

# Exploring Baba and Nyonya Culture via Multiple Image Lenses: Food Travellers' Perspective

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## Abstract

This study applies a multidimensional approach in the context of Baba and Nyonya cuisine. A total of 209 international food tourists were surveyed in Malacca, Malaysia. The results derived from structural equation modelling empirically confirmed that the cognitive image dimensions of safety, uniqueness and family-oriented significantly and positively influenced both affective and conative images. However, the cognitive image dimension of variety only partially influenced affective image, but not a conative image, while the cognitive image of cooking methods did not show any significant effects on the affective nor conative image. Finally, affective image dimensions significantly and positively influenced the conative image. Relevant implications, limitations, and suggestions for future studies for Baba and Nyonya cuisine also discussed.

## Keywords:

Baba & Nyonya cuisine, food destination image, cognitive-affective-conative, Malacca, Malaysia

## 1 Introduction

Tourist food consumption expenditure can cover up to thirty percent of their overall travel expenditure (Tikkanen, 2007) and is a significant financial contribution to the local economy and a nation's coffer. In fact, the government in certain countries have friendly food policies (regarding agricultural, food supply) to support tourism industry (Broadway, 2017; De Jong, & Varley, 2017). This phenomenon enables residents start to promote their local delicacies to the tourists, be it as ordinary food for filling up the stomach or authentic image that is representing the 'destination brand.' Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model proposes that everyone needs food to fulfill the basic hierarchy of physiological needs to survive. However, modernisation has seen a change in how individuals regard the concept of food. Today, some individuals consider food a hobby or a passion and may even regard food as art. Studies have shown that some individuals explore food as an identity-making tool and a symbol of culture reflecting an ethnicity or religion (Alder, 2015; Kim, Youn & Rao, 2017; Mak, Lumbers, Eves & Chang, 2017).

From a tourism perspective, Mak, Lumbers and Eves (2012, p. 177) suggests that there are two facets to food. For general tourists who consume food during their trips merely as a means of sustenance, the food reflects an "obligatory" facet. However, for tourists who explore food as a means of developing their identity and cultural capital by seeking authentic culinary experiences, the food reflects a "symbolic" facet. In fact, some tourists claim that eating local food is a novelty-seeking behaviour that fulfills a major affective part of the overall travel experience (Kim, Eves & Scarles, 2013). Previous studies argue that food consumption in a destination could play an essential role in destination selection and post-purchase behaviour (e.g., Andersson, Getz, Vujicic, Robinson & Cavicchi, 2016; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Kim, Suh, & Eves, 2010). As such, the study of tourist food consumption is an interesting topic to explore.

Majority of previous studies focused on the motivational aspects of tourist food consumption behaviour in the contexts of restaurants, street food or food festivals (e.g., Choi, Lee & Ok, 2013; Kim, Almanza, Ghiselli & Sydnor, 2016; Wong, Wu & Cheng, 2015; Wu & Ai, 2016; Wu, Cheng & Hsu, 2014). Another stream of researchers has proposed that food may serve as another element of travel destination image (e.g., Peštek & Činjarević, 2014; Seo & Yun, 2015; Seo, Yun & Kim, 2017). Henderson (2014) argued that destination food image is important for cultural tourism and therefore, effective marketers should make use of the local food image as a communication tool to promote a country. For example, the Korean Tourism Organisation's website promotes various types of Korean food (e.g., Kimchi, Royal Cuisine, Festive Foods and a Korean Food Culture Series), how to eat (e.g., table etiquette and settings) and where to eat (e.g., restaurants, food festivals and street stalls) (Horng & Tsai, 2010).

Despite the array of research on destination food image, most of the research merely focuses on the general food image or cognitive attributes, whereas image formation could be subjective and perceptual (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). The image perception can be emotional or rational. For example, if a tourist dislikes durian,

exposure to the fruit or a picture of the fruit may lead to feelings of irritation. This suggests that cognitive image may not possibly induce a positive affective attribute. Thus these two components should be evaluated in the image formation (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Lam, Yeo, Tan, Chong & Oh, 2014; Noh & Vogt, 2013). Further, Baloglu and McCleary (1999) argued that to holistically evaluate the image of a destination, instead of cognitive and affective attributes, the conative attribute should be included to describe the overall complex process of image formation. Huang and Gross (2010) assert that, while the cognitive-affective image model has frequently been applied in the causal relationships between destination image and other constructs, the cognitive-affective-conative continuum is more descriptive. In other words, if destination image could be better explored by the tri-level model, does this multiple destination images model, therefore, apply within the food tourism context? The current study takes a step further to explore the possible significant relationship of the tri-level of destination image in the context of food tourist behaviour, where such studies remain limited.

Previous studies have explored the role of travel destination image and tourist experience in the Malaysian context (e.g., Mohamad, Abdullah & Mokhlis, 2012; Mohamad, Ali & Ghani, 2011; Som, Marzuki, Yousefi & AbuKhalifeh, 2012; Teo, Khan & Rahim, 2014). However, most of the image-related studies assess a general travel destination image for Malaysia and omit the arguably, important food element. While there are existing studies on Malaysian food destination image, these studies are qualitative in nature do not quantitatively measure the multidimensional image of the food (e.g., Adilah, Zahari, & Emaria, 2014; Chi, Chua, Othman & Karim, 2013; Jalis, Che & Markwell, 2014; Leong, Othman, Adzahan, Karim & Shahrim, 2012; Ling, Karim, Othman, Adzahan & Ramachandran, 2010; Omar, Karim & Omar, 2015). As such, this article attempts to address these research gaps and further investigates empirically, the multidimensional image of Malaysia's local food.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Destination food image**

The image concept may be defined as a human's perception of products, objects, behaviours, and events driven by beliefs, feelings, and impressions (Crompton, 1979). The destination image is a tourist's incorporation of beliefs, ideas, and impressions of a particular place (Baloglu & Brinberg, 1997). In the same vein, destination food image is conceptualised as a tourist's perceptual understanding and evaluations of food offered at the destination (Chi *et al.*, 2013). As the image is formed through a tourist's reasoned and emotional interpretation, destination food image should comprise both cognitive food image and affective food image (Seo, Yun & Kim, 2017).

Cognitive attributes include beliefs and knowledge related to a destination's food. These attributes could include beliefs on nutritional contents, freshness, texture, wholesomeness, price, smell, taste, variety and local identity (Chi *et al.*, 2013; Karim & Chi, 2010; Seo, Yun & Kim, 2017). Meanwhile, affective attributes are a tourist's feelings,

moods, and emotions towards a destination’s food. This subjective perceptual image can be favourable, unfavourable or neutral. Seo, Yun and Kim (2017) posited that five semantic differential scales (discontented-contented, unfulfilled-fulfilled, unpleasant-pleasant, not enjoyable-enjoyable and gloomy-exciting) could be applied to measure the affective food image.

Also, the third image element, introduced earlier, is a conative image which may manifest as intentions of varying degrees and valences formed from the previous destination image elements (Noh & Vogt, 2013). Essentially, research has shown that cognitive and affective attributes may influence a tourist’s behaviour (Agapito, Oom & Mendes, 2013). This study proposes that positive food image attributes could influence a tourist intention to spread positive word-of-mouth and revisit the food destination in future. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) developed a path analytic model of Americans’ image perceptions towards four Mediterranean countries as a travel destination. This model included cognitive and affective components that represented the overall image. The study revealed that cognitive image influenced affective image and both influenced overall image. The model has since been applied in other empirical studies which revealed similar findings (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Phillips & Jang, 2008; Wang & Hsu, 2010). Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) argued that destination image cannot be understood without considering its three components. Agapito, Oom, and Mendes (2013), in their study on tourists to Portugal, reported that cognitive image impacted a tourists’ affective and conative image. The affective image then influenced the conative image. Similarly, in the context of destination food image, this study proposes that conative image of the destination’s food will impact on their affective and conative image. The cognitive image will also have a direct effect on the conative image. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed, and Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model which highlights the possible relationships amongst the three destination food image elements.

- H<sub>1</sub>: Cognitive food image will positively influence affective food image
- H<sub>2</sub>: Cognitive food image will positively influence conative food image
- H<sub>3</sub>: Affective food image will positively influence conative food image

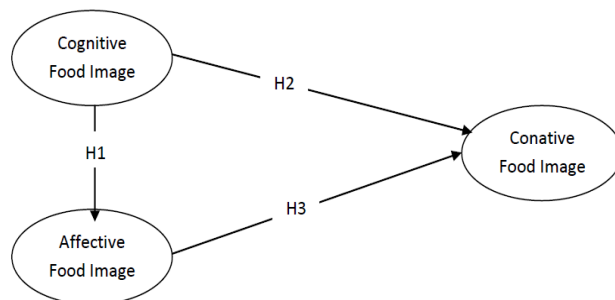


Figure 1: Proposed cognitive-affective-conative food destination image model

### 3 Methodology

For this study, Baba and Nyonya cuisine was utilised as the destination food based on its relative uniqueness. This food originated as the hybrid outcome of Malay and Chinese ethnicities, dubbed the Baba and Nyonya. This amalgamation of culture is particularly prominent in the culinary assimilation with regards to the types of food, preparation, and ingredients (Tumin, Zahari, Ishak & Abdullah, 2017). The immigrant workers mainly from Mainland China adapted and modified their traditional Chinese food to local ingredients, cooking techniques and taste (Ng & Karim, 2016). The '*kapitan*' chicken, '*pong teh*' chicken, prawn chili paste ('*sambal udang*'), herbal rice ('*nasi ulam Nyonya*') as well as an array of delightful cakes ('*kuih*') are among the signature dishes which have generated a mesmerising food image amongst local and foreign tourists (Lee, 2017). Further, some of the food preparation techniques are unique and may take more than a month to complete. For example, in order to cook the '*buah keluak*' chicken, the '*buah keluak*' has to be smoked for 40 days before it can be included as an ingredient in that dish. This kind of detail makes Baba and Nyonya food unique compared to other foods (Priya, 2016).

A self-administered questionnaire was employed to gather the relevant destination food image data. The measurement items were developed from previous related literature (e.g., Agapito, Oom & Mendes, 2013; Seo, Yun & Kim, 2017) and personal interviews with ten international tourists. The food destination image attributes which were mentioned by more than two respondents (equivalent to 20%) were included for the measurement scale, resulting in 23 items for the cognitive image, five items for affective image and three items for the conative image. Then, the measurement scales were reviewed by three tourism and hospitality experts. Whichever items that were not rated "representative" by at least two reviewers were removed from the scale (Lam, Tong & Ariffin, 2017). A pilot study was conducted after the review. The wording of the questionnaire was slightly amended to signify clearer representation and understanding. The two-step deductive scale development process resulted in a set of 31 items for all three dimensions (Table 1).

International tourists who visit Malaysia for the main purpose of food tourism, particularly the Baba and Nyonya food, were recruited for data collection. They were recruited at the heritage zone of the Historic Malacca city between March and August 2016. The data collection site was selected due to its status as UNESCO World Heritage City and a long history of Baba and Nyonya culture (Lam, Chong, Yeo, Goh & Oh, 2012). Further, a distinctive number of restaurants serving Baba and Nyonya food are mounting in enclaves around the heritage precinct in Malacca (Ng & Karim, 2016). Before completing the survey, potential respondents were asked whether Baba and Nyonya food image influenced them to visit the destination. Only tourists who responded 'yes' were recruited to avoid biased representation of the data. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, and 254 responses were collected. Forty-five responses were excluded due to incomplete data, and the remaining 209 responses were used for further statistical analyses.

Table 1: Measurement items for Food Destination Image Construct

No.	Cognitive Food Image Items	Source
CO1	Baba and Nyonya food are served in family style.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO2	Baba and Nyonya food is family-oriented.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO3	Baba and Nyonya food are authentic.	In-depth interviews
CO4	Baba and Nyonya food are always attractive.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO5	Baba and Nyonya food reflects 'Baba and Nyonya' identity.	In-depth interviews
CO6	Baba and Nyonya food is appealing.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO7	Baba and Nyonya food are neat.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO8	Baba and Nyonya food taste good.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO9	Baba and Nyonya food smells good.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO10	Baba and Nyonya food is easily digestible.	In-depth interviews
CO11	Baba and Nyonya food is reliable.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO12	Baba and Nyonya food is popular.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO13	Baba and Nyonya food is safe.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO14	Baba and Nyonya food is hygienic.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO15	Baba and Nyonya food is healthy compared to other types of food.	Panel expert judges
CO16	Baba and Nyonya food stress the importance of traditional cooking methods.	Panel expert judges
CO17	Baba and Nyonya food takes ideal time to prepare.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO18	Baba and Nyonya food use various cooking methods.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO19	Baba and Nyonya food offer various side dishes.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO20	Baba and Nyonya food offer various desserts (e.g., <i>ais kacang, cendol</i> ).	In-depth interviews
CO21	Baba and Nyonya food are prepared in a flexible portion according to guest needs (e.g., small, medium or large portion).	Panel expert judges
CO22	Baba and Nyonya food use fresh ingredients.	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
CO23	Baba and Nyonya food is easy to find.	In-depth interviews
No.	Affective Food Image Items	Source
AF1	For me, consuming Baba and Nyonya food is: Discontented – Contented	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
AF2	Unfulfilled – Fulfilled	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
AF3	Unpleasant – Pleasant	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
AF4	Not enjoyable – Enjoyable	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
AF5	Gloomy – Exciting	Seo, Yun & Kim, (2017)
No.	Conative Food Image Items	Source
CN1	I will recommend Baba and Nyonya food to other people when I return home.	Agapito, Valle & Costa Mendes (2013)
CN2	I will spread positive word-of-mouth about Baba and Nyonya food when I return home.	Agapito, Valle & Costa Mendes (2013)
CN3	I will visit Malaysia again specifically for Baba and Nyonya food.	Agapito, Valle & Costa Mendes (2013)

## 4 Results

Table 2 shows the demographic profiles of the respondents involved in the survey. As the tourists were from different nations across the globe, it was easier to categorise each country according to the geographical region for the better representation in the current study. In the data analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using VARIMAX rotation with SPSS 22 was conducted to examine 31 items that represent the multi-dimensional image constructs. The final six-factor solution identified 26 items that explained 86.6% of the variance with a Kaiser-Meyer Olkin value (KMO) of 0.82 and Bartlett's test of sphericity of 12985.72 ( $p=0.00$ ). These factors were labeled as "cognitive- safety" ( $\alpha=0.77$ ), "cognitive-uniqueness" ( $\alpha=0.85$ ), "cognitive-family-oriented" ( $\alpha=0.86$ ), "cognitive-variety" ( $\alpha=0.80$ ), "cognitive-cooking methods" ( $\alpha=0.82$ ), "affective image" ( $\alpha=0.89$ ) and "conative image" ( $\alpha=0.85$ ). The results of the reliability test revealed satisfactory reliability coefficients which were above the recommended standard of 0.70 (Nunally, 1978). Next, the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to further confirm the refined constructs. From the confirmatory examination, another five items were removed due to cross loading and low factor loading. The constructs were then examined in a structural model in AMOS 23.

Table 2: Demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic characteristics	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	128	61.24
Female	81	38.76
<b>Age</b>		
18years and below	4	1.91
19-25 years	27	12.92
26-32 years	135	64.60
33-39 years	35	16.75
40years and above	8	3.82
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	125	59.80
Married	77	36.85
Others	7	3.35
<b>Geographic Region</b>		
Africa	10	4.78
Asia	168	80.38
Europe	21	10.05
Middle East	2	0.96
America	8	3.83
<b>Occupation</b>		
Student	28	13.39
Civil servant	30	14.35
Professional employee	50	23.92
Business	27	12.92

Homemaker	25	11.96
Unemployed	12	5.74
Retiree	34	16.27
Others	3	1.45
<hr/>		
Travel purpose		
Leisure	128	61.24
Business trip	34	16.27
Visit friends/relatives	36	17.22
Others	11	5.27

The explanatory power (R-square) of the model was 46.33%. The absolute fit indices ( $\chi^2/df=2.90$ , RMSEA=0.08, SRMR=0.07), incremental fit indices (CFI=0.84, NFI=0.98, TLI=0.99), and parsimony fit index (PNFI=0.79) were deemed acceptable. Although the comparative fit index (CFI) figure was lesser than the standard of 0.90, the structural model met the minimal requirement of fulfilling at least three or four fit indices (Hair, Anderson, Babin, & Black, 2010).

The proposed hypotheses were investigated from the model (Table 3). First, the impact of the cognitive-safety image (CO13, CO14, and CO15) produced a significant and positive influence on affective food image (AF1, AF2, AF3 and AF4) ( $\beta=0.18$ ;  $p\leq 0.001$ ) and conative food image (CN1, CN2 and CN3) ( $\beta=0.23$ ;  $p\leq 0.001$ ) constructs. Thus, H1a and H2a were supported. Cognitive-uniqueness image (CO3, CO4, and CO5) also produced a significant and positive impact on affective food image ( $\beta=0.28$ ,  $p\leq 0.001$ ) and conative food image ( $\beta=0.30$ ;  $p\leq 0.001$ ), supporting H1b and H2b. Cognitive-family-oriented image (CO1 and CO2) produced a significant and positive impact on affective food image ( $\beta=0.31$ ,  $p\leq 0.001$ ) and conative food image ( $\beta= 0.40$ ,  $p\leq 0.001$ ), supporting H1c and H2c. Cognitive-variety image (CO19, CO20, and CO21) produced a significant and positive impact on affective food image ( $\beta=0.33$ ,  $p\leq 0.001$ ), but not conative food image ( $\beta=0.11$ ,  $p\geq 0.05$ ). Thus, H1d was supported, but H2d was not supported ( $\beta=0.21$ ,  $p\geq 0.05$ ). Interestingly, no significant relationships were observed for cognitive-cooking methods image (CO16, CO17, and CO18) on both affective ( $\beta=0.13$ ,  $p\geq 0.05$ ) and conative images ( $\beta=0.14$ ,  $p\geq 0.05$ ). Thus, H1e and H2e were not supported. Finally, the affective food image produced a significant and positive impact on conative food image, supporting H3 ( $\beta=0.35$ ,  $p\leq 0.001$ ).

Table 3: Results of Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Beta Value ( $\beta$ )	Result
H1: Cognitive Food Image $\rightarrow$ Affective Food Image		Partially supported
H1a: Cognitive-safety $\rightarrow$ Affective Food Image	0.18***	Supported
H1b: Cognitive-uniqueness $\rightarrow$ Affective Food Image	0.28***	Supported
H1c: Cognitive-family-oriented $\rightarrow$ Affective Food Image	0.31***	Supported
H1d: Cognitive-variety $\rightarrow$ Affective Food Image	0.33***	Supported



H1e: Cognitive-cooking-methods → Affective Food Image	0.13	Not supported
H2: Cognitive Food Image → Conative Food Image		Partially supported
H2a: Cognitive-safety → Conative Food Image	0.23***	Supported
H2b: Cognitive-uniqueness → Conative Food Image	0.30***	Supported
H2c: Cognitive-family-oriented → Conative Food Image	0.40***	Supported
H2d: Cognitive-variety → Conative Food Image	0.11	Not supported
H2e: Cognitive-cooking-methods → Conative Food Image	0.14	Not supported
H3: Affective Food Image → Conative Food Image	0.35***	Supported

*Note: Normed Chi-square ( $\chi^2/df=2.90$ ); Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA=0.80); Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR=0.07); Comparative Fit Index (CFI=0.84); Normed Fit Index (NFI=0.98); Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI=0.99); Parsimonious Normed Fit Index (PNFI=0.79);  $p<0.001$ .*

## 5 Implications, Limitations and Future Studies

### 5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study strives to expand multi-dimensional image approach to the food tourism industry, particularly in the context of Baba and Nyonya cuisine. Since the model deems to be fit from the structural equation modelling analysis, the study brands it as “FOOD C-A-C IMAGE” model.

### 5.2 Methodological Implications

As mentioned earlier, most of the previous food tourism studies explore in the context of qualitative and some focused only on the cognitive and affective images. However, this study takes a holistic approach to measuring food image in the continuum of cognitive, affective and conative in the quantitative paradigm. Further, a set of food destination image measurement properties specifically on the Baba and Nyonya food which adapted from the previous scale was introduced in this study.

### 5.3 Managerial Implications

The findings allow marketers and policymakers to identify which attributes should be highlighted to promote food tourism image effectively in the eyes of potential and frequent travellers. Since the cognitive images of safety, uniqueness and family-oriented indicated significant and positive impacts on affective and conative images, the tourism authority should highlight that the local foods are hygienic and safe to consume. Government authorities could impose quality food safety and hygiene policies on the food operators with regular monitoring and enforcement controls. The previous study revealed that tourists might worry about getting sick due to unhygienic food preparation (Adam, 2015). For instance, Thailand earns worldwide recognition due to its various street food and local cuisine images (Ng & Karim, 2016). The Thai government launched the Thai Select certification program that aims to upgrade and maintain the quality of its food (Liu, Su, Gan & Chou, 2014).

Although the uniqueness of Baba and Nyonya food culture has gradually gained global recognition, the amount of available and genuine resources about the culture,

endorsed by the relevant authorities, is still limited (Ng & Karim, 2016). Endowed with the Baba and Nyonya cuisine which reflects the unique identity of the two prominent cultures in Malaysia; government, related associations, heritage bodies and marketers should communicate this uniqueness in their marketing programmes regularly. A special food tourism promotional tagline should be created for this purpose, reflecting the identity of Baba and Nyonya culture and food. More features should be featured on state-run websites so that more tourists may learn more about the culture and its food when browsing on the internet.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Future Studies**

This study only focused on one research site, Malacca, Malaysia. Future research should compare how the research model performs with Baba and Nyonya food in different states (e.g., Penang) and countries (e.g., Singapore). Further, this research model should be tested with different ethnic foods to ensure the robustness of the framework in different settings. Food tourists in different destinations may have different cognitive and affective perceptions. Finally, since this study only focuses on destination image model, future research may incorporate other factors that may influence a tourist's intention to visit/revisit a destination such as perceived value, perceived service quality, perceived authenticity, historical nostalgia and personal nostalgia of a tourist towards destination food (Lee, Phau, Hughes, Li & Quintal, 2016; Nilplub, Khang & Krairit, 2016; Phau, Quintal, Marchegiani, & Lee, 2016).

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