EXPLORING ADULTS' PERCEPTIONS AND SWEETNESS PREFERENCES FOR LOCAL TRADITIONAL FOODS IN KELANTAN AND TERENGGANU

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(Received 08th September 2026; revised 28th October 2026; accepted 02nd November 2026)

Abstract. Sweetness is a distinctive sensory attribute that characterises the traditional cuisines of Kelantan and Terengganu, particularly across their diverse range of local dishes and traditional kuih. Although both East Coast states share similar cultural heritage and culinary traditions, they are widely perceived to differ in their sweetness profiles, making sweetness an important element of regional gastronomic identity. However, previous studies have predominantly focused on Malaysian traditional foods from the perspectives of heritage preservation, food acceptance and culinary tourism, with limited attention given to adults' perceptions of sweetness and the sociocultural factors that shape Kelantan and Terengganu. Therefore, this study aimed to explore adults' perceptions of sweetness in local foods, compare sweetness preferences between the two states and examine the factors influencing these preferences. A qualitative exploratory research design was employed. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on predetermined inclusion criteria aligned with the study objectives. Six informants aged between 30 and 40 years, familiar with the traditional local dishes and food culture of their respective states, participated in the study. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the resulting data were analysed manually to identify recurring patterns and themes. Four main themes emerged: regional culinary influence, sensory socialisation, cultural authenticity and reactive literacy. The findings demonstrate that sweetness preferences in Kelantan and Terengganu reflect regional identity, family socialisation, cultural expectations and changing life circumstances. These preferences are reinforced through repeated exposure and intergenerational transmission yet remain flexible as individuals adjust their consumption according to health awareness and changing circumstances. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of sweetness in East Coast regional cuisine and offers insights for preserving traditional food heritage while encouraging healthier dietary practices.
Keywords: *sweetness preference, Kelantan cuisine, Terengganu cuisine, traditional food*

Introduction

Traditional food is a vital aspect of the cultural heritage of a community, since it symbolises community identity, history and its values. It represents cultural identity and local knowledge (Karaosmanoğlu, 2020), while traditional Malay food sustains traditional cooking practices and the utilisation of local ingredients (Ismail et al., 2021). In Kelantan and Terengganu, traditional cuisine is still deeply connected to the local culture and ways of life. Despite sharing similar Malay traditions and geographical environment, their cuisines have developed subtle differences through generations of food preparation and consumption. Local ingredients like coconut milk, palm sugar,

cane sugar, ripe banana, pumpkin, sweet potato and glutinous rice contribute to culinary authenticity and the distinctive sweet flavour profile of East Coast cuisine (Raji et al., 2022). Although sweetness has been documented as a common characteristic of Kelantan and Terengganu cuisines (Abdullah et al., 2021), particularly the sweeter preferences among Kelantanese (Qureshi et al., 2020), limited attention has been given to how local adults perceive and develop preferences. Moreover, the influence of sociocultural factors, including cultural practices, upbringings and daily eating habits remains underexplored. While Venditti et al. (2020) identified several determinants of sweetness preferences, sociocultural influences were not extensively addressed.

This gap limits understanding of sweetness as both a sensory characteristic and an element of regional food culture. Therefore, this study examining adults' perceptions and preferences is important for understanding the relationship between sensory experience, sociocultural influences and the preservation of traditional food identity in Kelantan and Terengganu. Theoretically, this study explains sweetness preference as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than focusing solely on individual sensory preference, demonstrating how regional culinary environments, early childhood exposure and family practices shape and transmit taste preferences. Practically, the findings provide traditional food producers, foodservice operators and product developers with insights into how sweetness influences consumer acceptance and perceived authenticity, supporting efforts to maintain cultural value while considering dietary concerns. From the social aspect, this study highlights the role of sweetness preferences in maintaining the culinary identity and food heritage of Kelantan and Terengganu. Understanding how taste preferences and culinary knowledge are transmitted through family practices and traditions may strengthen awareness of traditional flavour profiles and encourage communities to preserve their culinary identities amid changing dietary habits and food consumption patterns.

Literature review

Geographic domain of Kelantan and Terengganu

Kelantan and Terengganu are neighbouring states on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, sharing similar physical environments yet possessing distinctive historical and cultural backgrounds. Both states are characterised by long coastlines facing the South China Sea, extensive river systems, tropical rainforests and fertile land that provide natural resources for food production. Despite these geographical similarities, their different historical trajectories have shaped distinctive culinary traditions. Kelantan's proximity and historical association with the Pattani region of Southern Thailand have facilitated continuous interactions through trade, kinship, migration and religious networks, resulting in noticeable similarities between Kelantanese and Southern Thai-Malay cuisines (Alias and Ahamat, 2023). In contrast, Terengganu developed strong maritime connections with the wider Malay Archipelago, particularly present-day Indonesia, through sea trade and cultural exchange. This historical and geographical context can be understood through Duruz (2005) culinary border theory, which conceptualises food as a social and cultural border where identity, belonging, ethnicity, memory and cultural difference are continuously negotiated. Culinary tradition transcends geographical boundaries through the movement of people, ingredients, recipes and cooking methods (Kamaruzaman et al., 2022). Thus, cross-border and maritime interactions have contributed to distinctive culinary characteristics

in Kelantan and Terengganu, including variations in flavour profiles and sweetness preferences, while reinforcing their shared East Coast Malay culinary heritage.

Gastronomic social practices

The gastronomic social practices of Kelantan and Terengganu are closely associated with the normalisation of food-related behaviours within their communities, which subsequently shape distinctive culinary identity and cultural value (Mayes et al., 2026). Early socialisation begins within the family, where family members are exposed to food-related customs and eating behaviours that are accepted, practised and transmitted across generations (Mohamed Nadzri, 2024). This process is consistent with Bourdieu's household habitus, as discussed by Edgerton and Roberts (2014), whereby the family serves as the primary environment for developing enduring dispositions, routines, values and taste preferences through everyday socialisation. Repeated exposure from childhood allows these experiences to become internalised, influencing perceptions of appropriate flavours and eating practices. For example, families that regularly consume sweet foods are likely to transmit these practices and taste preferences to subsequent generations, perpetuating a preference for sweetness over time. Similarly, culinary knowledge, including ingredient selection, preparation techniques and cooking practices, is preserved through intergenerational knowledge transfer and becomes part of family tradition (Kamaruzaman et al., 2022). Younger generations therefore reproduce inherited practices that reflect family values, cultural beliefs and regional culinary heritage. These household practices may subsequently extend into the wider community through communal food preparation and intergenerational transmission.

Gastronomic culture of Kelantan and Terengganu

Gastronomic culture encompasses the traditions and practices of preparing, serving and consuming food that are developed and preserved within particular communities over time (Davidova and Dudkina, 2024). It also reflects collective memory, cultural identity and heritage through traditional cuisine and culinary practices (Cordova-Buiza et al., 2025). Beyond food consumption, gastronomic culture incorporates local ingredients, inherited cooking skills, intergenerational knowledge transmission and taste preferences. These elements are shaped by structural rules, referring to socially accepted norms that regulate ingredient selection, preparation techniques, flavour profiles and eating practices (Higgs, 2015). Such rules establish culturally acceptable flavour boundaries and influence what communities recognise as appropriate and authentic. In Kelantan and Terengganu, sweetness represents a culturally established characteristic, although its expected intensity varies between the two states. Previous studies have identified differences in perceived sweetness (Rahmat et al., 2021), with Kelantanese cuisine generally characterised by a sweeter flavour profile than Terengganu cuisine (Jalis et al., 2009). Structural rules therefore help explain how particular levels of sweetness become associated with specific traditional foods. For example, traditional kuih are generally expected to retain recognisable sweetness, whereas excessive sweetness may conflict with the established identity of savoury dishes. These culturally accepted expectations contribute to perceptions of culinary authenticity and help preserve distinctive regional flavour profiles across generations (Delormier et al., 2009).

Flavour profile and taste preferences

The flavour profiles of Kelantan and Terengganu are shaped by geographical, cultural and social processes that influence how particular flavours are developed, recognised and maintained. Historical cross-cultural interactions have introduced external culinary influences that were incorporated into local food traditions while preserving regional identity (Hanan and Hamid, 2017). Caul (1957) defines a flavour profile through sensory characteristics including aroma, taste, intensity, aftertaste and overall sensory impression. Within regional cuisines, these characteristics can develop into culturally recognisable flavour patterns. Such patterns are reinforced through household socialisation, where early exposure to culturally preferred flavours contributes to long-term taste preferences (Mura Paroche et al., 2017). Although structural rules maintain culturally accepted flavour characteristics, individual responses may change over time due to physiological changes, health concerns and dietary restrictions (Navarro-Allende et al., 2008). These changes can be understood through temporal boundaries, which explain how food choices and dietary practices evolve across the life course in response to changing circumstances (Devine, 2005). Individuals may reduce the amount or frequency of sweet food consumption as health awareness increases without necessarily changing their perceptions of how traditional foods should taste. Temporal boundaries therefore reflect the negotiation between culturally established taste preferences and changing individual needs, explaining how authentic flavour expectations may persist even when personal consumption practices are modified.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach was employed to explore adults' perceptions and sweetness preferences for local foods in Kelantan and Terengganu. Those states were selected because of their predominantly Malay cultural backgrounds, related food traditions and overlapping culinary practices (Nor et al., 2012). Purposive sampling was employed, as it enables the selection of informants with relevant knowledge and experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Three inclusion criteria were established: (1) aged between 30 and 40 years (2) familiar with the traditional local dishes and food culture of their respective states and (3) willing to verbally share personal experience. Focusing on adults aged 30-40 helped minimise age-related variation in taste perception and dietary behaviour, allowing greater emphasis on cultural and regional influences on sweetness preferences. In line with the phenomenological orientation and relatively homogeneous characteristics of the informants, a sample of six to eight was considered appropriate (Bekele and Ago, 2022). Ultimately, six informants were recruited, as data saturation was reached while allowing an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences and perceptions.

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol developed from the research objectives and literature review. The protocol addressed three areas: informants' perceptions of sweetness in local foods, differences in sweetness preferences between the two states and factors influencing these preferences. Probing questions were also used to obtain clarification and further elaboration. Before each interview, informed consent was obtained after explaining the study purpose, informants' data confidentiality, interview procedures and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, after

which the transcripts were compared with the original recordings to verify accuracy. The transcripts were systematically organised to ensure that the analysis remained aligned with the research objectives. Given the relatively small and focused dataset, manual analysis was conducted using Microsoft Word, which facilitated the searching, organising and comparison of textual data. Data collection and preliminary analysis were undertaken concurrently, with each interview reviewed to identify emerging patterns and determine when data saturation had been achieved.

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The process began with familiarisation through repeated reading of the transcripts, followed by generation of initial codes from meaningful features that related to the research questions. Related codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed against the entire dataset to assess their relevance and coherence. Subsequently, themes were clearly defined and named before the final report was produced, with interpretations supported by relevant verbatim excerpts. Trustworthiness was established through credibility and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced by comparing transcripts with the original audio recordings to ensure data accuracy, while confirmability was supported by maintaining an audit trail throughout the analytical process. Confirmability was further strengthened through theory triangulation, whereby findings were interpreted using multiple theoretical perspectives. This allowed different theoretical explanations to be compared and integrated, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Fusch et al., 2018).

Results and Discussion

A total of six informants participated in this study, representing diverse occupational backgrounds and levels of experience (*Table 1*). Four main themes were identified from the analysis in relation to sweetness perceptions and preferences for local foods in Kelantan and Terengganu: regional culinary influence, sensory socialisation, cultural authenticity and reactive literacy. The analysis demonstrated a progression whereby the geographical domain shapes regional culinary influences, while sensory socialisation transmits and reinforces these influences through household practices. Individuals subsequently negotiate between the structural rules that define cultural authenticity and the temporal demands reflected through reactive literacy. The interaction between these cultural, social and temporal dimensions ultimately shapes individuals' dietary choices.

Table 1. *Demographic profile of informants.*

Informant	Gender	Age	Occupation	State
S1	Female	34	Business owner	Terengganu
S2	Male	30	Teacher	Terengganu
S3	Male	32	Marketing officer	Kelantan
S4	Male	37	Chef	Kelantan
S5	Female	40	Business owner	Kelantan
S6	Male	34	Business owner	Terengganu

Theme 1: Regional culinary influence

Based on interview sessions, several informants agreed that geographical proximity, Southern Thai culture and food movement from Thailand have influenced the flavour profiles of both states in the East Coast region. This influence is particularly evident in

the sweeter flavour profiles of certain Thai foods, which have subsequently influenced local food preferences and culinary practices.

> *"Probably, yes, because as we know there are many Siamese communities in Kelantan. So that could be one factor that influences the foods there."* (Informant 2)

> *"...maybe it is also because they are located close to Thailand. Some of their food sometimes comes from Thailand, so perhaps that has some influence as well."* (Informant 5)

The findings also show that informants clearly recognised differences in the flavour profiles of both states, particularly in terms of sweetness and spiciness. For example, the gravy served with nasi dagang was described as slightly sweeter in the Kelantanese version, while the Terengganu version was perceived more spice.

> *"...Kelantan nasi dagang has a sweeter curry, while Terengganu nasi dagang has a more spiced curry."* (Informant 6)

> *"...foods in Kelantan are sweeter than those in Terengganu."* (Informant 1)

Some informants associated Kelantan's sweeter flavour profile with its cultural proximity to Southern Thailand, reflecting cross-border interactions and the presence of Siamese communities. This finding aligns with Duruz's culinary border theory, whereby culinary knowledge moves across geographical and cultural boundaries. Local communities integrate, adapt and reinterpret external influences while maintaining their local identities. Thus, geographical domain contributes to differences in flavour profile between Kelantan and Terengganu despite their shared culinary culture.

Theme 2: Sensory socialisation

The findings indicate that sweetness preferences gradually developed through household routines, parental influence and childhood exposure. Informants also highlighted that repeated exposure to particular levels of sweetness created familiarity over time, making these flavour characteristics more acceptable and embedded in their taste preferences during adulthood.

> *"...I have been accustomed to sweet foods since childhood."* (Informant 4)
> *"...whether we prefer sweet or less sweet food, it is something we learn from our mother."* (Informant 3)

These food practices are further sustained through intergenerational transmission and subsequently become embedded within the wider community through social activities.

> *"...the first generation consumes sweeter. So, the second generation will pick the recipe from the previous generation. Same goes to the third generation…It has been passed down to the incoming generations."* (Informant 5)

> *"...during communal events, the sweetness level of foods has been set to ensure consistency in terms of taste."* (Informant 4)

Sensory socialisation demonstrates how early exposure to culinary practices is transmitted across generations, consistent with Bourdieu's household habitus as discussed by Edgerton and Roberts (2014). These practices become internalised through daily dietary habits and shape individual taste preferences. Moreover, accepted sweeter flavour profiles are reinforced within the wider community through communal events.

Theme 3: Cultural authenticity

The findings under cultural authenticity revealed that informants associated appropriate levels of sweetness with the established identity of particular local foods. Traditional kuih were expected to possess a recognisable level of sweetness, while savoury dishes generally required little or no sweetness. Such expectations demonstrate how culturally established flavour norms shape perceptions of culinary appropriateness and taste.

> *"...kuih should definitely be sweet."* (Informant 2)

> *"...singgang daging and budu are not sweet."* (Informant 6)

This finding aligns with Higgs (2015) regarding structural rules. Through sensory socialisation, the flavour profiles of traditional local foods gradually become accepted and embedded within the community. As mentioned by informants, the flavour of traditional food should retain its established flavour profile. These expectations are governed by structural rules that define food authenticity and preserve the culinary traditions.

Theme 4: Reactive literacy

The analysis shows that health awareness encouraged informants to modify, rather than abandon, their consumption of traditional sweet foods. The informants adopted practices like portion control, reduced intake and moderation while still recognising sweetness as an important characteristic of authentic local food. This reflects how changing health concerns can influence dietary behaviour without necessarily altering established perceptions of traditional taste.

> *"...I still enjoy sweet foods, but nowadays I am more careful with my food choices due to my age and health. I try to consume them in moderation."* (Informant 6)

> *"...I would choose foods that are not too sweet because, of course, excessive sweetness can affect my health. If a drink is too sweet, I would either leave it unfinished or drink only half of it."* (Informant 3)

Reactive literacy, referring to the use of knowledge to adjust behaviour, aligns with Devine (2005) temporal boundary. Although informants recognised the expected sweetness of traditional foods, health concerns led them to limit their intake. For example, one informant described cek mek molek as too sweet, leading to reduced consumption.

"...I would only eat one, and I would share the rest with others." (Informant 3)

The findings reveal that sweetness preferences in Kelantan and Terengganu are shaped by regional, social and cultural processes beyond individual sensory responses. Regional culinary influence demonstrates how geographical location and culinary history contribute to distinctive flavour profiles, with informants perceiving Kelantanese cuisine as sweeter and Terengganu cuisine as more heavily spiced, even for similar dishes like nasi dagang. These findings align with Duruz's culinary border theory, which emphasises how culinary identities develop through interactions across geographical and cultural boundaries. Thus, sweetness may function as a regional marker rather than merely a recipe variation. These characteristics are further strengthened through sensory socialisation, where household routine, parental influence, childhood exposure and intergenerational transmission shape sweetness preferences. This corresponds with Bourdieu's household habitus, whereby repeated family experiences become internalised as durable dispositions that shape later food choices and reinforce regional taste preferences.

The findings further demonstrate that socially acquired preferences are maintained through cultural authenticity, as informants associated particular levels of sweetness with how traditional foods should taste. Sweetness was considered appropriate for kuih but less acceptable in savoury dishes, reflecting structural rules that establish boundaries for acceptable culinary practices. As explained by Delormier et al. (2009), food practices are shaped by social structures and everyday routines that preserve recognised flavour characteristics and culinary authenticity. However, these preferences are not completely fixed. Informants gradually adjust their eating practices to health awareness, ageing and changing life circumstances, reflecting Devine's (2005) temporal boundary. Rather than abandoning sweet food, informants reduced portion size and consumption frequency while retaining their understanding of authentic sweetness. Thus, culturally established taste preferences may remain meaningful even when individual consumption practices change over time.

Conclusion

This study explored adults' perceptions and sweetness preferences for local traditional food of Kelantan and Terengganu. Overall, the informants perceived sweetness not merely as a taste attribute but as an important characteristic that contributes to the identity and authenticity of traditional foods. Certain foods were expected to maintain their established sweetness to preserve their authentic character. Informants consistently perceived Kelantanese traditional food as sweeter compared to Terengganu, especially in savoury dishes. In contrast, Terengganu traditional food was perceived as less sweet, more heavily spiced and richer in flavour. These perceptions reflect expectations of how traditional foods should taste and contribute to maintaining distinctive regional flavour characteristics across generations. These preferences influence food acceptance and consumption while contributing to the preservation of regional culinary identity. However, this study was limited to informants from Kelantan and Terengganu, therefore, it primarily reflects insider perspectives. Future studies could examine how outsiders, particularly domestic tourists, perceive the sweetness and flavour characteristics of traditional food from these regions, providing a broader understanding of regional taste perceptions and their influence on food acceptance.

Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

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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