable cultural tourism development in Malaysia. To address these interconnected gaps, the objective of this study is to examine the relationship between emotional value, prestige value, and quality value towards Gen-Z's attitude on Penang's local food.

Literature review

Underpinning theory

This study is grounded in Consumption Value Theory (CVT), originally developed by Sheth et al. (1991). CVT posits that consumer choice behavior is a function of multiple consumption values that contribute to the overall perceived value of a product or service. Sheth et al. (1991) identified five distinct consumption values which are functional value, social value,vemotional value, epistemic value and conditional value. These values collectively influence consumers' decision-making processes and

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behavioral intentions. In the context of food tourism, CVT has been widely applied to understand how different value dimensions shape tourists' attitudes and behaviors toward local cuisine (Sahrulrazi et al., 2024; Yulius et al., 2024; Yeap et al., 2020). For example, functional value may relate to the taste, freshness, and nutritional quality of food, while social value corresponds to the prestige and status associated with consuming certain dishes or dining at popular establishments. Emotional value captures the feelings of nostalgia, comfort, happiness, or cultural connection evoked by food experiences (Sthapit et al., 2023). In alignment with CVT, this study focuses on three specific values which are emotional value, prestige value, and quality value as predictors of Gen-Z's attitudes toward Penang's local food.

To explain how these values translate into behavioral outcomes, this study integrates CVT with the Value-Attitude-Behavior (VAB) framework. The VAB framework, proposed by Homer and Kahle (1988), suggests that consumer values influence attitudes, which in turn shape behavioral intentions and actual behaviors. While behavioral intentions are not directly tested in this study, the attitude component serves as a critical precursor to subsequent behaviors such as revisiting, recommending, or sharing food experiences online (Purwanegara et al., 2025; Yulius et al., 2024). The integration of CVT and VAB provides a theoretical foundation for understanding Gen-Z's food attitudes in Penang. CVT explains the multiple value dimensions that consumers consider when evaluating food experiences, while VAB explains the process through which these values influence attitudes. By combining these frameworks, this study offers explanation of how emotional, prestige, and quality values collectively shape Gen-Z's attitudes toward Penang's local food. This integrated approach has been successfully applied in previous food tourism research to explain how tourists' perceived values affect their satisfaction, loyalty, and revisit intentions (Purwanegara et al., 2025; Yulius et al., 2024).

Hypotheses development

Emotional value and Gen-Z's atititude

Emotional value refers to the affective responses such as happiness, nostalgia, comfort, and cultural connection that evoked by food consumption (Sthapit et al., 2023; Sheth et al., 1991). For Gen-Z, emotional value holds particular significance as this generation seeks immersive experiences that engage all the senses (Poyoi et al., 2024; Pratap et al., 2022). Yeap et al. (2020) found that emotional value significantly shaped young travelers' attitudes toward street food in Penang, while Abd Rahman et al. (2023) reported that emotional satisfaction strongly predicted behavioral intentions among young food tourists in Malaysia. However, Sahrulrazi et al. (2024) found that functional value exerted a stronger influence than emotional value in a different cultural context, suggesting contextual variation. Given Gen-Z's heightened emphasis on experiential consumption (Zhu et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2024), emotional value is expected to be a critical determinant of their food attitudes in Penang. Accordingly, the first hypothesis is formulated as follows; (H1): Emotional value has a significant positive influence on Gen-Z's attitude toward Penang's local food.

Prestige value and Gen-Z's atititude

Prestige value represents the perceived social status and peer approval gained from food consumption (Liao et al., 2022; Sheth et al., 1991;). For digitally native Gen-Z,

food experiences serve as social currency and personal branding on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Zhu et al., 2025; Poyoi et al., 2024;). Iranita et al. (2025) found that prestige value strongly predicted Gen-Z's attitudes toward local food in Southeast Asia, while Pradana et al. (2023) reported that prestige value significantly influenced young consumers' intention to visit food destinations. However, Liao et al. (2022) found that prestige value's effect was less pronounced among Asian consumers compared to Western contexts, raising cultural considerations. Despite this, Gen-Z's motivation to seek shareable experiences suggests prestige value remains meaningful (Poyoi et al., 2024; Pratap et al., 2022). Accordingly, the second hypothesis is formulated as follows; (H2): Prestige value has a significant positive influence on Gen-Z's attitude toward Penang's local food.

Quality value and Gen-Z's atititude

Quality value refers to the perceived excellence, authenticity, and consistency of food offerings (Yeap et al., 2020; Sheth et al., 1991). Gen-Z is discerning and informed, actively researching food options and valuing authenticity (Abd Rahman et al., 2023; Pratap et al., 2022). Yulius et al. (2024) found that quality value strongly predicted satisfaction and behavioral intentions among food tourists. However, Yeap et al. (2020) found quality value secondary to emotional value among young travelers, whereas Sahrulrazi et al. (2024) identified it as the strongest predictor in a different setting. Given Gen-Z's emphasis on authenticity and quality (Pratap et al., 2022), quality value is expected to shape their attitudes toward Penang's local food. Accordingly the third hypothesis is formulated as follows; (H3): Quality value has a significant positive influence on Gen-Z's attitude toward Penang's local food.

Materials and Methods

Research design

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to examine the influence of emotional value, prestige value, and quality value on Gen-Z's attitudes toward Penang's local food. A cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect primary data from the target population within a specified timeframe.

Target population and sampling method

The target population comprises Malaysian Gen-Z individuals aged 18–29 with prior experience consuming Penang's local food, consistent with recent Gen-Z consumer behavior studies (Chamoli et al., 2025; Soyadlı, 2025;). A convenience sampling technique was employed to reach a geographically dispersed population through online channels, as the target population (Gen-Z) is highly active on social media and online platforms, making online distribution an effective method of reaching them.

Sample zize

The Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula was applied to the population of individuals aged 15–29 in Malaysia (approximately 8.95 million), yielding a minimum sample size of 384 respondents. While the official statistics report the age range as 15–29, this study specifically targets individuals aged 18–29. The slight discrepancy in age range does not

materially affect the sample size calculation, as the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula is relatively insensitive to variations in population size beyond a certain threshold. To enhance the statistical power and generalizability of the findings, a total of 431 valid responses were successfully collected, exceeding both minimum requirements and providing a margin of safety for potential incomplete or invalid responses.

Survey instrument development and data collection

For this study, Closed-ended questions were used for data collection. The questionnaire consists of 3 sections as shown in *Table 1*. The sample were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with statements on a five-point Likert scale.The survey was administered via an online questionnaire using Google Forms, distributed through social media platforms including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook groups targeting Malaysian Gen-Z respondents. Data collection was conducted over a four-week period.

***Table 1**. Sources for measurement items.*

Sections	Num. of item
A: Demographic	3
B: Independent Variables	
Emotional Value	5
Prestige Value	4
Quality Value	5
C: Dependent Variable	3

Data analysis

Data collected were analyzed using SPSS Statistics Version 26.0. Pearson correlation analysis was perfomed to examine the bivariate relationships between the independent variables (emotional value, prestige value, and quality value) and the dependent variable (attitude toward Penang's local food). Correlation coefficients (r) were interpreted guidelines: r = 0.10 (small), r = 0.30 (medium), and r = 0.50 (large). Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive influence of the three independent variables on Gen-Z's attitudes.

Results and Discussion

Pearson correlation analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation analysis between emotional, prestige, and quality values towards Gen-Z's attitude on Penang's local food. All three values demonstrated significant positive correlations ($p < 0.001$): prestige value recorded the strongest correlation ($r = 0.58$), followed by quality value ($r = 0.57$) and emotional value ($r = 0.55$). These findings indicate that all factors are key drivers of attitudes toward local food among Gen-Z consumers.

***Table 2**. Pearson correlation analysis between value dimensions and attitude towards local food.*

Value Dimension	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)
Emotional Value	0.55	< 0.001
Prestige Value	0.58	< 0.001
Quality Value	0.57	< 0.001

Note: n = 431. All correlations are significant at p < 0.001 (2-tailed). Coefficients between 0.50 and 1.0 indicate strong correlations.

Multiple regression analysis

Table 3 presents the multiple regression analysis examining the impact of emotional, prestige, and quality values on Gen-Z's attitude toward local food in Penang. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(3, 427) = 98.33$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 41% of the variance in Gen-Z's attitudes ($R^2 = 0.41$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.40$). All three predictors were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). Prestige value emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 3.04$, $p < 0.001$), followed by quality value ($\beta = 0.22$, $t = 3.56$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional value ($\beta = 0.18$, $t = 6.11$, $p < 0.001$). These findings indicate that prestige value are the primary drivers of positive attitudes, while quality and emotional value also contribute meaningfully to shaping Gen-Z's attitudes toward Penang's local food.

***Table 3**. Multiple regression analysis of value dimensions on attitude towards local food.*

Independent Variables	Standardized Coefficients (β)	t-value	Significance (p value)
Emotional Value	0.18	6.11	< 0.001
Prestige Value	0.31	3.04	< 0.001
Quality Value	0.22	3.56	< 0.001

Note: n = 431. Dependent variable: Attitude toward Penang's local food. $R^2 = 0.41$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.40$, $F(3, 427) = 98.33$, $p < 0.001$.

Emotional value

The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between emotional value and Gen-Z's attitude toward Penang's local food ($r = 0.55$; $\beta = 0.18$, $p < 0.001$. This finding aligns with recent scholarship demonstrating that emotional value significantly influences attitudes toward local cuisine among Gen-Z tourists (Alexandra and Choirisa, 2024; $\beta = 0.455$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, Lin et al. (2024) found that Gen-Z's comfort food choices are associated with enhanced mood and ritualistic engagement, transforming dishes beyond mere sustenance. For many Gen-Z individuals, dishes such as Char Kuey Teow and Nasi Kandar embody shared moments with family and cultural identity markers. This resonates with Badu-Baiden and Kim (2022), who found that memorable local food consumption experiences strongly predict attitude toward local food. The emotional resonance of local cuisine is further amplified when consumed in traditional settings such as hawker stalls, which evoke a sense of place and tradition (Stone and Zou, 2023). Theoretically, these findings affirm that emotional value is a critical determinant of attitude formation, consistent with the Value-Attitude-Behavior framework. Practically, promotional strategies should incorporate storytelling and cultural context to effectively engage Gen-Z (Alexandra and Choirisa, 2024). Therefore, H1 is supported.

Prestige value

Prestige value demonstrated the strongest influence on Gen-Z's attitude ($r = 0.58$; $\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that social status and trendiness associated with local food significantly shape favorable attitudes. This finding aligns with Özkan Önem et al. (2025), who demonstrated that social media consumption significantly influences local food preferences, with perceived symbolic status serving as a key mediating mechanism. Similarly, Sari et al. (2026) found that prestige value exerts a significant positive relationship with purchase intention among Gen-Z Muslim consumers. In

Penang, Gen-Z consumers are influenced by social media trends where sharing local food experiences functions as self-expression and cultural identity affirmation. With the dominance of Instagram and TikTok, food is evaluated not only by taste but by how "share-worthy" the experience is. Poyoi et al. (2024) identified social recognition and perceived enjoyment as key motivational dimensions driving food sharing behavior. Furthermore, research on Hungarian Gen-Z consumers suggests that local food serves as a cultural badge or identity statement, with value proximity which encompassing quality, taste, and health dominating consumer perceptions (Chamoli et al., 2025). This highlights an opportunity for vendors and tourism agencies to rebrand Penang cuisine as stylish and globally relevant. Therefore, H2 is supported.

Quality value

The positive relationship between quality value and Gen-Z's attitude ($r = 0.57$; $\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) reinforces the critical role in shaping food preferences. This finding verifies research by Kim et al. (2025), who demonstrated that food quality significantly and positively affects satisfaction and visiting intentions among Gen-Z consumers. Similarly, Yeap et al. (2020) identified taste value as the most salient factor influencing attitude among young travelers to Penang. The particularly strong influence of visual appeal aligns with Gen-Z's digitally native characteristics. In an era where Instagram and TikTok dominate, visual content acts as a powerful driver of gastronomic interest by shaping pre-consumption expectations (Sa'min et al., 2024). This study therefore provides empirical support for the argument that emotional and sensory experiences drive food preferences more profoundly than rational factors like price (Chamoli et al., 2025; Mehta, 2024). For Penang, where the culinary landscape is defined by rich flavors and diverse heritage, Gen-Z demands consistent taste quality, freshness, and modern aesthetic appeal. Practically, vendors must maintain taste quality while elevating visual presentation and hygiene standards. Therefore, H3 is supported.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of emotional value, prestige value, and quality value on Gen-Z's attitude toward Penang's local food. The findings confirmed that all three value dimensions significantly predict attitudes, with prestige value emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.31$), followed by quality value ($\beta = 0.22$) and emotional value ($\beta = 0.18$). The regression model explained 41% of the variance in attitudes ($R^2 = 0.41$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.40$), indicating that these consumption values collectively play a substantial role in shaping Gen-Z's attitude towards Penang's local food. Therefore, H1, H2, and H3 are supported. These results contribute to the growing body of literature on consumption value theory by demonstrating its applicability to Gen-Z consumers in a multicultural Asian destination. The findings also offer practical insights for food vendors, tourism marketers, and policymakers seeking to engage younger consumers. Strategies should emphasize social prestige and recognition, while maintain high-quality sensory experiences and fostering emotional connections with local cuisine. This study has several limitations. The use of convenience sampling and self-reported data may limit generalizability and introduce response bias. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inferences, while the single-method approach raises concerns about common-method bias. Additionally, the focus on Gen-Z in Penang limits generalizability to other demographics and regions. Future research should employ probability sampling,

longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches, while exploring additional variables such as environmental concerns and price perceptions.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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