

EXPLORING MALAYSIA'S RESTAURANTS AS MULTICULTURAL FOODSCAPE

ISHAK, F. A. C.^{1*} – ROSLAN, A. N.¹

¹ Faculty of Food Science and Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author
e-mail: farahadibah[at]upm.edu.my

(Received 05th March 2025; revised 12th May 2025; accepted 20th May 2025)

Abstract. Malaysia is known for its multicultural society that is blessed with a diverse range of cultures, ethnicities, and traditions. The Malays, Chinese, and Indians are the three primary ethnic groups that make up Malaysian society, aside from other minorities. Each group contributes to a rich cultural identity reflected in various aspects of life, including the restaurant industry. However, multicultural restaurants face challenges in authentically representing and integrating diverse cultural identities, impacting their branding, operations, and market positioning. This study aimed to examine the key elements defining multicultural restaurants and explore the marketing strategies and identify the challenges they face in promoting their identity. A qualitative research approach was employed, using semi-structured interviews with restaurant managers of selected multicultural restaurants in Klang Valley. A total of 10 respondents were carefully chosen and interviewed face-to-face. Findings reveal that multicultural restaurants incorporate various elements to establish their identity, including culturally inspired color schemes, diverse food offerings, ethnic-themed lighting, immersive soundscapes, festive-themed specials, and traditional decorations. Additionally, strategic marketing techniques such as social media engagement, loyalty programs, interactive customer engagement and cultural-themed promotions are used to strengthen their multicultural identity. However, restaurant owners face challenges in maintaining cultural authenticity while catering to diverse customer preferences, balancing traditional and modern influences, and differentiating themselves in a competitive market. These findings provide deeper insights into how multicultural restaurants construct and communicate their identity, emphasizing the role of visual, sensory, and experiential elements in shaping the dining experience. Future researchers can expand on these insights by further exploring the relationship between culture and restaurant branding. Practically, the results offer valuable guidance for restaurant owners on effectively leveraging cultural elements to enhance customer engagement, strengthen brand identity, and celebrate Malaysia's vibrant multicultural heritage within the foodservice industry.

Keywords: *multicultural, restaurant identity, cultural representation, marketing, foodservice industry*

Introduction

The food industry serves as a significant cultural platform, reflecting a nation's heritage, traditions, and identity. In Malaysia, a country renowned for its diverse ethnic landscape, restaurants act as cultural representations of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities, among others. The concept of a "foodscape" describes the spatial and social context in which food is produced, distributed, and consumed, making multicultural restaurants a crucial part of Malaysia's dining ecosystem. These restaurants provide opportunities for cultural engagement while preserving traditional culinary practices. According to data from the DOSM (2021), there was a 7.2% growth in income for the service industry, which includes restaurant establishments, during the first quarter of 2021 when compared to the corresponding period in 2020. The food and beverage segments account for 9.3% of the increase among the other segments. This demonstrated how, in recent years, the food industry including ethnic restaurants has been viewed as a driver of the country's economy. According to Jalis (2008), a variety

of ethnic foods are offered and served at numerous restaurants as a result of demand from a wide range of ethnic groups, which has caused ethnic restaurants to gain attention. However, the hipster restaurant concept has grown as a result of shifts in contemporary trendsetting. Each element can reflect the cultural heritage and traditions of the different ethnic groups, thereby enhancing the authenticity and cultural richness of the dining experience. For instance, the use of traditional motifs in decor, the inclusion of ethnic music, and the employment of culturally knowledgeable staff can significantly contribute to a restaurant's ethnic representation.

Promoting multicultural restaurants in Malaysia involves highlighting the country's diverse culinary heritage and fostering an environment where cultural exchange is encouraged and celebrated. However, this task comes with several challenges. Restaurant owners must balance authenticity with innovation to appeal to a broad audience while preserving the integrity of each cuisine. Additionally, the competitive restaurant industry requires effective marketing strategies that emphasize the multicultural aspects of their offerings to attract both locals and international tourists (Rubin, 2005). Understanding how to promote these multicultural restaurants effectively requires a comprehensive approach. This involves examining the role of ambient elements, such as decor and music, which can enhance the dining experience by providing a cultural context. It also includes understanding the perceptions and experiences of both restaurant operators and patrons regarding multiculturalism in these spaces. By identifying successful strategies and potential obstacles, this study aims to provide valuable insights that can help restaurant owners and marketers better promote multicultural dining experiences (Yildirim and Simsek, 2011). Furthermore, promoting multicultural restaurants in Malaysia can contribute to broader societal goals, such as fostering social cohesion and cultural understanding. By creating spaces where people from different backgrounds can come together and appreciate each other's culinary traditions, these restaurants can play a pivotal role in promoting unity and mutual respect within Malaysia's multicultural society (Karagöz, 2017).

Multicultural restaurants in Malaysia face significant challenges in effectively promoting their identity, maintaining cultural authenticity, and navigating operational difficulties in an increasingly competitive food industry. One of the primary challenges is the representation of cultural identity, as restaurant owners must balance preserving traditional flavors, ambiance, and dining customs while adapting to contemporary consumer expectations. Research indicates that successful marketing of multicultural cuisines requires a strategy that integrates authenticity with adaptation to local preferences; however, many restaurant owners struggle to find this balance (Harvard Business Review, 2023). Additionally, creating a culturally cohesive restaurant environment presents another challenge, as elements such as colour schemes, décor, and symbolic art play a crucial role in shaping the dining experience. If these elements are not carefully curated, they can lead to customer confusion or a lack of perceived authenticity (Restaurant India Web Portal, 2023). Selecting culturally significant symbols, patterns, and themes is essential to establishing a strong and immersive multicultural dining atmosphere. Furthermore, there is a lack of clear guidelines for promoting multicultural restaurants, making it difficult for restaurant owners to develop effective marketing strategies. Many restaurants struggle with limited resources and digital marketing expertise, making it challenging to reach a broader audience (Aziz, 2021a). The rise of urbanization and changing consumer lifestyles has led to increased competition between traditional ethnic restaurants and fast-food chains, further

complicating their ability to attract and retain customers (Agwa et al., 2021). Additionally, the growing influence of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has transformed food marketing, requiring multicultural restaurants to adopt modern digital promotional techniques to stay competitive. These challenges highlight the need for structured promotional strategies, government support, and enhanced digital engagement to help multicultural restaurants sustain their businesses while preserving Malaysia's rich culinary heritage.

This study aims to explore how multicultural restaurants in Malaysia build and promote their cultural identity in today's competitive food industry. It focuses on identifying the key elements that help represent different cultures within these restaurants, looking into the marketing strategies they use to attract and connect with customers. The study also examines the challenges these restaurants face in staying authentic while trying to meet customer expectations and keep up with industry changes. By doing so, the research hopes to offer useful insights into how multicultural restaurants can continue to celebrate cultural diversity while remaining relevant and successful.

Literature review

Concept of multicultural restaurant

Multicultural restaurants are establishments that offer a broad range of culinary experiences from multiple cultural backgrounds within a single dining setting. Understanding the concept of multicultural restaurants involves recognizing how they blend various cultural elements into their offerings. Mimovic (2015) explains that the term "multicultural restaurant" can describe a themed restaurant that serves a variety of cuisines from different cultures, with an ambiance that incorporates diverse cultural influences. These restaurants aim to provide an authentic dining experience that showcases the culinary diversity of various ethnic communities, presenting a fusion of cultures in their menus and environment. A fundamental aspect of a multicultural restaurant is its ability to attract not only those who dine there but also those who are enticed by the diverse offerings displayed on the menu and signage. These restaurants often feature a mix of traditional music from different cultures and the inviting aromas of various cuisines being prepared, enhancing the overall sensory experience for passersby. Tsai and Lu (2012) note that multicultural restaurants tend to be less influenced by fleeting trends compared to other types of restaurants, as they are deeply rooted in the long-standing traditions of multiple cultures. Research indicates that multicultural restaurants often have a sophisticated yet relaxed atmosphere (Marinkovic et al., 2015). Studies have shown that the quality and authenticity of the diverse cuisines and the services provided by multicultural restaurants are crucial factors that sustain their popularity and adherence to their original concept (Tsai and Lu, 2012). According to Tsai and Lu (2012), owners of multicultural restaurants should develop a unique concept for their establishments that not only provides customers with a memorable dining experience but also attracts new patrons. The restaurant's décor, including furniture, lighting, and seating arrangements, along with other features, significantly influences customers' perceptions and evaluations of the establishment. Marinkovic et al. (2015) further emphasize that the name, décor, and menu of a multicultural restaurant should all reflect the diverse range of cuisines offered, creating a cohesive and immersive cultural experience.

Role and function of each restaurant setting

Studies have shown all of the elements of the restaurant environment is crucial in influencing customers' opinions, promoting cultural authenticity, and improving the overall eating experience. Every component helps create a setting that is culturally immersive, including ambient elements like lighting, colour schemes, soundtracks, and decorations. A restaurant's atmosphere has a vital role in drawing in and keeping patrons by representing and conveying cultural narratives. For example, dining sections are distinguished by their culturally inspired colour schemes, with the Indian sections featuring intricate patterns and vibrant hues, the Chinese sections featuring deep reds and lacquered finishes, and the Malay sections incorporating wooden textures and neutral tones (Restaurant India Web Portal, 2023). By keeping the restaurant theme consistent and in line with cultural norms, these visual components avoid misunderstandings and improve the dining experience for customers. In a similar vein, lighting is crucial for establishing the tone and promoting cultural aesthetics. The overall ambiance is improved and the interior design is complemented by ethnic-themed lighting, such as warm, dim lights for a comfortable Malay setting, colourful lanterns for a Chinese touch, and ornate lamps for Indian authenticity. Beyond aesthetic appeal, ambient soundscapes incorporate natural sound elements and traditional music that represent each ethnic group's background, further enhancing the cultural eating experience.

Through the calming sounds of Malay gamelan, the pulsating beats of Chinese guzheng, or the lively melodies of Indian sitar, the immersive soundscape technique guarantees that customers are immersed in a genuine cultural environment (Yatnip et al., 2021). The dining area's cultural relevance is reinforced and participation is increased by this audio experience. Additionally, traditional decorations that connect clients to the creative and historical manifestations of each culture include heritage-inspired wall paintings, cultural textiles, and wooden carvings. A tranquil setting that complements traditional Malaysian aesthetics is also produced by the incorporation of natural components like water features and potted plants. Furthermore, ambient characteristics have an impact on consumer behavior and perception in ways that go beyond aesthetics. Research indicates that a carefully designed restaurant atmosphere increases the sense of authenticity and increases the likelihood that patrons would connect the establishment with authentic cultural experiences (Liu and Mattila, 2015). To ensure that every culture is represented in a multicultural restaurant setting without overpowering others, it is essential to balance these ambient characteristics. To achieve a smooth transition between various cultural zones while preserving a cohesive overall theme, the fusion of disparate design elements needs to be carefully planned. For instance, the way the menu is presented has a crucial role in the overall atmosphere of the restaurant. To maintain cultural authenticity, Chinese food is plated on round bowls, Indian food is usually served on banana leaves, and Malay food is served on wooden trays. The sensory experience of dining is improved by this attention to detail, as tactile and visual components contribute to cultural representation in addition to taste (Ting et al., 2019).

Strategy in promoting multicultural restaurants

Promoting multicultural eateries successfully calls for a calculated strategy that strikes a balance between contemporary marketing methods and cultural authenticity. Restaurant operators must use creative tactics to draw in a wide clientele while preserving the authenticity of their cultural offerings, especially in light of the growing demand for various dining experiences and the globalization of food trends. Using social media interaction and digital marketing is one important advertising tactic. Due to the fact that visually appealing content that highlights traditional foods, behind-the-scenes preparation, and interactive storytelling can increase audience engagement, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are vital in shaping customer choices (Radhi, 2021). Restaurants may have a strong internet presence and draw in both domestic and foreign clients by using top-notch photos and videos that showcase the distinctive features of each cultural cuisine. Additionally, influencer partnerships, festive-themed promos, and digital advertising campaigns all contribute to increasing brand awareness and creating buzz around multicultural dining experiences (Aziz, 2021b). Word-of-mouth advertising is still a very effective way to advertise multicultural restaurants. Building credibility and trust on social media platforms involves promoting user-generated content, consumer evaluations, and testimonials. Happy patrons who talk about their dining experiences on social media, write blog reviews, or create vlogs help the restaurant promote itself naturally and draw in new customers (Matson-Barkat and Robert-Demontrond, 2018). Forming strategic alliances with culinary tourism-focused media outlets, food bloggers, and travel influencers can also raise brand recognition and draw in new clients eager to experience other cuisines. Promoting multicultural restaurants requires a multifaceted approach that combines digital marketing, customer engagement, themed experiences, and word-of-mouth strategies. By effectively leveraging social media, hosting cultural events, implementing loyalty programs, and fostering strong community ties, restaurant owners can successfully market their establishments as vibrant, culturally inclusive dining destinations. The ability to strike a balance between tradition and modernity while embracing innovative promotional techniques is key to sustaining the success of multicultural restaurants in Malaysia's dynamic food industry.

Challenges in marketing multicultural restaurant

The difficulties of striking a balance between cultural authenticity, catering to a wide range of consumer preferences, and managing operational limitations make promoting multicultural restaurants difficult. Keeping authenticity while adjusting to the needs of the local market is one of the biggest problems multicultural restaurant operators confront. According to research, consumers have different taste preferences impacted by globalization and regional eating customs, even as they seek for genuine cultural dining experiences (Liu and Mattila, 2015). Restaurants must therefore strike a careful balance between maintaining classic recipes and flavors and making the required adjustments to appeal to a wider range of customers. The expectation that ethnic food should be both genuine and approachable makes this task even more difficult, frequently necessitating changes to ingredients, spice levels, and presentation without sacrificing cultural integrity (Chhabra et al., 2013). Numerous persistent issues in the marketing of multicultural restaurants have been found by research in the fields of food studies and hospitality management. Keeping cultural authenticity while accommodating customer preferences is one of the most important challenges. Research suggests that customers are looking for genuine cultural experiences, yet their impressions of authenticity are

frequently influenced by past exposure to fusion or commercialized ethnic food (Chhabra et al., 2013).

Restaurant operators face an issue as a result of this paradox: should they stick to traditional recipes or alter them to suit the tastes of a wider range of customers. Furthermore, careful branding and marketing initiatives which can be resource-intensive are necessary to successfully convey cultural narratives through cuisine, atmosphere, and service (Ting et al., 2019). Financial sustainability in a very competitive market is another major obstacle. According to research, independently run multicultural eateries frequently have little funding, which makes it challenging to make investments in extensive advertising campaigns, marketing campaigns, and the incorporation of contemporary technologies (Aziz, 2021a). Smaller multicultural restaurants must rely on low-cost promotional techniques including word-of-mouth advertising, social media interaction, and community activities, in contrast to corporate restaurant chains that enjoy economies of scale and great brand awareness (Radhi, 2021). However, restaurant owners who may lack experience in digital marketing and brand management may find these strategies difficult to implement because of their need for consistency, inventiveness, and a thorough grasp of consumer behavior (Agwa et al., 2021). Research shows that a number of issues, such as the difficulty of striking a balance between authenticity and adaptation, budgetary constraints, consumer attitudes, and regulatory compliance, make it difficult to promote multicultural restaurants. A complete approach that incorporates efficient operations, cultural education, personnel training, and successful marketing is needed to address these problems. Overcoming these obstacles will be crucial for ethnic restaurants to prosper and stay relevant in a changing food sector, as the desire for varied culinary experiences grows worldwide.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the identity construction and marketing strategies of multicultural restaurants in Malaysia. Data were primarily collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews aimed at understanding the cultural elements represented in these restaurants and the challenges encountered in promoting multicultural identities. Interview questions were open-ended to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences, practices, and perceptions, allowing for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives. In addition to interviews, field visits were conducted to observe the physical environment and spatial aesthetics of each restaurant. This method enabled the researcher to gain firsthand insights into how cultural identities are staged within dining spaces. Photographic documentation was also included to complement the observational data and enhance the analysis of visual and symbolic elements. This approach is supported by previous study, which utilized photographic data to examine themed objects and culturally embedded materials.

The study was conducted over a three-month period, from 1 November 2024 to 20 January 2025. A total of ten multicultural restaurants located in the Klang Valley were selected using purposive sampling. These restaurants were chosen to reflect a diversity of cultural influences, particularly those representing Malay, Chinese, and Indian cuisines. Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria aligned with the study's objectives: (1) the participant must be a manager or owner of a multicultural restaurant in Malaysia, and (2) the restaurant must feature at least three different ethnic cuisines or display culturally diverse decorations. Purposive sampling was chosen as it

allows for the deliberate selection of informants who possess relevant knowledge or experience concerning multicultural restaurant operations. The target sample size was set between three to ten participants, with final numbers determined by data saturation—the point at which no new themes or insights emerge. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis via ATLAS.ti software. Transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring themes and categorize insights related to branding, cultural representation, and marketing strategies employed by multicultural restaurants. *Table 1* shows the list of informants for this study.

Table 1. Information background of 10 informants.

Informant	Restaurant	Position
Informant 1	Precious old China	Manager
Informant 2	Kampung Kitchen	Manager
Informant 3	Madam Kwans	Manager
Informant 4	Ali, Muthu and Ah Hock	Manager
Informant 5	Old Malaya	Owner
Informant 6	The grands mama	Manager
Informant 7	Serai	Manager
Informant 8	Marmalade Cafe	Owner
Informant 9	Bamboo House	Owner
Informant 10	Bunda Cafe	Owner

Results and Discussion

Representation of multicultural identity in Malaysia's restaurant

The analysis identified six key decorative elements commonly used by Malaysian multicultural restaurants to express cultural identity: (1) culturally inspired color schemes, (2) diverse food selections, (3) ethnic-themed lighting, (4) immersive soundscapes, (5) traditional decorations, and (6) festive-themed specials (*Figure 1*). Each of these elements contributes significantly to shaping the restaurant's multicultural identity and enriching the overall customer experience. For instance, Malay-themed sections often feature rattan and wooden carvings, Chinese areas display intricate red and gold motifs, while Indian sections incorporate bright-colored textiles and kolam patterns. These findings support Tan and Wong (2019), who state that cultural decorations influence customer perceptions and engagement, as well as Rahim et al. (2022), who highlight how furniture selections reinforce restaurant authenticity and enhance cultural dining experiences. Decorative lamps significantly contribute to setting the ambiance, serving both aesthetic and symbolic functions. Many restaurants integrate lighting elements that reflect Malaysia's three main ethnic groups. A restaurant manager explained:

"Our lighting is carefully chosen to enhance the dining experience. We use red Chinese lanterns to symbolize prosperity, traditional Malay pelita lamps for a warm and nostalgic feel, and elegant brass oil lamps for Indian-themed sections" (I3).

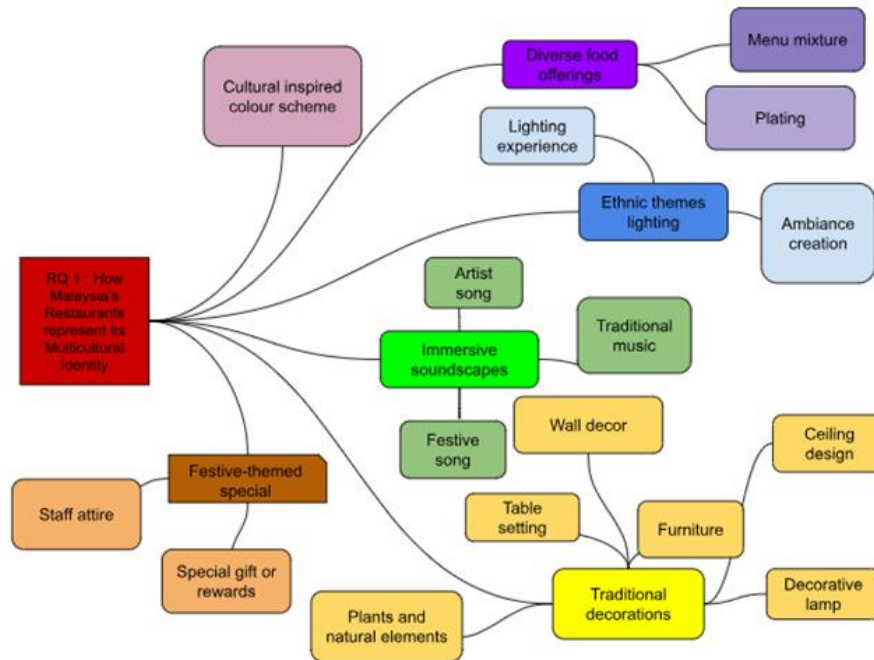


Figure 1. Representation of diverse cultural identities in multicultural restaurants in Malaysia.

By incorporating these lamps, restaurants create immersive cultural environments that heighten the overall dining atmosphere. Ceiling design is another vital aspect of traditional decoration, featuring intricate carvings, wooden beams, and hanging ornaments that reflect traditional architectural influences. Many establishments install hand-carved wooden panels, colourful ceiling fabrics, and suspended lanterns to add cultural depth. As a restaurant owner stated:

"Our ceiling features hand-carved wooden panels similar to those in traditional Malay houses, intricate latticework inspired by Chinese temples, and colourful fabric drapes that reflect Indian cultural designs" (I5).

Figure 2 shows pictures of ceiling decorations inside multicultural restaurants taken during the data collection. These ceiling designs not only enhance the aesthetic appeal but also contribute to authentic multicultural representation. Furniture selection is equally important and carefully curated to match the cultural themes. Restaurants use handcrafted wooden tables, intricately carved chairs, and traditional woven seating. A restaurant owner described:

"In our restaurant, the Malay section features teakwood tables with woven mats, the Chinese section has rosewood furniture with engraved designs, and the Indian area includes hand-carved wooden chairs with intricate detailing" (I7).



Figure 2. Ceiling decorations in restaurants.

Such furniture choices help customers form a deeper connection with Malaysia's traditions. Wall décor is another key element, often featuring symbolic artwork, calligraphy, and traditional textile displays. Many establishments use a combination of Malay batik textiles, Chinese calligraphy scrolls, and Indian kolam art. An interviewee highlighted:

"Each wall in our restaurant tells a story: batik prints represent Malay heritage, red-and-gold Chinese banners display traditional blessings, and kolam art enhances our Indian-themed dining area" (I9).

These decorations serve as storytelling devices, offering customers an immersive cultural experience beyond the visual appeal. Table settings further reinforce authenticity, incorporating traditional dishware, cultural motifs, and distinctive arrangements. Restaurants use woven placemats, ceramic dishware, and engraved brass cutlery. A manager shared:

"We ensure that our table settings match our restaurant's theme. We use banana leaves in the Indian dining section, traditional porcelain bowls and chopsticks in the Chinese area, and woven mengkuang placemats in the Malay dining area" (I2).

These thoughtful table settings make dining a culturally meaningful experience. Plants and natural elements are also widely incorporated to create a serene and refreshing ambiance. Restaurants use bonsai trees, bamboo, tropical plants, and floral arrangements to represent the cultural significance of nature. A restaurant owner stated:

"We use natural elements to create a refreshing and authentic ambiance bonsai trees in the Chinese section, palm plants and wooden decor in the Malay area, and fragrant jasmine flowers in the Indian dining space" (I6).

These elements not only enhance the aesthetic environment but also provide a calming and inviting atmosphere for customers. Through these various decorative elements, multicultural restaurants successfully blend tradition with modern aesthetics, creating immersive dining experiences that preserve and celebrate Malaysia's diverse

cultural heritage. Festive-themed promotions also play an essential role. These are categorized into two strategies: staff attire and customer rewards. Many restaurants dress their staff in traditional clothing during major festivals: Baju Melayu for Hari Raya, Cheongsams for Chinese New Year, and Sarees for Deepavali. Customers are often given festive rewards such as kuih, fortune cookies, or special vouchers. These findings align with Matson-Barkat and Robert-Demontrond (2018), who emphasize that thematic promotions enhance customer engagement, and Omar et al. (2019), who found that cultural events foster customer loyalty. Festive-themed specials aim to create immersive dining experiences during celebrations. Dressing staff in traditional outfits fosters authenticity. One informant shared:

"Seeing staff in traditional clothing makes customers feel more connected to the celebration and adds a sense of cultural belonging to the dining experience" (I5).

The visual representation of diverse attire strengthens the festive atmosphere and deepens customer engagement.

The strategy of Malaysia's restaurant promoting multicultural restaurants

Malaysia's rich multicultural identity is clearly expressed through its dynamic food industry, where restaurants serve as cultural bridges showcasing culinary elements from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic communities. For multicultural restaurants, effective promotion involves navigating the intersection between cultural authenticity and commercial viability. As noted by Liu and Mattila (2015), this process includes responding to evolving customer preferences, market competition, digital transformation, and the need for accurate cultural representation. *Figure 3* maps the overall key strategies of multicultural restaurants in Malaysia. The first key strategy identified is social media engagement, which has become a cornerstone for restaurant marketing. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter offer restaurant owners accessible and creative tools for visibility. Many restaurants actively use ads promoting, develop a business website, and most importantly, develop creative content to reach a broad audience. As one owner emphasized:

"An online menu with high-quality images and descriptions helps us market our restaurant better on social media, attracting both locals and tourists" (I8).

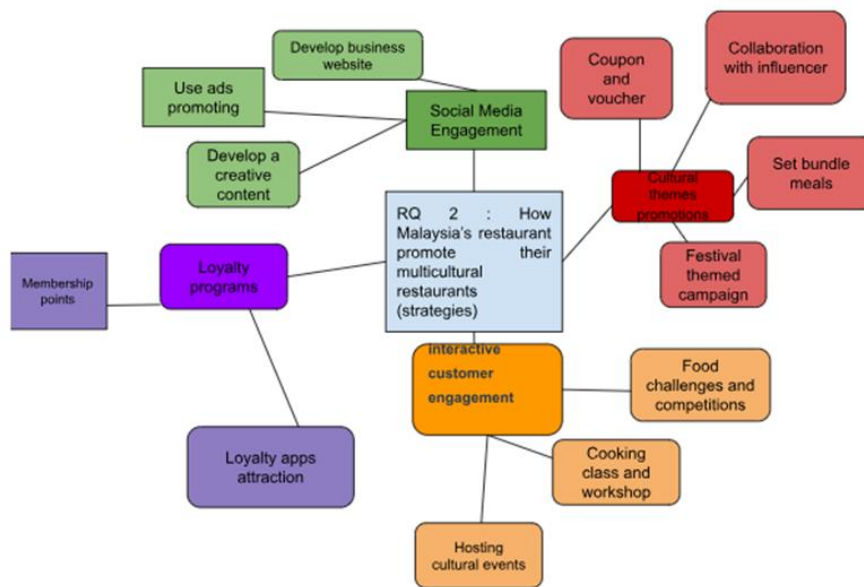


Figure 3. Strategies of multicultural restaurant promotions.

Festive and seasonal advertising also plays a role in enhancing visibility and cultural appeal.

“We run special ads during Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, and Deepavali to attract customers looking for traditional festive meals” (I6).

These practices align with the findings of Aziz (2021b), who highlighted the importance of digital engagement for customer interaction and brand recognition, while Radhi (2021) underscored the value of promoting ethnic cuisine through digital platforms. Restaurants often collaborate with influencers to create trust and expand reach, producing content such as behind-the-scenes videos of food preparation to humanize the brand and elevate cultural appreciation.

“We film behind-the-scenes videos of our chefs preparing traditional dishes” (I9).

The second major strategy is cultural theme promotions, which are designed around Malaysia's festive calendar and ethnic diversity. Restaurants align set bundle meals, coupon and voucher offers, and festival-themed campaigns to enhance customer engagement and highlight cultural meaning. For instance, restaurants offer unique promotions such as Yee Sang platters during Chinese New Year or Thali meals for Deepavali.

“Our festive promotions highlight the cultural significance of food, making customers more engaged in the dining experience” (I4).

“These bundles make it easier for families to enjoy a variety of cultural dishes without having to order separately” (I9).

Additionally, collaborations with influencers extend the impact of these campaigns. Some restaurants host social media takeovers, where influencers provide real-time content, helping to reinforce authenticity and expand outreach.

“Social media takeovers create excitement, as influencers engage directly with their followers while tasting and reviewing our multicultural food offerings” (I8).

Another owner shared the use of digital vouchers to attract new visitors:

“We offer digital vouchers for first-time customers, allowing them to experience our signature multicultural meals at a discounted price” (I1).

A third core strategy involves interactive customer engagement, where customers are actively involved in culturally immersive experiences. Restaurants host food challenges and competitions, such as spicy food contests, to attract younger audiences and increase their online visibility.

“We organize a spicy food challenge where participants must finish a bowl of extra-hot Laksa or Sambal-loaded Nasi Lemak within a time limit” (I7).

Cooking-related activities also support learning and interaction. Some establishments offer cooking classes and workshops, which serve as both educational and promotional tools.

“In our workshops, we not only teach recipes but also share the cultural significance behind classic dishes from each ethnic tradition” (I1).

To further enhance the experience, some restaurants host cultural events like traditional dance performances or heritage exhibitions.

“We organize community events where guests can experience different cultures through food tasting and heritage displays” (I6).

These initiatives not only create memorable experiences but also elevate the restaurant's role as a cultural ambassador. The final strategy centers on loyalty programs, which are designed to encourage repeat visits and sustained customer relationships. Restaurants offer membership points, tier-based benefits, and loyalty app attraction to reward frequent diners.

“Our loyalty program allows customers to earn points for every purchase, which can be redeemed for discounts on traditional dishes” (I6).

Some restaurants personalize these programs by using customer data to tailor offers based on favorite cultural dishes.

“We use customer data to create personalized offers, such as discounts on their favourite Malay, Chinese, or Indian dishes” (I6).

Seasonal exclusivity is also used to reinforce loyalty.

“Early access to seasonal promotions allows our loyal customers to enjoy exclusive deals on festive set menus before they’re available to the public” (I2).

Gamification strategies are introduced during festive periods through mobile applications, allowing customers to collect culturally themed rewards.

“To celebrate festive seasons, we launch in-app challenges where customers can earn rewards like free Mooncakes during Chinese New Year or Kuih Raya for Hari Raya” (I9).

These structured and interactive programs support brand attachment and foster long-term loyalty. In summary, the findings demonstrate that Malaysia's multicultural restaurants promote themselves through four interrelated strategies: social media engagement, cultural theme promotions, interactive customer engagement, and loyalty programs. These approaches, as mapped in *Figure 3*, reflect a multi-dimensional effort to enhance visibility, encourage participation, and celebrate cultural heritage within the increasingly dynamic and diverse foodservice industry.

The challenges in multicultural restaurant promotion

While multicultural restaurants in Malaysia play a vital role in preserving and promoting ethnic food heritage, they also face a variety of operational and promotional challenges. As shown in *Figure 4*, the challenges can be grouped into four main categories: balancing familiarity and innovation, balancing tradition and modernity, limited budget constraints, and staff training and cultural misunderstanding. These areas reflect the complex environment in which multicultural restaurants operate as they attempt to maintain authenticity while responding to market demands. One of the key challenges is balancing familiarity and innovation. Restaurant owners often struggle to introduce new menu items while staying true to the original cultural identity of the cuisine. Maintaining this balance is essential to appeal to both culturally aware customers and those with limited exposure to ethnic dishes.

“One challenge is ensuring new dishes maintain the originality of each culture. We work closely with chefs to keep the balance just right” (I3).

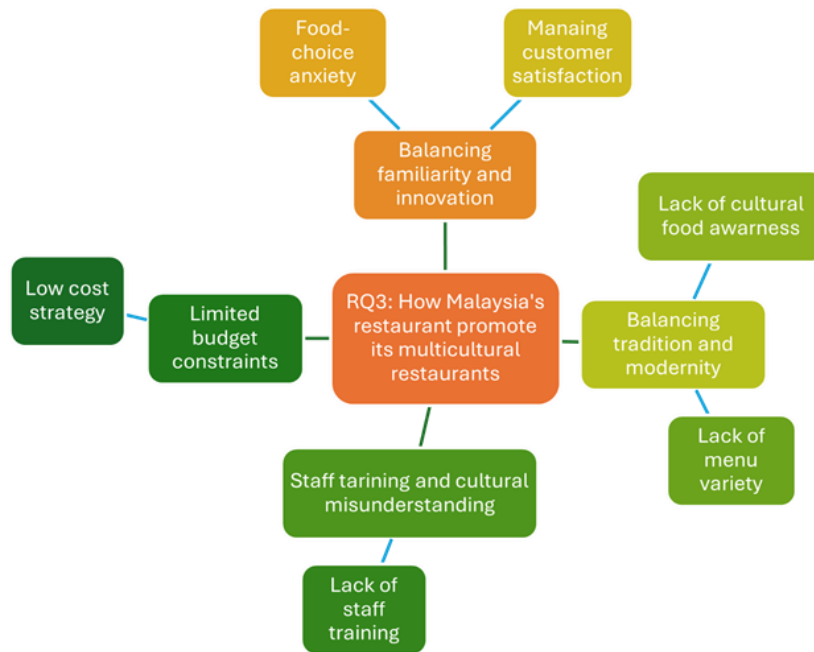


Figure 4. Challenges of multicultural restaurant promotions.

This statement emphasizes the importance of culinary expertise and research when developing new dishes. However, many customers experience food-choice anxiety when confronted with unfamiliar meals, which reduces their willingness to try new or traditional options. Restaurants must manage this by educating customers through menu descriptions, storytelling, and guided tastings. Without these efforts, it becomes difficult to meet the demand for innovation while preserving authenticity. Another significant challenge is balancing tradition and modernity, which includes managing customer expectations while maintaining the cultural value of the dishes. Many customers are not familiar with certain ethnic dishes, which causes hesitation in ordering them.

“Many customers are unfamiliar with certain cultural dishes, so they hesitate to order them. We need better ways to educate diners about our diverse menu” (I4).

This reflects a lack of cultural food awareness, which restaurants must address through better communication tools such as detailed menus and cultural marketing. Additionally, restaurants must manage expectations about speed of service. Traditional meals often require longer preparation times, but many customers expect quicker service similar to fast food models.

“Customers sometimes expect fast food-style service, but traditional meals take longer to prepare. Managing expectations is a challenge” (I8).

To navigate this, some restaurants streamline kitchen processes, use partially prepared ingredients, or clearly communicate wait times to customers. The goal is to respect the cultural cooking process while meeting modern dining expectations. As Ting et al. (2019) suggested, a careful balance between heritage and convenience is essential for sustainability. Limited budget constraints also emerged as a major barrier. Many independent multicultural restaurants operate with tight financial resources, limiting

their ability to engage in wide-reaching promotional activities. Competing with large chains that have access to professional marketing is particularly difficult.

“Marketing is expensive, and without a big budget, it's hard to compete with larger restaurants that can afford professional ads” (I2).

As a result, many rely heavily on word-of-mouth or basic digital presence. Financial limitations also hinder innovation in menu development. Testing new items or sourcing specialty ingredients comes with risks that smaller restaurants may not afford.

“We want to introduce new menu items, but testing and experimenting with dishes cost money, and mistakes can be wasteful” (I7).

To overcome these issues, restaurant owners turn to low-cost strategies such as organic social media promotion, collaborations with local influencers, or community-driven storytelling. Omar et al. (2019) support this by stating that financial barriers often limit ethnic food businesses' ability to promote themselves effectively. Creative, affordable solutions are crucial for growth and survival. Another major challenge is staff training and cultural misunderstanding. Restaurant staff often come from diverse backgrounds and may not be familiar with the cultural norms, etiquette, or terminology associated with the dishes they serve.

“There are times when staff accidentally mispronounce dish names or misinterpret cultural customs, which can upset customers” (I10).

Such situations highlight the consequences of lack of staff training and limited cultural awareness. Miscommunications can negatively affect customer experience and reduce the perceived authenticity of the restaurant.

“Some staff come from different backgrounds and aren't familiar with the cultural significance of certain dishes, leading to unintentional mistakes” (I8).

This demonstrates the importance of structured staff development programs that include training on food heritage, customer service etiquette, and cross-cultural understanding. Rahim et al. (2022) also found that training enhances service quality in ethnic restaurants, improving both customer satisfaction and operational effectiveness. Restaurants can invest in practical solutions such as regular workshops, onboarding manuals, cultural briefings, and digital learning resources to strengthen staff competence and reduce service-related errors.

Conclusion

This study explored how multicultural restaurants in Malaysia promote their cultural identity, implement marketing strategies, and manage challenges in maintaining authenticity. The findings show that these restaurants use a mix of visual, sensory, and experiential elements, such as culturally inspired colour schemes, themed decorations, and diverse food offerings, to create an immersive dining environment. Social media engagement, cultural-themed promotions, interactive experiences, and loyalty programs

are among the key strategies used to enhance customer engagement and promote cultural heritage. However, restaurant owners often face challenges in balancing tradition with innovation, managing customer expectations, and addressing operational constraints such as budget limitations and staff training gaps. The research highlights that while many restaurant owners are able to use modern promotional techniques without compromising cultural authenticity, others struggle to stand out in a competitive market. Challenges like food-choice anxiety, limited menu variety, lack of cultural awareness, and limited financial resources often make it difficult to reach a wider audience. Additionally, staff unfamiliarity with cultural etiquette or dish names can lead to service issues and customer dissatisfaction. Despite these challenges, the study emphasizes the important role multicultural restaurants play in preserving Malaysia's cultural identity and promoting food diversity.

There are a few limitations to this study. One is the small sample size, which included only a limited number of restaurant owners and managers in selected locations. This may not fully represent the broader landscape of multicultural dining in Malaysia. Also, as the study is based on qualitative interviews, some findings may reflect personal beliefs or experiences, which could introduce bias. Recall issues and subjective perceptions from both customers and operators may also affect the accuracy of the data. External factors such as government regulations, economic changes, or evolving food trends were not directly covered but may influence restaurant operations. Based on these limitations, future research could expand the sample by including a wider range of multicultural restaurants across different regions in Malaysia. Including customer perspectives through surveys or interviews would also provide a more balanced understanding of multicultural dining experiences. A mixed-method approach combining interviews with quantitative data, such as spending patterns or menu preference trends, could help increase the reliability of the findings. Longitudinal studies would also be useful to track changes in marketing strategies and customer behaviour over time. Further, restaurant owners are encouraged to collaborate with government bodies, marketing professionals, and cultural organizations to enhance their promotional efforts. Financial incentives, training support, and technological adoption, such as digital loyalty apps, AI-driven marketing, and virtual dining experiences, can help multicultural restaurants remain authentic while adapting to modern expectations.

Acknowledgement

This study is supported by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia under The Fundamental Research Grant Scheme FRGS/1/2022/WAB01/UPM/02/1.

Conflict of interest

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

REFERENCES

- [1] Agwa, A., Aziz, N., Khalifa, M. (2021): The impact of urbanization and changing consumer lifestyles on the restaurant industry. – *Journal of Consumer Research* 34(2): 145-163.

- [2] Aziz, N. (2021a): Challenges in digital marketing for multicultural restaurants. – *International Journal of Marketing Strategies* 29(3): 210-225.
- [3] Aziz, N.A. (2021b): Social media marketing and customer engagement in the restaurant industry. – *Journal of Digital Marketing* 15(3): 45-58.
- [4] Chhabra, D., Lee, W., Zhao, S., Scott, K. (2013): Marketing of ethnic food experiences: Authentication analysis of Indian cuisine abroad. – *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 8(2-3): 145-157.
- [5] Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) (2021): Quarterly Services Statistics, First Quarter 2021. – DOSM 5p.
- [6] Harvard Business Review (2023): Multicultural Marketing in the Age of Experience. – HBR Publications 17p.
- [7] Jalis, M.H. (2008): Ethnic food demand and the growth of ethnic restaurants in Malaysia. – *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality* 15(4): 78-92.
- [8] Karagöz, M. (2017): The role of multicultural restaurants in fostering social cohesion and cultural understanding. – *Journal of Cultural Studies* 22(1): 45-61.
- [9] Liu, Y., Mattila, A.S. (2015): Ethnic dining experiences: The role of authenticity. – *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 50: 20-28.
- [10] Marinkovic, V., Senic, V., Ivkov, D. (2015): Emotional engagement in restaurant experiences. – *Journal of Foodservice Business Research* 18(3): 187-206.
- [11] Matson-Barkat, S., Robert-Demontrond, P. (2018): Who's on the tourists' menu? Exploring the social significance of restaurant experiences for tourists. – *Tourism Management* 69: 566-578.
- [12] Mimovic, S. (2015): Multicultural concept and foodservice operations. – *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Studies* 12(1): 25-37.
- [13] Omar, S.R., Karim, S.A., Isa, S.S., Omar, S.N. (2019): Enlivening the effect of tourists' knowledge and involvement on Malaysian heritage food (MHF) towards food tourism image in Malaysia. – *International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management in the Digital Age* 3(1): 23-42.
- [14] Radhi, A. (2021): Digital marketing strategies for ethnic restaurants: A case study approach. – *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 33(4): 89-104.
- [15] Rahim, F.M., Ismail, Z., Noor, H. (2022): The significance of traditional furniture design in the authenticity of multicultural restaurants. – *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Heritage* 7(1): 87-101.
- [16] Restaurant India Web Portal (2023): The importance of ambience in shaping dining experiences. – *Restaurant India Magazine* 4p.
- [17] Rubin, D. (2005): Cultural representation in restaurant themes and dining experiences. – *Gastronomy & Culture* 8(2): 34-49.
- [18] Tan, L.C., Wong, C.S. (2019): Wall décor and artistic elements as a storytelling tool in ethnic-themed restaurants. – *Journal of Interior Design and Cultural Heritage* 14(2): 65-78.
- [19] Ting, H., Tan, S.R., John, A.N. (2019): Ethnic food and tourists' experience in Malaysia: Understanding the role of cultural heritage. – *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 12: 75-84.
- [20] Tsai, C.Y., Lu, P.H. (2012): The influence of restaurant environments on consumer behavior. – *Journal of Foodservice Business Research* 15(2): 142-158.
- [21] Yatnip, M., Lim, W.X., Hashim, R. (2021): The role of music and ambience in shaping customer experiences in cultural restaurants. – *Asian Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(2): 201-219.
- [22] Yildirim, S., Simsek, H. (2011): Authenticity vs. fusion in ethnic restaurants: Meeting diverse customer expectations. – *Journal of Hospitality Management* 19(3): 99-115.