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CULINARY HERITAGE AND DESTINATION IDENTITY IN MULTI-ETHNIC TOURISM CONTEXTS: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE SYNTHESIS WITH FOCUS ON MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

Culinary heritage has become an important resource in contemporary tourism, functioning as an intangible cultural asset, experiential attraction, and marker of destination identity. In multi-ethnic societies such as Malaysia, heritage food carries deeper cultural meanings because it reflects migration, interethnic exchange, religious practices, local memory, and everyday community identity. Despite growing scholarly interest in gastronomy and food tourism, existing studies remain fragmented. Much of the literature is still dominated by consumer-based surveys that focus on food quality, satisfaction, destination image, and behavioral intention, while giving limited attention to governance structures, stakeholder networks, and socio-political issues that shape how culinary heritage is selected, promoted, preserved, and institutionalized. Adopting a critical narrative synthesis approach, this study examines contemporary and seminal literature on culinary heritage, destination identity, food tourism governance, and Malaysia's multi-ethnic tourism context. Through this analysis, five main thematic domains were identified: conceptualization and branding of culinary heritage; stakeholder collaboration and governance; tourist behavior and destination image; ethnic and socio-political inclusion; and Halal governance. The synthesis reveals two key gaps. First, there is weak integration between macro-level tourism policy and grassroots culinary practices. Second, existing research relies heavily on short-

term empirical studies, with limited attention to long-term heritage preservation and inclusive governance. In response, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework that links institutional policy, stakeholder collaboration, and tourist perceptions through a dynamic feedback system. The framework positions culinary heritage as a living cultural resource, a governance challenge, and a strategic asset for destination identity. It also highlights the need for future research that is longitudinal, inclusive, and cross-cultural to better understand culinary heritage management in multi-ethnic tourism destinations.

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Critical Narrative Synthesis, Culinary Heritage, Destination Identity, Malaysia, Multi-Level Governance



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Introduction

Food is no longer viewed merely as a supporting element in the tourist itinerary. In contemporary tourism, it has shifted from a basic necessity to an important cultural marker, experiential attraction, and strategic resource for shaping destination identity (Quan & Wang, 2004). Culinary heritage, in particular, offers more than taste and consumption. It carries stories of migration, trade, adaptation, interethnic contact, and collective memory. Through everyday dishes, cooking practices, and food rituals, destinations can communicate their historical depth and cultural distinctiveness to visitors.

In this context, traditional cuisine should not be understood as a fixed or rigid historical artifact. Rather, it represents a living expression of community identity. Recipes, ingredients, preparation methods, and eating practices continue to evolve as they are transmitted across generations and adapted to changing social environments. This understanding is consistent with the view that traditional food and cuisine can serve as important heritage resources and tourist attractions, particularly when embedded in local culture and regional identity (Bessière, 1998; Du Rand & Heath, 2006).

Malaysia provides a particularly rich context for examining this relationship. Its culinary heritage reflects the long historical integration of Malay, Chinese, Indian, indigenous, and other local food traditions. These interactions have produced a diverse food landscape that expresses the country's historical mobility, ethnic plurality, religious practices, and regional variation. For tourists, Malaysian heritage food offers an accessible way to experience the identity of a diverse society. Through sensory and taste experiences, the uniqueness of Malaysian culture can be effectively communicated and remembered (Noriza et al., 2012).

The strategic value of culinary heritage has also been recognized at the policy level in Malaysia. The Malaysian government has increasingly positioned food and cultural heritage as important assets in strengthening the country's tourism competitiveness and long-term destination development. This direction is reflected in the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, which identifies culture, heritage, and local experiences as key components in enhancing Malaysia's tourism appeal and supporting the broader agenda of Visit Malaysia Year 2026 (MIDF Research, 2025; Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, 2020).

More recently, Malaysia's nomination of its "Breakfast Culture" to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity further demonstrates the growing institutional recognition of everyday food practices as national heritage. The nomination, which highlights popular breakfast items such as *nasi lemak*, *roti canai*, and *teh tarik*, does not merely promote food as a tourism product. It also presents breakfast culture as a shared social practice that reflects unity, interaction, and cultural familiarity across Malaysia's multi-ethnic communities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2024).

This policy development is consistent with wider trends in global tourism, where destinations increasingly use living heritage resources to strengthen place distinctiveness and regional competitiveness. Previous studies have shown that gastronomic products can contribute to destination branding, local economic development, and community well-being when they are managed as part of a broader cultural and regional development strategy (Bessière, 1998; Du Rand & Heath, 2006).

Problem Statement and Knowledge Gap

Despite the growing policy attention given to food tourism and culinary heritage, the preservation and management of heritage food remain challenging. One of the main concerns is the tension between commercial promotion and cultural authenticity. In tourism development, heritage food is often marketed to attract visitors. While this strategy may increase destination visibility, it can also reduce food heritage to a branding tool if the cultural meanings, preparation practices, and community knowledge behind the dishes are not adequately protected. This issue is particularly important in the context of globalization, where local food traditions are increasingly exposed to standardization, changing consumer preferences, and the declining interest of younger generations in traditional foodways (Avieli, 2013; Rashid, 2021).

The problem is further complicated by weaknesses in multi-level governance. Existing studies have shown that food tourism research is often concentrated on localized case studies, specific food products, or consumer behavior, with limited attention to the institutional and policy structures that shape heritage food management (Okumus et al., 2018; Omar & Omar, 2018). In Malaysia, national branding efforts frequently present the country as a multi-ethnic food destination. However, the implementation of such branding at the grassroots level remains uneven. Small vendors, ethnic restaurant operators, and indigenous communities may not always receive sufficient institutional support, financial assistance, or representational space to preserve and communicate their own culinary narratives (Bhowmik, 2005; Jalis, 2009).

In addition, much of the empirical literature on Malaysian food tourism remains dominated by short-term, consumer-based surveys. These studies commonly examine relationships between food quality, satisfaction, destination image, revisit intention, and behavioral intention

(Mohammad et al., 2022; Saad et al., 2021). Although such studies provide useful insights into tourist responses, they do not fully explain the wider socio-political and governance processes through which culinary heritage is selected, institutionalized, promoted, and contested. This limitation is especially significant in multi-ethnic destinations, where decisions about which foods are officially recognized as national or destination symbols may unintentionally marginalize minority, regional, or indigenous food traditions (King, 2012).

Based on these limitations, two critical knowledge gaps can be identified. First, the existing literature has not sufficiently integrated macro-level tourism policy, meso-level stakeholder collaboration, and micro-level tourist perceptions into a single conceptual understanding of culinary heritage tourism. Second, there is a lack of dynamic frameworks that explain how governance, cultural representation, authenticity, and tourist experience interact in multi-ethnic tourism contexts. This study addresses these gaps by providing a critical narrative synthesis of culinary heritage and destination identity in Malaysia and by proposing an integrative systems-based framework that connects institutional policy, stakeholder networks, and tourist perceptions.

Research Objectives

To address the identified gaps, this critical narrative synthesis pursues four interrelated research objectives within the multi-ethnic tourism context of Malaysia:

1. To examine the conceptual evolution of culinary heritage and its role in shaping destination identity within multi-ethnic tourism contexts.
2. To analyze how institutional policy, stakeholder collaboration, and governance structures influence the management and promotion of culinary heritage in Malaysia.
3. To synthesize existing empirical findings on the relationship between heritage food consumption, tourist experience, destination image, and behavioral intention.
4. To propose an integrative conceptual framework that links macro-level policy, meso-level stakeholder networks, and micro-level tourist perceptions in explaining culinary heritage tourism within a multi-ethnic destination.

Methodology

Review Design

This study adopted a critical narrative synthesis approach to examine the relationship between culinary heritage, destination identity, and tourism governance in multi-ethnic contexts, with a specific focus on Malaysia. This approach was considered appropriate because the topic involves diverse bodies of literature across tourism studies, hospitality, heritage studies, sociology, public policy, and cultural governance. Unlike meta-analysis, which is primarily designed to aggregate statistically comparable empirical findings, critical narrative synthesis allows for a broader, more interpretive engagement with conceptual, empirical, and policy-based sources.

The purpose of this review was not only to summarize existing studies but also to critically examine how culinary heritage has been conceptualized, promoted, governed, and experienced within tourism destinations. This is particularly relevant for Malaysia, where heritage food is shaped by multi-ethnic identities, religious governance, stakeholder interests, and national

branding strategies. Therefore, the critical narrative approach enabled the study to integrate fragmented research findings, identify conceptual tensions, and develop a more holistic understanding of culinary heritage as both a cultural resource and a destination identity asset. To enhance transparency, the review incorporated structured elements commonly used in systematic literature searches, including clearly defined databases, keyword combinations, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and an audit trail of the screening process. However, the study does not claim to be a full systematic review. Instead, it uses a critical narrative synthesis design supported by a transparent and purposive search strategy to ensure both analytical depth and methodological clarity.

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

The literature search was conducted between January 2026 and March 2026, with the final database checking completed in April 2026 to ensure that recent publications up to 2026 were captured. A structured purposive strategy was applied across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Scopus and Web of Science were selected to capture peer-reviewed international literature, while Google Scholar was included to identify Malaysia-specific publications, regional studies, and relevant policy documents that may not be fully indexed in major academic databases. The search focused mainly on publications from 2015 to 2026 in order to capture recent developments in culinary heritage tourism, destination identity, and tourism governance. However, selected seminal works published before 2015 were retained where they provided important theoretical foundations for food tourism, culinary heritage, and destination identity.

The search terms were organized into four thematic keyword blocks: culinary heritage, tourism and destination identity, governance and socio-political context, and Malaysia as the geographic focus. Boolean operators were applied to combine the search terms, with OR used within each thematic block and AND used across the major blocks. The operational search matrix is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Operational Search Matrix and Thematic Keyword Blocks

Thematic Dimension	Keywords & Search Terms	Boolean Operational Rules
Dimension 1: Culinary Heritage	“culinary heritage”, “food heritage”, “gastronomic heritage”, “local cuisine”, “heritage food”	Terms within this dimension were combined using OR to broaden the retrieval of relevant culinary heritage literature.
Dimension 2: Tourism & Destination Identity	“destination identity”, “gastronomic tourism”, “place branding”, “tourist experience”, “destination image”	These terms were combined with Dimension 1 using AND to ensure that the search focused on the relationship between food and destination constructs.
Dimension 3:	“stakeholder collaboration”, “multi-level governance”,	These terms were added using AND to capture governance, institutional, and

Governance & Socio-Political Context	"policy", "Halal governance", "power relations"	socio-political dimensions of culinary heritage tourism.
Geographic Context Filter	"Malaysia"	The Malaysia filter was applied to anchor the synthesis within the national and multi-ethnic tourism context.

The main applied search string used across the databases was: ("culinary heritage" OR "food heritage" OR "gastronomic heritage" OR "local cuisine" OR "heritage food") AND ("destination identity" OR "gastronomic tourism" OR "place branding" OR "tourist experience" OR "destination image") AND ("stakeholder collaboration" OR "multi-level governance" OR "policy" OR "Halal governance" OR "power relations") AND "Malaysia".

Studies were included if they addressed at least one of the following areas: culinary heritage or heritage food in tourism; food tourism and destination identity; stakeholder collaboration or tourism governance; Halal governance; ethnic representation; or Malaysia's multi-ethnic culinary tourism landscape. Studies were excluded if they focused only on general food service management, modern culinary preferences, restaurant operations, or tourist satisfaction without a clear link to culinary heritage, destination identity, governance, or socio-political context.

To enhance the quality of the synthesis, peer-reviewed conceptual and empirical studies were prioritized, particularly those published in journals ranked in the Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) Q1-Q3 quartiles. However, selected official policy documents and context-specific reports were also retained where they provided relevant evidence on Malaysia's tourism policy, heritage governance, or national culinary branding. These documents were used to support contextual analysis rather than to replace peer-reviewed academic evidence.

Screening Process and Audit Trail

The initial search produced 248 records, including 82 from Scopus, 66 from Web of Science, and 100 from Google Scholar. After 54 duplicate records were removed, 194 unique records were retained for title and abstract screening. At this stage, 112 records were excluded because they focused on generic culinary management, lacked a destination identity focus, or did not address heritage, governance, or multi-ethnic tourism issues. The remaining 82 full-text articles were then assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Following the full-text quality appraisal, 45 core studies were retained for the final thematic synthesis. The screening process is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Documentation of the Article Screening and Selection Process (Audit Trail)

Screening Stage	Records Remaining	Rationale for Exclusion / Detail
Initial Identification	248	Records identified from Scopus (n = 82), Web of Science (n = 66), and Google Scholar (n = 100).

Post-Duplicate Removal	194	54 duplicate records were identified and removed.
Title & Abstract Screening	82	112 records were excluded because they focused on generic culinary management, lacked a destination identity focus, or did not address heritage, governance, or multi-ethnic tourism issues.
Full-Text Quality Appraisal	45	37 records were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria, lacked sufficient conceptual or methodological relevance, were not peer-reviewed where academic evidence was required, or did not contribute directly to the thematic synthesis.

Data Synthesis and Thematic Analysis

The 45 retained studies were analyzed using a structured thematic synthesis process. This stage was designed to identify recurring concepts, methodological patterns, theoretical debates, and research gaps across the selected literature. Rather than treating each study as an isolated source, the synthesis examined how the studies collectively explained the relationship between culinary heritage, destination identity, tourism governance, and multi-ethnic representation.

The synthesis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, each selected study was reviewed based on its research focus, context, methodology, and key findings. This process helped to distinguish studies that focused primarily on tourist behavior from those that examined destination branding, heritage preservation, stakeholder collaboration, policy, cultural politics, or Halal governance. In the second stage, recurring ideas were coded and grouped into broader analytical categories. These included authenticity, heritage branding, stakeholder participation, grassroots inclusion, tourist experience, destination image, ethnic representation, power relations, and religious governance. In the third stage, the emerging categories were critically compared to identify areas of convergence, contradiction, and omission within the existing literature.

Through this process, five main thematic domains were identified: conceptualization and branding of culinary heritage; stakeholder collaboration and governance; tourist behavior and destination image; ethnic and socio-political inclusion; and Halal governance. These domains served as the analytical framework for the review and guided the development of the proposed integrative conceptual framework. A summary of the core literature and its contribution to thematic synthesis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Core Literature (2012–2025)

Author (Year)	Context	Key Theme	Research Methodology	Key Findings
Okumus et al. (2018)	Global	Methodological Trends & Gaps	Bibliometric Analysis	Identifies that food tourism research is heavily saturated with localized,

				descriptive studies, highlighting the need for broader theoretical frame working.
Omar & Omar (2018)	Malaysia	Governance & Challenges	Qualitative / Review	Discusses the operational and policy challenges in managing Malaysian heritage food, emphasizing the need for structured institutional frameworks.
King (2012)	Melaka, Malaysia	Cultural Politics & Power Relations	Qualitative / Policy Analysis	Evaluates the embedded power dynamics and cultural politics within heritage discourse, illustrating how institutional branding risks shaping pluralistic identities.
Rashid (2021)	Malaysia	Youth & Heritage Foodways	Quantitative / Survey	Examines the shifting preferences and declining engagement of the younger generation toward traditional heritage foodways in Malaysia.
Chong & Stephenson (2020)	Malaysia	Micro-vendors & Hawkerpreneurship	Qualitative Case Study	Unpacks the socio-economic challenges, resource constraints, and operational hurdles faced by local food hawkers attempting to scale up.
Hashemi et al. (2023)	Malaysia	Tourist Behaviour & Neophobia	Survey (Quantitative)	Examines how micro-level constructs like destination food image and food neophobia interact to shape tourists' behavioural intentions.
Chi et al. (2013)	Malaysia	Consumer Behaviour	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)	Illustrates the historical and ongoing focus on testing structural relationships between food quality, satisfaction, and

				immediate behavioural intentions.
Mohamad et al. (2022)	Penang, Malaysia	Street Food & Revisit Intentions	Quantitative Survey	Focuses heavily on predicting the micro-level behavioural intentions of domestic and international tourists revisiting street food spots in a heritage enclave.
Au Yong et al. (2025)	Malaysia	Heritage Sustainability & Community	Qualitative Study	Explores community-driven sustainability practices, highlighting the necessity of inclusive governance to safeguard cultural heritage tourism.

Literature Review and Thematic Analysis

Conceptualizing Culinary Heritage and Destination Identity

Culinary heritage is increasingly understood in contemporary tourism and hospitality literature as more than a collection of traditional recipes or food products. It represents a dynamic form of intangible cultural heritage that reflects a community's history, social values, everyday practices, and sense of place (Bessière, 1998). In this sense, heritage food is not static. It continues to evolve through intergenerational transmission, adaptation, and interaction with wider social and economic changes.

This understanding is particularly important in multi-ethnic societies, where food often becomes a visible expression of cultural coexistence and identity negotiation. Recent research suggests that culinary heritage can strengthen destination identity by safeguarding local distinctiveness and reducing the risk of cultural erosion from globalization (Shahrin et al., 2025). Unlike general food tourism, which may include modern, commercial, or international food experiences, heritage food tourism places a stronger emphasis on origin, authenticity, traditional preparation methods, cultural memory, and the symbolic meanings attached to food. In Malaysia, culinary heritage is shaped by the long-standing interaction of Malay, Chinese, Indian, indigenous, and other local food traditions. This has produced a hybrid, diverse culinary landscape that serves as a distinctive marker of national and regional identity. The Malaysian culinary brand is therefore not built on a single ethnic food tradition, but on the layering of multiple food cultures, historical encounters, and localized adaptations. This diversity allows Malaysia to differentiate itself from neighboring destinations while also presenting food as a medium through which tourists can experience the country's plural social identity (Jalis, 2009; Shahrin et al., 2025).

Culinary Heritage as a Branding and Marketing Tool

Culinary heritage has become an important branding resource for tourism destinations. Destination Management Organizations increasingly use local food traditions to construct distinctive place identities and to differentiate destinations in a competitive global tourism market. In this context, heritage food functions not only as a product for tourist consumption but also as a sensory and symbolic touchpoint through which visitors form emotional and psychological connections with a destination. Previous research has shown that heritage food consumption can influence tourists' experiential value, destination image, and behavioural intention (Mohammad et al., 2022).

In Malaysia, food has long been used as part of the country's tourism identity. Earlier promotional narratives often positioned Malaysia as a "food paradise", highlighting the abundance and diversity of its culinary offerings. More recent branding strategies, however, appear to move beyond general food promotion toward a stronger emphasis on cultural meaning and shared social practice. This shift can be seen in Malaysia's nomination of its "Breakfast Culture" to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. By highlighting everyday breakfast items such as *nasi lemak*, *roti canai*, and *teh tarik*, the nomination presents food not only as a tourism attraction but also as a cultural practice that reflects social interaction, familiarity, and unity across Malaysia's multi-ethnic communities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2024).

This development shows that culinary heritage branding is most effective when it is supported by cultural storytelling. Tourists are not only attracted to the taste of local food, but also to the stories, memories, preparation practices, and social meanings attached to it. However, branding also creates risks. When heritage food is promoted mainly for commercial visibility, its deeper cultural value may be simplified or detached from the communities that sustain it. Therefore, culinary heritage branding requires a careful balance between market appeal, cultural authenticity, and community representation.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Governance in Food Tourism

Stakeholder collaboration has emerged as a central issue in the sustainable management of culinary heritage tourism. Heritage food does not exist only within restaurants, festivals, or tourism campaigns. It is produced, maintained, and transmitted through a wider network of actors, including government agencies, tourism boards, local authorities, private operators, food vendors, community members, and heritage custodians. For this reason, culinary heritage tourism requires more than promotional strategies. It requires a governance structure that can coordinate the interests, responsibilities, and resources of multiple stakeholders.

In food tourism, collaborative governance is particularly important because heritage food involves both economic and cultural values. Tourism authorities may focus on destination branding and visitor arrivals, while private operators often prioritize market demand and business sustainability. Local communities, however, may be more concerned with authenticity, cultural continuity, and the protection of inherited food knowledge. When these interests are not properly aligned, culinary heritage may become vulnerable to over-commercialization, selective representation, and the marginalization of grassroots actors.

Within the Malaysian context, this issue is especially significant in heritage destinations such as George Town and Melaka, where local food traditions are closely tied to place identity, urban heritage, and community memory. Municipal councils, state tourism agencies, private restaurateurs, hawkers, and community groups all play important roles in shaping how heritage food is preserved and presented to tourists. However, the absence of strong coordination among these actors may create gaps between national branding objectives and local implementation realities. Previous studies have emphasized that stakeholder collaboration is necessary to protect authenticity, support local food operators, and ensure that the benefits of food tourism are more equitably distributed (Au Yong et al., 2025; Chong & Stephenson, 2020; Hribar et al., 2021; King, 2012).

Therefore, culinary heritage governance should be understood as a multi-level process. At the macro level, policies and national heritage recognition provide legitimacy and strategic direction. At the meso level, local authorities, tourism organizations, and private operators translate these policies into programs, products, and visitor experiences. At the micro level, tourists respond to these experiences through perceptions, satisfaction, loyalty, and word of mouth. This multi-level relationship shows that culinary heritage tourism cannot be sustained solely through marketing. It depends on continuous coordination between policy, stakeholders, and community-based cultural resources.

Culinary Heritage, Destination Image, and Tourist Behavior

A major stream of food tourism research has examined how culinary experiences influence destination image and tourist behavior. In this body of literature, heritage food is often studied as part of the tourist consumption experience, particularly in relation to food quality, satisfaction, perceived value, revisit intention, and word of mouth. These studies are important because they show that food is not a minor or incidental part of travel. It can shape how tourists evaluate, remember, and emotionally connect with a destination.

In the Malaysian context, empirical studies have shown that heritage food consumption can positively influence tourists' experiential value and destination image. Mohammad et al. (2022), for example, found that the consumption of heritage food in Terengganu contributed to tourists' perceptions of destination image and behavioral intention. Similarly, studies on heritage food and domestic tourism suggest that local cuisine can generate curiosity, cultural learning, and a stronger intention to revisit when tourists perceive the food experience as meaningful and authentic (Saad et al., 2021).

This relationship also highlights the role of epistemic value in culinary tourism. Tourists are not only motivated by taste, price, or convenience. Many are also interested in learning about the cultural background, preparation methods, local stories, and the symbolic meanings associated with heritage food. In this sense, food becomes an educational and interpretive medium. It allows visitors to engage with the destination through sensory experience while also developing a deeper understanding of local identity.

However, this stream of research also has limitations. Much of the existing literature remains concentrated on short-term behavioral outcomes, especially satisfaction, revisit intention, and recommendation intention (Chi et al., 2013; Mohammad et al., 2022; Saad et al., 2021). While these variables are useful, they do not fully explain how culinary heritage is governed, which food narratives are promoted, or how community actors sustain heritage food over time.

Therefore, studies of tourist behavior need to be connected to broader discussions on governance, authenticity, and cultural representation.

Emerging Issues: Power Relations and Inclusion

Culinary heritage is not a neutral cultural resource. In multi-ethnic destinations, the selection, promotion, and institutional recognition of heritage food often involve questions of power, representation, and inclusion. When certain dishes are promoted as symbols of national or destination identity, other food traditions may receive less visibility. This is particularly important in plural societies, where ethnic minority, regional, indigenous, and grassroots culinary traditions may not always be equally represented in mainstream tourism narratives.

In Malaysia, the issue of representation is closely linked to the country's multi-ethnic identity. National food branding often highlights selected iconic dishes that are easily recognizable to domestic and international tourists. While this can strengthen destination visibility, it may also simplify the complexity of Malaysia's culinary landscape. Heritage food is not limited to well-known national dishes. It also exists in regional foodways, indigenous cooking practices, street food cultures, family recipes, and everyday community-based food traditions.

The institutional recognition of heritage food can therefore produce both inclusion and exclusion. King (2012) argues that heritage discourse is often shaped by cultural politics, particularly in destinations where tourism, identity, and official recognition intersect. In this context, the decision to promote certain foods as heritage symbols may unintentionally marginalize less visible communities or food traditions. This creates a need for more inclusive heritage governance that recognizes culinary diversity beyond commercially popular or politically convenient representations.

Grassroots actors are especially important in this discussion. Street food vendors, small restaurant operators, traditional cooks, family businesses, and local communities are often the actual custodians of culinary heritage. Yet they may have limited influence over how heritage food is branded, packaged, or promoted in tourism strategies. Previous studies have highlighted the challenges faced by food vendors and small operators, including limited capital, regulatory pressure, urban redevelopment, and weak institutional support (Bhowmik, 2005; Chong & Stephenson, 2020). If these actors are excluded from tourism planning, culinary heritage risks becoming detached from the communities that sustain it.

Therefore, inclusive culinary heritage governance must move beyond symbolic recognition. It should create space for diverse ethnic, regional, and community-based food narratives to be represented in tourism policy, destination branding, and heritage preservation initiatives. This is essential not only for cultural justice but also for maintaining the authenticity and long-term sustainability of Malaysia's culinary destination identity.

The Multi-Ethnic Identity and Halal Governance

A distinctive feature of Malaysia's culinary tourism landscape is the intersection between multi-ethnic food traditions and Halal governance. As a Muslim-majority country with a highly diverse population, Malaysia's destination identity is shaped not only by Malay, Chinese, Indian, indigenous, and regional culinary traditions, but also by Islamic dietary requirements and institutional Halal certification. This makes the governance of culinary heritage more

complex than in destinations where food identity is framed mainly through culture, taste, or locality.

Halal certification has become an important component of Malaysia's tourism competitiveness, particularly in attracting Muslim tourists and strengthening the country's position within the global Halal tourism market. Previous studies have shown that Halal food availability, certification, and Muslim-friendly services can enhance tourist confidence and destination appeal among Muslim travelers (Battour & Ismail, 2016; Henderson, 2016). In this sense, Halal governance supports Malaysia's image as a safe, accessible, and culturally familiar destination for Muslim visitors.

However, the relationship between Halal governance and culinary heritage is not without tension. Malaysia's culinary identity is multi-ethnic and includes both Halal and non-Halal food traditions. While Halal certification provides regulatory assurance and market value, tourism authorities and destination marketers must also ensure that non-Halal and minority culinary traditions are not erased from the broader narrative of Malaysian food heritage. This requires careful cultural balancing, especially in promoting Chinese Malaysian, Indian Malaysian, indigenous, and regional foodways that may not always fit neatly into dominant national branding frameworks.

Therefore, Halal governance should not be viewed only as a technical certification process. It is also part of the wider politics of representation in Malaysian culinary tourism. The challenge is to promote Malaysia as a leading Halal tourism destination while also preserving the diversity, authenticity, and visibility of its multi-ethnic culinary heritage. A more inclusive approach to food tourism governance is needed, one that recognizes Halal as a strategic strength without marginalizing other cultural food identities within the national destination brand (Maspul & Ardhin, 2025; Omar et al., 2020).

The Proposed Integrative Conceptual Framework

Based on the critical narrative synthesis, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework for understanding culinary heritage tourism in Malaysia's multi-ethnic context. The framework moves beyond linear cause-and-effect models commonly used in destination and tourist behavior studies. Instead of treating culinary heritage only as a predictor of satisfaction or behavioral intention, the framework positions it as a living cultural resource shaped by policy, stakeholder collaboration, community participation, and tourist interpretation. The structural relationship between these dimensions is illustrated in Figure 1.

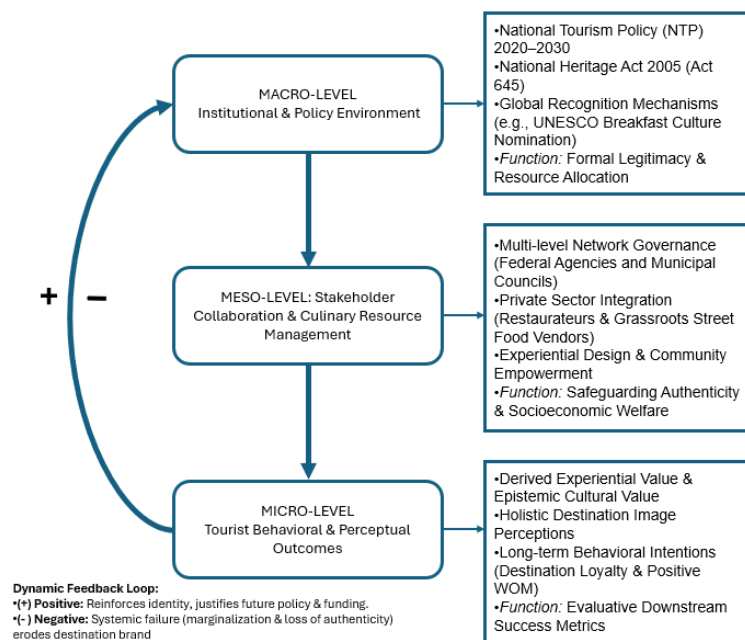


Figure 1: The Proposed Integrative Conceptual Framework for Malaysian Culinary Heritage Tourism

The framework is structured around three interrelated levels: macro, meso, and micro. The first level is the Institutional and Policy Environment, which represents the macro-level foundation of culinary heritage tourism. This level includes national tourism policies, such as the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030; heritage legislation; Halal governance; cultural branding strategies; and international recognition mechanisms, such as UNESCO-related nominations. These elements provide formal legitimacy and policy support for transforming everyday culinary practices into recognized destination heritage assets. This level also responds to previous concerns that the management of Malaysian heritage food requires stronger institutional coordination and clearer policy integration (Commissioner of Heritage, 2005; Omar & Omar, 2018).

The second level is Stakeholder Collaboration and Culinary Resource Management, which functions as the meso-level bridge between policy and practice. This level focuses on the roles of federal and state agencies, municipal councils, private restaurateurs, street food vendors, local communities, and heritage custodians. It explains how culinary resources are curated into tourist experiences while also addressing issues of authenticity, community empowerment, and the socioeconomic welfare of local heritage actors. This is consistent with previous studies that emphasize the importance of collaborative governance and the need to address the operational challenges faced by local food operators and grassroots actors (Chong & Stephenson, 2020; Hribar et al., 2021).

The third level is Tourist Behavioral and Perceptual Outcomes, which represents the micro-level evaluative dimension of the framework. This level captures how tourists experience and responds to culinary heritage through experiential value, epistemic value, destination image, satisfaction, destination loyalty, and positive word of mouth. These outcomes indicate whether macro-level policy support and meso-level stakeholder collaboration are successfully translated into meaningful tourist experiences. Previous empirical evidence has shown that

heritage food consumption can influence destination image and tourists' behavioral intention, particularly when the food experience is perceived as culturally meaningful and authentic (Mohammad et al., 2022).

A key contribution of the framework is its dynamic feedback loop. Positive tourist experiences can strengthen destination identity and support future policy attention, funding, and promotional strategies. However, weaknesses at the meso level, such as poor stakeholder coordination, over-commercialization, loss of authenticity, or the marginalization of minority food traditions, may negatively affect tourist perceptions and weaken the destination brand. This shows that culinary heritage tourism is not a static process. It depends on the continuous interaction between policy, stakeholders, communities, and tourists.

The framework, therefore, integrates three areas that are often discussed separately in the existing literature: institutional policy, stakeholder governance, and tourist behavior. The macro level responds to institutional and policy gaps in culinary heritage management. The meso level addresses the policy–grassroots divide by emphasizing collaboration among tourism agencies, local authorities, food operators, and communities. The micro level incorporates tourist experience and behavioral outcomes, which remain important but should be understood within the wider governance and cultural context of culinary heritage tourism.

Discussion and Future Research Agenda

This critical narrative synthesis shows that culinary heritage plays a central role in shaping Malaysia's destination identity. However, the review also reveals that culinary heritage tourism is still frequently discussed through a limited marketing or consumer-behavior lens. Many existing studies focus on food quality, satisfaction, destination image, and behavioral intention. These perspectives are useful, but they do not fully explain the governance structures, community processes, and socio-political negotiations that determine how heritage food is selected, promoted, preserved, and experienced.

A key insight from this synthesis is the need to move beyond viewing heritage food only as a tourism product. Culinary heritage is also a cultural resource, a community practice, and a site of identity negotiation. In Malaysia's multi-ethnic context, food carries meanings related to ethnicity, religion, locality, memory, and belonging. The promotion of selected dishes as national or destination icons may strengthen Malaysia's tourism image, but it may also simplify the wider diversity of local food traditions if minority, regional, indigenous, or grassroots foodways are not adequately represented.

The proposed integrative framework responds to this issue by linking three levels of analysis: macro-level institutional policy, meso-level stakeholder collaboration, and micro-level tourist perceptions. This structure shows that culinary heritage tourism cannot be sustained solely through branding. A strong destination identity depends on alignment among policy direction, local implementation, community participation, and meaningful tourist experience. When these levels are disconnected, heritage food may become over-commercialized, detached from its cultural roots, or unevenly represented in tourism narratives.

The Malaysian case also highlights the importance of inclusive governance. National policies and international recognition initiatives, including UNESCO-related nominations, can provide visibility and legitimacy for culinary heritage. However, these initiatives must be supported by

practical mechanisms that involve local vendors, traditional cooks, ethnic communities, municipal authorities, tourism operators, and private stakeholders. Without such participation, culinary heritage may be preserved symbolically but weakened operationally.

Based on the synthesis, several directions for future research are proposed. First, more longitudinal studies are needed to examine how culinary heritage policies evolve over time and how they affect grassroots food communities. Second, future studies should explore the role of digital media, food influencers, and online tourism platforms in shaping public perceptions of authenticity and destination identity. Third, comparative research between Malaysia and other multi-ethnic destinations, such as Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, or Brazil, could provide deeper insight into different models of inclusive culinary heritage governance. Finally, future empirical research should examine the resilience of culinary heritage tourism amid urban redevelopment, climate change, supply-chain disruptions, and economic uncertainty.

Overall, future research should adopt broader and more integrated approaches. Rather than separating tourist behavior, policy, and community participation, scholars should examine how these dimensions interact within the wider tourism ecosystem. This is necessary for developing a more sustainable, inclusive, and culturally grounded model of culinary heritage tourism in multi-ethnic destinations.

Conclusion

This critical narrative synthesis examines the relationship between culinary heritage and destination identity in Malaysia's multi-ethnic tourism context. The review shows that culinary heritage should not be understood merely as a food product or a supporting tourism attraction. Instead, it functions as a living cultural resource that reflects history, ethnicity, religion, locality, community memory, and everyday social practice.

Through a synthesis of existing literature, five main thematic domains were identified: the conceptualization and branding of culinary heritage; stakeholder collaboration and governance; tourist behavior and destination image; ethnic and socio-political inclusion; and Halal governance. These domains show that culinary heritage tourism is shaped by multiple forces. It depends not only on tourist consumption and destination marketing but also on policy decisions, stakeholder coordination, cultural representation, grassroots participation, and religious governance.

The proposed integrative conceptual framework contributes to the literature by connecting macro-level institutional policy, meso-level stakeholder collaboration, and micro-level tourist perceptions through a dynamic feedback system. This framework offers a more holistic way to understand how culinary heritage is recognized, managed, experienced, and sustained in a pluralistic destination. It also highlights the importance of aligning national tourism strategies with local implementation and community-based heritage preservation.

Overall, this study argues that the future sustainability of Malaysia's culinary heritage tourism depends on inclusive and coordinated governance. For Malaysia to maintain a competitive, authentic, and culturally grounded destination identity, culinary heritage must be protected not only as a marketable tourism asset but also as a shared, diverse cultural inheritance. Future research should continue to examine this relationship through longitudinal, comparative, and

community-centered approaches that reflect the complexity of multi-ethnic tourism destinations.

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