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CULINARY HERITAGE AND YOUTH: MALAY TRADITIONAL FOOD LOSING RELEVANCE AMONG GEN Z?

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Abstract:

In an era increasingly shaped by globalization and digital connectivity, traditional food cultures are experiencing significant challenges in maintaining their cultural relevance, particularly among young generations. This generation, born between 1997 and 2012, has grown up in a rapidly evolving food landscape where exposure to global cuisines, fast food, fusion dishes and app-based food delivery services is ubiquitous. Their eating habits are shaped by convenience, novelty and digital influence, leading to potential disengagement from traditional culinary practices and heritage foodways. While numerous studies have examined topics such as traditional food preservation, cultural sustainability and the sociocultural impact of globalization on food, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding a systematic review of challenges in sustaining traditional food for youth. Using the PRISMA protocol, this systematic literature review identifies seven prominent themes critical to sustaining Malay traditional food among Generation Z by rigorously screening and synthesizing relevant academic research. The identified sub-themes highlight critical internal and external factors that provide a framework for addressing future research gaps in the sustainability of traditional culinary heritage.

Keyword:

Knowledge Transfers, Malay, Practices, Youth, Traditional Food



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Introduction

Malay traditional cuisine is identified by its recipes, cooking techniques, and staple key ingredients that are fundamental to Malay culture (Md. Sharif et al., 2018). The rich and distinctive characteristics of Malay traditional food, including its unique flavours, preparation methods, and culinary traditions, form an essential component of Malaysia's cultural heritage and reflect a significant expression of its social and communal identity. Culinary knowledge related to traditional food has historically been transmitted across generations through informal learning environments. These exchanges typically occurred organically, often within familial settings involving mothers and daughters (Md. Sharif et al., 2018; M. Sharif et al., 2014). However, in recent years, increasing concerns have emerged over the declining continuity of these practices among the younger generation.

In an era marked by rapid globalization, urbanization, and the widespread influence of digital culture, Malay traditional food practices are increasingly at risk of being overlooked, particularly by the young generation, whose eating habits are shifting toward quicker, more

convenient fast-food options. This trend, driven by modernization and changing lifestyle choices, often comes at the expense of traditional cuisine. Md. Sharif, et. al., (2014) and Md. Sharif, et. al. (2016) emphasize that the younger Malay generation not only consumes less traditional food but also lacks the knowledge and skills to prepare it, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of these cultural practices. Generation Z, typically defined as those born between 1997 and 2012, is growing up in a world where fast food, convenience meals, and international cuisines are readily accessible. This demographic is not only shaped by technological advancements but also by shifting values around health, identity, and environmental consciousness.

Despite the pervasive influence of global food trends and evolving dietary patterns among younger populations, the preservation and sustainability of traditional food remain imperative, as these culinary practices represent a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge, and communal identity. Traditional foods are intrinsically linked to historical and cultural contexts, often utilizing locally sourced ingredients and preparation techniques that have been transmitted across generations. However, the sustainability of such practices is increasingly undermined by declining interest, limited engagement, and insufficient knowledge among Generations Z. In this regard, the transmission of knowledge related to Malay traditional foods to younger generations is not only important but essential for ensuring their continuity. As Generation Z becomes a significant consumer demographic, a critical understanding of their perceptions, preferences and behaviors is fundamental in shaping effective strategies for the long-term viability of traditional food systems. Additionally, it opens a research opportunity to explore divers' challenges or key factors in sustaining Malay traditional food among younger generations especially Generation Z which potentially bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, ensuring the continued relevance of traditional food for future generations.

Literature Review

Malay Traditional Food

Malaysia's traditional cuisine has a strong cultural, historical, and social foundation. It reflects regional adaptations, foreign influences, and centuries-old traditions. Malay cuisine is known for its rich flavors, usually achieved using spices such as turmeric, lemongrass, galangal, ginger, and chili. Traditional Malay cuisine has a strong connection with festivals, ceremonies, and group activities. As stated by Hassan (2016), in Malay culture, eating frequently symbolizes harmony, generosity, and spirituality. For example, *pulut kuning* is utilized at religious events and marriages, while *ketupat* and *lemang* are common dishes during Eid celebrations. These foods strengthen social ties and cultural identity in addition to providing sustenance. Malay traditional food is a vital component of Malaysia's cultural heritage, which reflects centuries of regional identity, indigenous knowledge, and culinary evolution. However, the sustainability of these traditional food practices is currently being tested by modern influences, particularly from younger generations such as Generation Z. According to Zainudin et al. (2019), many young people are unable to identify or prepare heritage dishes due to a lack of exposure at home and school. Traditional recipes, which are frequently passed down orally or through hands-on experience with elders, are at risk of disappearing as younger generations more cherish modern convenience over traditional continuity (Salleh et al., 2022). Traditional materials and culinary tools, such as stone grinders, banana leaves, or wood-fire methods, are seen as obsolete or ineffective by Generation Z until reintroduced in a modern and accessible setting (Rahman & Ismail, 2020).

However, digital media offers both a challenge and an opportunity. While Gen Z tends to disregard traditional dishes in favor of more trendy alternatives, some research suggests that social media platforms could reinvigorate interest in traditional cuisine. Food influencers' efforts, heritage culinary channels, and culturally themed food content on TikTok and Instagram have resulted in positive interaction among younger users (Yusof & Ariffin, 2021). Additionally, there is a growing number of Gen Z foodies who are proud of their origins and want to reimagine old cuisine with new aesthetics and flavors. This includes fusion adaptations, street food revivals, and food business ventures based on nostalgia or family recipes. Educational programs are crucial to preserve culinary traditions among Generation Z. Programs in vocational schools, colleges, and community workshops that stress hands-on learning and storytelling about traditional foods have shown promise in improving awareness and enjoyment (Hamid et al., 2022).

Food Knowledge

Food knowledge is an awareness of food sources, preparation methods, cultural importance, dietary habits, and food-related traditions. It includes both explicit information (recipes, ingredients, processes) and implicit knowledge (sensory skills, cultural significance, oral traditions) (Bessière, 2013). Based on Trichopoulou et al., (2007), traditional food knowledge is frequently passed down through generations, providing an important component of invisible cultural heritage. However, lifestyle changes, urbanization, and the rise of modern food systems are reducing intergenerational transmission, particularly among youth. Young people are becoming increasingly disengaged from traditional dietary habits, preferring fast, convenient, and globalized alternatives. Several studies have found a reduction in food knowledge among younger generations, particularly in traditional or heritage-based food practices. As reported by Zainal et al. (2019), fewer young people are engaging in traditional cooking, resulting in a loss of skills such as ingredient authentication, method of preparation, and cultural symbolism. This trend is visible in many civilizations, particularly those undergoing prompt modernization and urbanization. Moreover, several studies also mentioned factors that contribute to this decline are caused by things like eating more prepared or ready-made foods. Then, due to hectic schedules, there is no time for traditional cooking, lack of culinary education in schools, and reduced engagement with elders and community-based food preparation (Rathi et al., 2018). Food knowledge is more than just a culinary talent; it is related to cultural identity, health, environmental sustainability, and food security. When food knowledge fades away, so are reverence for biodiversity, local food systems, and cultural narratives (Kuhnlein et al., 2009).

Knowledge Transfer

Knowledge transfer is the process by which knowledge, whether skills, expertise, or information is presented and exchanged from one person, group, or organization to another. It has an important role in education, corporate learning, innovation, and the preservation of culture (Argote & Ingram, 2000). The purpose of knowledge transfer is not only the dispersion of knowledge but also its application in new situations to gain value and maintain sustainability. In the context of cultural heritage, particularly food, knowledge transfer is essential for sustaining identity, traditions, and community cohesion. Traditional food knowledge, as opposed to formal academic knowledge, is frequently tacit, orally transmitted, and integrated in daily activities and ceremonies (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Bessière, 2013). In Malay culture, food knowledge encompasses not only recipes and methods, but also symbolic

meanings, seasonal cycles, family traditions, and traditional knowledge. However, the transmission of this knowledge across generations has grown increasingly challenging. Traditional Malay cuisine offers an array of dishes such as rendang, lemong, nasi kerabu, and ketupat, which are distinguished using natural ingredients, complex spice mixes, and slow cooking methods. The food displays influences of Malay customs, Islamic practices, and regional biodiversity (Ahmad et al., 2018). These culinary habits are frequently deeply personal and communal, passed down through family reunions, celebrations, and hands-on cooking with elders (Zainudin et al., 2020). This type of experiential learning is vital for the preservation of Malay culinary traditions.

Food Practices

Food is more than just nutrition in Malay culture; it symbolizes heritage, religious beliefs, social solidarity, and identity. Traditional Malay cuisine practices include complex cooking techniques, communal preparation, and symbolic meanings associated with celebrations such as Hari Raya, weddings, and majlis kesyukuran (Ahmad et al., 2018). However, these practices have undergone generational changes. The younger generation, particularly those born in the digital age (Generation Z), is becoming increasingly disconnected from the standards and practices inherent in traditional Malay eating culture (Zainal et al., 2019). Traditional Malay food practices typically involve: Use of natural, local ingredients (turmeric, lemongrass, coconut milk and belacan), time-intensive cooking techniques (slow simmering, fermenting and hand grinding), community-based preparation, particularly during festive seasons or ceremonies, symbolic food rituals, such as preparing pulut kuning for birthdays or bubur lambuk during Ramadan. These methods are typically passed down through observation, oral tradition, and hands-on experiences in the kitchen with elders (Salleh et al., 2022).

However, recent research indicates a major shift in food habits and preferences among Malaysian youth. For example, the younger generation prefer ready-made or quick meals since it is convenient and fit with their fast-paced lifestyle. Traditional cooking, which takes time and effort, is sometimes regarded as outdated (Tan & Nor, 2020). Then, through digital food culture, platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have altered food preferences and preparation methods, prioritizing creative and visually appealing meals over traditional cuisine (Yusof & Ariffin, 2021). After that, they lack exposure, especially teenagers who particularly those raised in urban or separated families, are not actively participating in traditional food preparation (Rahman et al., 2021). The dietary habits of Malaysia's younger population are changing rapidly, with a clear shift away from traditional Malay cooking patterns. However, this doesn't mean they are completely not interested. Through application of correct platforms, resources, and education, young people may reconnect with their culinary traditions. The combination of tradition and modernity via education, technology and innovation can help to sustain and adapt traditional Malay food practices for future generations.

Methodology

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)

A systematic review and analysis were carried out to identify existing literature on the factors affecting the sustainability of traditional Malay food among Generation Z in Malaysia. The review followed the guidelines outlined in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). The process

involved several stages, including identifying relevant records from databases, screening and excluding studies, assessing article eligibility, and justifying exclusions. Additionally, any studies related to sustaining traditional Malay food were included. The review began with an explanation of its rationale within the context of the research topic. The authors then formulated a research question guided by the PICo framework, which considers the population, phenomenon of interest, and context. The central question posed was: What are the challenges in sustaining traditional Malay food among Generation Z in Malaysia?

Table 1. PICo (Population, Phenomenon of interest, Context)

P – Population of Issue	Generation Z
I – Interest	Sustainability of Traditional food
C – context	Malaysia

Identification

The identification process in this study involved locating prior research that aligns with the research question (Ab Talib et al., 2020). Guided by the formulated research question, several keywords were developed for database searches, and these keywords were required to appear in either article titles or abstracts. The complete set of keywords used for the search is outlined in Table 2. Article identification began on May 29, 2025, using three reputable databases: Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. The use of advanced search functions helped refine the results to those most relevant to the research objectives. Access to these databases was obtained through institutional subscriptions and selected articles were downloaded for further screening (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). Moreover, all retrieved articles were indexed and peer-reviewed, ensuring the credibility and quality of their content. By the end of the identification phase, a total of 1,113 articles were identified using the advanced search features available in the databases.

Table 2. The Search String

Database	Search string
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY = (“Traditional” AND “Food” AND “Youth” AND “Knowledge Transfer” AND “Practices”)
Science Direct	TITLE-ABS-KEY = (“Traditional” AND “Food” AND “Youth” AND “Knowledge Transfer” AND “Practices”)
Google Scholar	TITLE-ABS-KEY = (“Traditional” AND “Food” OR “Cuisine” AND “Young” AND “Malaysian” AND “Knowledge” AND “Practices”)

Screening

The screening phase involved selecting articles using the filtering functions available within the database search tools. Initial screening focused on strict evaluation of article keywords, titles, and abstracts (Pahlevan-Sharif et al., 2019). Additional criteria such as publication year, language, and publication status were applied in alignment with the PRISMA guidelines. Given the high volume of articles on the subject, conducting an in-depth review of all would not have been practical. Therefore, the researchers established clear exclusion criteria to refine the selection process (Okoli, 2015). Screening was carried out independently by two reviewers,

who assessed articles based on title, abstract, and article type. This approach helped to minimize bias and ensured that only studies directly addressing the research question were considered. In total, 779 articles were screened using the criteria listed in Table 1. Only articles published between 2015 and 2025, a ten-year window were eligible for inclusion in this systematic review. Ultimately, 45 articles were selected, while 734 were excluded for reasons such as not meeting the criteria established in Table 3 or the articles being duplicated.

Eligibility

Table 3. Eligibility Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Timeline	2015 until 2025	Records below 2015
Document type	Article journal and peer review journal	Business article, letter, editorial, conference review, book and note.
Language	English and Bahasa Malaysia	Other than English and Bahasa Malaysia
Region	Malaysia	None
Choice of Article	Random selection of article based on key word search in database	Article other than the key word searching
Search option	Web of Science, Science Direct and Google Scholar	Other than these three databases.
Keywords	“Traditional” AND “Food” OR “Cuisine” AND “Young” AND “Malaysian” AND “Knowledge” AND “Practices”	Keywords that are not suggested by
Search for relevance	Title and abstract of each article	All the unclear articles title and abstract
Final selection	Only article related to factors or challenges in sustaining traditional Malay food among Generation Z in Malaysia were selected	Articles which do not provide information related to the topic.

The eligibility phase involved selecting articles that met the predefined inclusion criteria for the systematic review. Eligible articles included those employing empirical research designs, quantitative, qualitative, or systematic review methodologies. Following the initial screening of titles and abstracts, a more detailed analysis of each article was conducted, and relevant data were recorded and organized into a data extraction table. Only articles published in English or Bahasa Malaysia were considered. Furthermore, studies focus on Malaysia as the geographical context for this research; thus, others research articles that do not meet these criteria were excluded. The data extraction process included information on the study context, research methodology, results, and discussion. Articles that did not align with or support the research

question were excluded from further analysis. A total of 23 articles were removed at this stage, while 22 articles were deemed eligible to proceed to the final synthesis phase. To clearly illustrate the selection process, a flow diagram was developed in accordance with the PRISMA protocol in Table 4.

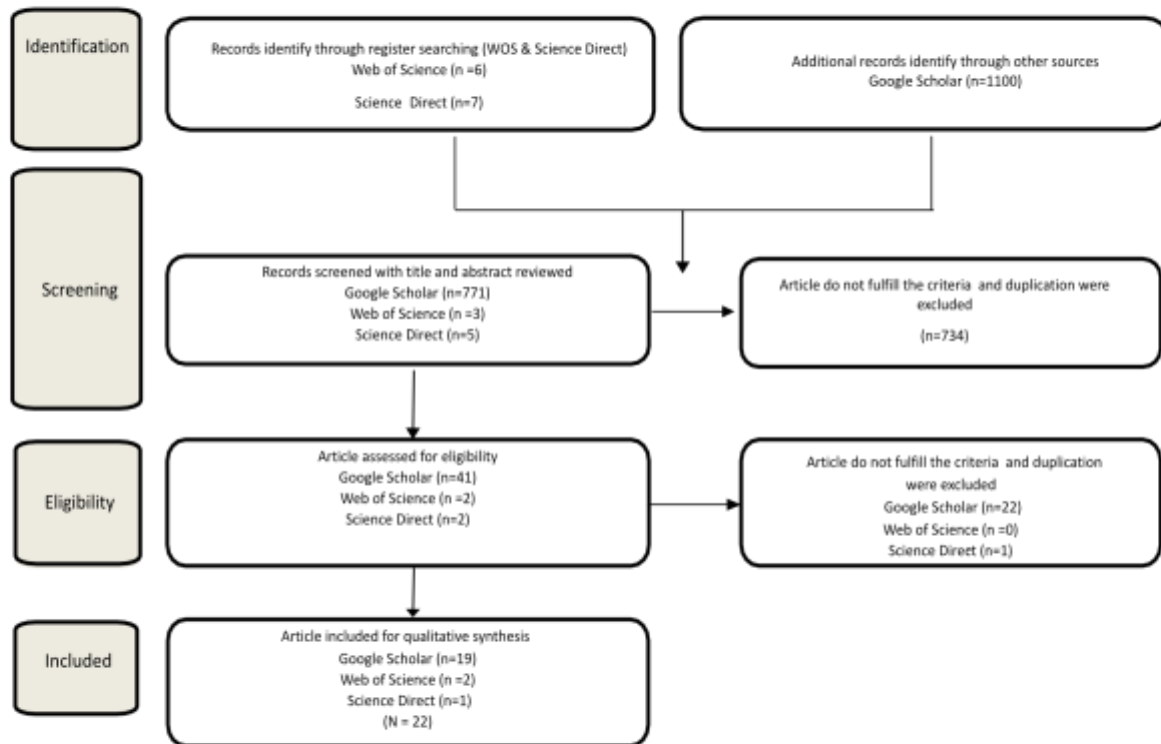


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis represents a qualitative research methodology designed to facilitate the systematic organization and interpretation of large and complex datasets. Its central purpose is to uncover and examine recurring patterns or themes that emerge within the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). This method entails a detailed and deliberate analysis of data transcripts to identify significant thematic content. When applied with methodological rigor, thematic analysis can produce findings that are both insightful and trustworthy (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis can be approached through either deductive (theory-driven) or inductive (data-driven) methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive approach involves generating themes that arise directly from the data, independent of prior theoretical assumptions or research biases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This strategy ensures that the identified themes are rooted in the empirical substance of the data itself (Goddard et al., 2004). The six-phase guide by Braun & Clarke (2006) were then implemented with step-5 (define themes) was intentionally excluded and clustering phase using GPT by Turobov et al., (2024) were introduced to help in manual theme development. Additionally, once the respective themes have been developed, step-6 (write-up) elaboration and critical discussion on themes were reflected into structured sentences.

Results and Analysis

The final synthesis of 22 selected articles revealed that the sustainability of Malay traditional food among Generation Z is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, familial and societal factors which were clustered into seven prominent themes. Data extraction table in Table 4 portrays list of selected articles that had succeeded and fulfilled the respective requirement according to eligibility characteristics and has been reviewed by independent review to remove biasness in final selection process.

Table 4: Data Extraction Table

No	Author (S)	Year	Methodology	Title	Database
1	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2016	Observation	The Importance of Knowledge Transmission and its Relation towards the Malay Traditional Food Practice Continuity	Science Direct
2	M.S. Muhammad Shahrul et. al (2023)	2023	Ethnographic and Netnographic approaches,	Determinants of Traditional Food Sustainability: Nasi Ambeng practices in Malaysia	WOS
3	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2013	Observation and Ethnographic	How Could the Transfer of Food Knowledge be Passed Down?	WOS
4	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2018	Observation	Malay Traditional Food Knowledge Transfer	Google Scholar
5	Misran et al	2022	Observation	Cultural Identity of Malay Bugis: A Reflection in Traditional Food Practices	Google Scholar
6	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2014	Observation	Traditional Hari Raya food: An insight from three Malay women generations	Google Scholar
7	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2018	Observation and Ethnographic Technique	Can Traditional Food Knowledge Be Transferred?	Google Scholar
8	Mohd Fisol et al	2024	Systematic Review	Unfolding Key Factors in Sustainability of Malay Traditional Food: A Systematic Analysis	Google Scholar
9	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2018	Open-ended interview/Qualitative	Transmission Effects of Malay Food Knowledge	Google Scholar

10	Azman et al	2024		Young Generation's Intention to Learn Traditional Ketupat Weaving Skills: A Case Study of Kelantan, Malaysia	Google Scholar
11	Mohammad Ramly et al	2023		The Challenges in Inheritance of Ketupat Palas Weaving as a Malay Heritage Festival Food Among the Millennials	Google Scholar
12	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2016	Observation Method	Restriction on Malay Traditional Food Practices	Google Scholar
13	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2021	Interview/Qualitative	Traditional Gastronomy Knowledge Transfers Among Malay Women: An Exploratory Study	Google Scholar
14	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2015	Ethnographic method	Following Mothers to the Wet Market: The Significant Benefits Gain by Young Generations	Google Scholar
15	Hashim et al	2024		Practice of Young Generations on Traditional Javanese-Malay Foods in Selangor	Google Scholar
16	Mokhtar et al	2022		Malay Local Food Knowledge and Young Generation Practices in Johor	Google Scholar
17	Kamarul Rashid N. F	2021	Quantitative techniques	Malaysian Heritage Food Foodways Among Young Generation	Google Scholar
18	Wan Zulkifali et al	2025	Exploratory approach	Do Foreign Food Trends Give Impact on Consumption of Malays Traditional Food Patterns among Malays Centennials Generation?	Google Scholar
19	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2021	Ethnographic method	How do Convenience Ingredients Encourage Young Generations to Preserve Malay Traditional Food Practice?	Google Scholar

20	Mohd Zahari et al	2013	Interview/Qualitative	Malay Traditional Food Knowledge and Young Generation Practices	Google Scholar
21	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2015	Ethnography technique	What Makes the Malay Young Generation Had Limited Skills and Knowledge in the Malay Traditional Food Preparation?	Google Scholar
22	M.S. Md. Sharif et al	2013		Factors That Restrict Young Generation to Practice Malay Traditional Festive Foods	Google Scholar

Theme 1: Intergenerational Transmission and Knowledge Transfer

One of the most prominent themes is the role of intergenerational knowledge transfer, where mothers and female elders serve as the primary custodians of culinary heritage. This transfer often begins at a young age, typically through informal learning environments such as observing elders in the kitchen, assisting in festive meal preparations, or accompanying parents to wet markets. These moments not only impart practical cooking skills but also embed cultural values and traditions in everyday life. However, participation in such activities is steadily declining due to modern work schedules, urban living, and the increasing preference for convenience foods.

Theme 2: Familiarization and Food Awareness

Familiarization and food awareness, which refers to the process of developing knowledge about ingredients, cooking techniques, and the cultural meaning of dishes. From early exposure, whether through family cooking routines, school-based programs, or community events, it helps individuals form an understanding of what constitutes a “proper” or “authentic” meal. In the absence of such early experiences, individuals may miss critical culinary knowledge, leading to a widening gap between generations and a weakening of cultural identity.

Theme 3: Modernization and Food Pluralism

Modernization emerges as both a challenge and an opportunity. Convenience products and global food options have reduced the frequency of traditional cooking, but they also allow for creative reinterpretations of heritage cuisine, making it more accessible to time-pressed individuals. Furthermore, media and technology have become influential drivers of food engagement. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are being used to promote traditional recipes, highlight heritage cooking techniques, and inspire fusion innovations that appeal to younger audiences.

Theme 4: Food Preferences and Attitudes

The review also underscores food preferences and attitudes as a decisive factor in food sustainability. Shifts in health consciousness, environmental awareness, and the desire for

convenience have influenced how Generation Z approaches traditional cuisine. While some remain committed to heritage dishes, others seek novelty, incorporating global flavours and modern preparation methods. This creates a dynamic tension between preserving tradition and embracing innovation, reflecting broader societal changes in taste and lifestyle. In terms of food practices and skills development, the review found that many members of Generation Z only gain proficiency in cooking traditional dishes after living independently or starting their own families. Authentic cooking methods such as slow simmering, hand-grinding spices, and using traditional tools are still valued by many but are frequently replaced with modern appliances and pre-mixed seasonings to save time. While such adaptations support practicality, they can also dilute the authenticity and symbolic meaning of the dishes

Theme 5: Food Guidance and Decorum in Practice

Another significant theme emerging from the review is food guidance and decorum in practice, which reflects both the explicit and implicit rules that shape how individuals perceive, prepare, and consume food. Such guidance may come from family traditions, educational institutions, or even public health recommendations, and it plays an important role in defining what is considered appropriate or desirable to eat. Beyond nutrition, food guidance is closely linked to food decorum, which is the social etiquette and cultural protocols surrounding food preparation and consumption. These include rituals such as communal dining, cross-legged seating during meals, the order in which dishes are served, and the expected roles individuals play in the kitchen. While these practices serve to reinforce cultural identity and social cohesion, they are also subject to change in modern contexts, where convenience and global influences may shift the way etiquette is expressed. Maintaining awareness of both guidance and decorum ensures that traditional food culture remains not only a matter of taste, but also of shared values and community identity.

Theme 6: Cultural Celebration and Festive Food

Cultural celebrations such as weddings, Hari Raya, and community feasts remain pivotal occasions for experiencing traditional dishes. These events act as both cultural showcases and practical learning environments, where younger generations are exposed to the sensory, symbolic, and communal aspects of Malay cuisine. Similarly, ingredient sourcing and pre-preparation activities particularly in traditional markets have historically been a crucial part of culinary knowledge, allowing youth to engage in ingredient recognition, sensory evaluation, and seasonal food awareness. Nevertheless, fewer young people are now involved in these preparatory stages, often opting instead for ready-to-use products from supermarkets.

Theme 7: Food Resilience and Adaptability

Food resilience and adaptability also emerged as a critical factor in sustaining Malay traditional food in the face of cultural shifts, environmental pressures, and changing lifestyles. Communities and individuals demonstrate resilience by adjusting recipes, sourcing alternatives for scarce ingredients, and modifying preparation methods to fit modern constraints such as limited time or urban living. Importantly, these adaptations are often carried out with the intention of preserving the dish's core cultural meaning, ensuring that even as circumstances change, the symbolic and sensory identity of the food remains intact. This adaptability allows traditions to continue evolving rather than disappearing, enabling heritage cuisine to maintain its relevance across generations while responding to external challenges. Overall, the findings

suggest that the sustainability of Malay traditional food among Generation Z is dependent on maintaining meaningful connections between cultural heritage and contemporary lifestyles. While certain traditions are fading, there is evidence that with the right engagement strategies, particularly those that blend hands-on experience with digital influence, Malay culinary heritage can continue to thrive in the modern era.

Discussion

This systematic review underscores the central role of family, culture, and adaptability in sustaining Malay traditional food among Generation Z. The most critical factor is the transmission of culinary knowledge within families, particularly from mothers to daughters, which aligns with earlier studies that emphasize the home as the primary site of cultural learning. However, this form of transmission is increasingly constrained by urban lifestyles, time limitations, and the appeal of convenience foods. As a result, the continuity of traditional practices is being disrupted, and younger generations risk losing not only culinary skills but also the cultural narratives embedded in these food ways. At the same time, the review reveals that modernization is not solely a threat merely it can also serve as a vehicle for preservation if approached strategically. The rise of digital platforms has opened new avenues for engaging youth with traditional cuisine, whether through heritage recipe tutorials, visually appealing food photography, or creative fusion adaptations. This suggests that technology, when harnessed thoughtfully, can bridge the gap between tradition and modern preferences. Cultural events remain one of the most effective settings for knowledge reinforcement, providing sensory and symbolic experiences that are difficult to replicate through written recipes or digital content alone. Weddings, religious celebrations, and community gatherings encourage intergenerational interaction, reinforce food-related rituals, and allow younger participants to experience the taste, texture, and preparation of authentic dishes in their intended context. However, the sustainability of these practices also depends on active participation rather than passive consumption. The findings suggest that while many young people enjoy eating traditional dishes, fewer are directly involved in preparing them. Without hands-on engagement, cultural knowledge risks becoming fragmented and dependent on a shrinking pool of skilled elders. In this context, education and community-based initiatives offer a promising path forward. Culinary heritage workshops, vocational training programs, and school-based cultural modules can formalize what was once an informal learning process. When combined with modern communication channels, such initiatives can both preserve authenticity and make traditional food relevant to a generation accustomed to fast-paced, visually driven media.

The findings of this study carry valuable implications for both theoretical development and practical application. From a theoretical standpoint, the expanded set of 7 themes identified offers a more nuanced framework for understanding the sustainability of traditional foods among Generation Z. This review contributes theoretically by offering an expanded framework for understanding the sustainability of Malay traditional food, integrating themes such as Familiarization and Food Awareness, Food Preferences and Attitudes, Food Guidance and Decorum in Practice, and Food Resilience and Adaptability. It reframes modernization as both a challenge and an opportunity, with relevance across disciplines including anthropology, sociology, nutrition, and education. Practically, the findings can guide policymakers, educators, and industry stakeholders in developing initiatives that foster intergenerational engagement, integrate traditional food studies into education, leverage digital platforms for cultural promotion, and blend authenticity with innovation in tourism and gastronomy. While the study provides meaningful contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The

scope of the review was confined to published academic sources, which means it may not reflect the rich body of knowledge found in grey literature, community archives, or oral histories that could further illuminate traditional food practices. The cultural and geographic focus on Malay cuisine in Malaysia also limits the direct transferability of these findings to other contexts, although the conceptual framework may still offer valuable comparative insights. Additionally, given the rapid evolution of food trends, media platforms, and lifestyle patterns, some observations, particularly those concerning the role of social media and modernization, may change over time, requiring ongoing reassessment.

Conclusion

The systematic review concludes that the future of Malay traditional food among Generation Z will depend on striking a balance between authenticity and adaptation. While modernization and global food trends present challenges, they also offer opportunities for reinvention and renewed relevance. Sustaining this culinary heritage will require a multi-faceted approach that combines family-based knowledge transfer, community engagement, education, and the strategic use of digital platforms. If these efforts are embraced, traditional Malay cuisine can evolve without losing its cultural essence, ensuring that it remains a living, adaptive tradition rather than a static relic of the past. The evidence from this review suggests that integration, rather than isolation, is the key by blending traditional practices with modern tools, tastes, and lifestyles, Malay food heritage can not only survive but also thrive in the hands of the next generation.

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