Unlocking the secret of *nasi lemak*: How food choices shape emotional experience and purchase intentions among Malaysians

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Malaysians' emotional experiences influence their intentions to purchase *nasi lemak*, with food choice acting as a critical moderator. The theoretical foundation of the research is based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which provides a framework for understanding the relationship. The study collected data from a convenience sample of 718 respondents. The instruments contain 14 questions, using a 5-point Likert scale format. This research used Smart PLS for data analysis, revealing a significant positive correlation between emotional experience and purchase intention. Furthermore, the results show that the type of food choice influences the relationship between emotional experience and *nasi lemak* purchase intention, underscoring the role of food choice as a moderator. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the TPB and its applicability in the context of food consumption behavior, highlighting the importance of the relationship between emotional experiences and cognitive determinants of behavior. The results have implications for marketers, policymakers, and other stakeholders seeking to promote healthier food choices and develop targeted interventions. By recognizing the influence of emotional experiences and the moderating role of food choice, stakeholders can design more effective strategies to encourage consumers to make informed and positive dietary decisions. This study sets a significant research agenda for future research in the domain of consumer behavior related to *nasi lemak* consumption, particularly in unraveling the mechanisms governing health risk perceptions and their influence on consumer behavior within the Malaysian culinary context.

Contribution/ Originality: This study provides new empirical evidence on whether food choice can be potentially moderated and how it influences the link between emotional experience and purchase intention. Moreover, this research provides unique insights that may diverge from findings in studies conducted within different cultural contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

People who seek out distinctive or extraordinary food experiences and diverse culinary cultures that they might not find in their home nations often turn to food as one of the most important factors in the tourism sector, serving as a sense of place attraction [1]. Many developing nations' tourism industries continue to make steady progress and support their countries' economies [2]. A tourist destination's distinctive cuisines may inspire admiration among travelers. In Malaysia, where *nasi lemak* is a traditional dish, this is definitely pragmatic. It is

considered Malaysia's national dish and Malaysian Heritage Food [3]. The author went on to elaborate on its preparation, which involves cooking rice in flavorful coconut cream. This dish is typically served with deep-fried anchovies, fried peanuts, slices of cucumber, wedges of hardboiled egg, and a spicy chili condiment known as *sambal*, comprising the essential components of *nasi lemak*. People frequently engage in active seeking for and sampling of new flavors of food that they find intriguing and enjoyable for their journey. While enjoying their wonderful and relaxing holiday, people do spend over half of their budget on food and beverages. According to Song, et al. [4], a large percentage of tourists spend money on food, which accounts for 30% of tourism earnings. Rather than satisfying the societal need for satisfaction at a particular location, the meal itself may entice people to make a return visit, and inspire them to share their best moments with loved ones or a special someone.

According to Barber, et al. [5] a buyer's desire to purchase is a crucial factor in predicting the goods or services they will ultimately acquire. While there is a distinction between purchase intention and actual purchase behavior, research has shown that as a consumer's intention to buy grows, their desire to buy also increases Leyva-Hernández, et al. [6]. Mowen and Minor [7] define intention as the consumer's desire to behave in specific ways to acquire, dispose of, or utilize goods or services. This may result in heightened motivation to further engage in learning, exchange experiences with others, and ultimately make purchases or discard a product in a particular manner. Intention, as defined by Hui, et al. [8] pertains to the frequency of purchases or the proportion of all purchases conducted by customers committed to a specific item, such as *nasi lemak*. This dish has become a significant part of Malaysian culture, with individuals from all segments of society participating in the tradition of Malay cuisine. Travel guides and advertising materials commonly refer to *nasi lemak* as a national dish, reflecting its widespread popularity. Prior studies have examined the concept of "national dishes" and their role in various contexts, including the contributions of political entities and the agro-food industry, visitors' attitudes and expectations towards food, and the impact of tourism on the development of regional cuisines [9, 10]. As such, the study of *nasi lemak* and its influence on Malaysian consumer behavior can provide valuable insights into the broader societal and cultural factors that shape food consumption patterns. While emotions play a crucial role in shaping people's behavior and reactions in various contexts, there is still a dearth of empirical research on the function of emotions in the context of tourist destinations. Research has shown that people's emotional responses to their immediate surroundings can significantly impact their decision-making processes [11]. However, there is still a lack of investigation into how visitors' emotional experiences may differ from those of non-visitors. Previous studies on *nasi lemak*, for example, focused on online food reviews [3] and its social construction process as a national dish [10]. Other studies highlighted *nasi lemak* as part of the overall study, such as contamination level [12] and breakfast culture [13]. In light of this, there is a need for more research to examine the determinants of purchase intention, especially in the context of traditional dishes such as *nasi lemak*. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the influence of emotional experience on purchase intention of *nasi lemak* among Malaysians, with food choice acting as a moderator. By addressing this research gap, this study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of emotions in shaping consumer behavior in the context of food tourism. The rest of this article will focus on the literature review and theoretical framework, highlighting the study variables such as purchase intention, emotional experience, and the moderating effect of food choice while also illustrating the study's conceptual framework. Next, this study will delve into the research methodology, followed by the analysis of the gathered data, a discussion of the findings, and the study's conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Purchase Intention

Purchase intention can be understood as the outcome of a consumer's holistic evaluation of a product or their attitude towards a brand, influenced by external factors. One can perceive it as a subjective response that involves an individual's assessment of their future purchase desires [14]. A review of the body of literature demonstrates

widespread agreement that purchase intention is a good predictor of actual purchases [15]. In addition, one of the biggest discoveries in consumer behavior studies is that people are not just rational; they are also emotional, which is why they look for enjoyable consuming experiences [16]. Brands' marketing actions and initiatives influence consumer purchase intent [17]. "Customer purchase intention," which is often used as a simpler and more cost-effective substitute for consumer behavior, holds significant importance in numerous research studies [18]. The study of purchases is of interest to marketing researchers due to its link to actual buying behavior Karimi Alavijeh and Afsharnejad [19]. Bhatti and Rehman [20] argue that consumer purchase intention serves as a reliable indicator of actual purchasing behavior. Understanding consumers' intentions to buy makes it easier to comprehend their brand preferences. Enhancing customer value increases their inclination to make purchases, as they perceive products and services as more valuable [21]. Research suggests that product attributes significantly influence consumers' propensity to buy. Particularly, products that fulfill consumers' emotional needs and evoke an emotional response in their brains have a profound impact on purchase intentions [22]. Every stimulus elicits a different interpretation, making it essential. Different people may interpret the same input in different ways because expectations shape how they perceive a stimulus.

2.2. Emotional Experience

In the study conducted by Dawson, et al. [23] the term "emotional experience" was used to describe the various moods and emotions that arise during the shopping journey. According to Wang, et al. [24] emotional experiences will provide useful experiences, starting from mildly upbeat feelings and progressing to strongly felt joy and satisfaction associated with a brand. Anecdotal evidence showed that the frequency of crucial situations did affect emotional responses. Additionally, "clients who have strong emotional bonds tend to invest more in their relationships than do those who lack affective commitment" [25]. In addition, a number of studies have attempted to comprehend the function of emotions in the context of hospitality and tourism. For instance, earlier research examined the factors that influence post-emotional consumption [26], the relationship between emotions and overall satisfaction [27], customer loyalty [28], behavioral intentions [16], and emotions as variable segmentation for tourism services [29]. Other research looked at how emotions affect judgments about halal travel [16]. Emotional experience has been proven by Srinivasan and Srivastava [30] to be a key driver of purchase intent. This is in line with research by Wang, et al. [24] who found that emotional experience had a big impact on purchase intention. According to Ratnasari, et al. [16] individuals who have favorable experiences with a product or service are more likely to willingly share their experiences with others. After visiting and consuming, customers will have a fascinating experience. Furthermore, Srinivasan and Srivastava [30] demonstrated that emotional experience is a key element in drawing customers to a retail establishment. In their research, Sharma and Nayak [31] found that individual tourists' emotional experiences affected their behavioral intentions. This is in line with research by Wang, et al. [24] who found that emotional experience had a big impact on purchase intention. Accordingly, this study hypothesized that:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention.

2.3. Moderating Effect of Food Choice

A society's culture deeply embeds food choices, with *nasi lemak* emerging as a beloved staple in Malaysians' diets and hearts over time. Originally created by workers on Peninsula Malaysia's west coast, *nasi lemak* has evolved from a breakfast dish to a widely consumed meal available to people of all races at any time of the day or night. In fact, a survey conducted by Tibère, et al. [10] found that 42% of respondents believe *nasi lemak* is the best food to represent Malaysia, with other traditional dishes like *roti canai* and chicken rice receiving 22% of responses each and satay receiving 9.5%. The popularity of *nasi lemak* can be attributed to its unique taste, affordability, and the fact that many Malaysians have had positive prior experiences with it. As such, it has become

the go-to food choice for many Malaysians. It is assumed that prior positive experiences with *nasi lemak* would have a significant impact on Malaysians' future purchase intentions for the dish. By understanding the underlying factors driving Malaysians' food choices, businesses can develop more effective strategies for attracting and retaining customers. Thus, the following hypothesis was explored:

H_2: *Food choice moderates the relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention.*

2.4. Conceptual Model

Figure 1 summarizes the relationships between this study's hypotheses in a graphic way. The conceptual model reinforces the positive impact of emotional experience on purchase intention, with *nasi lemak* and food choice serving as moderators. The study aims to provide additional support for this objective by formulating two hypotheses, as stated below:

H_1: *There is a significant relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention.*

H_2: *Food choice moderates the relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention.*
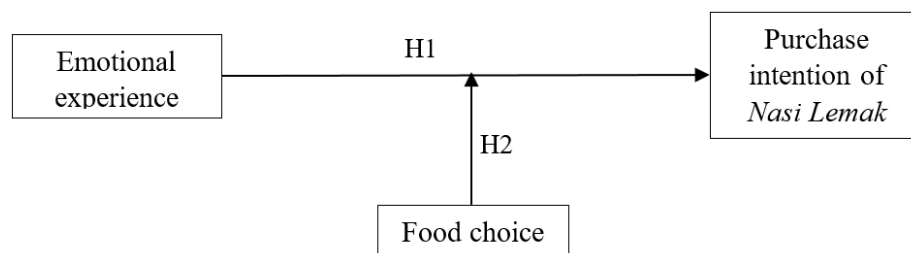

Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

2.5. Theoretical Settings

This study is grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which serves as the theoretical framework guiding the research. The TPB posits that behavioral intentions are influenced by three key factors: attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. According to this theory, individuals are more likely to engage in a behavior if they have a positive attitude towards it, perceive that important others approve of the behavior, and believe they have the necessary control and resources to perform the behavior.

In this study, the TPB provides a lens through which to understand the relationship between emotional experiences and purchase intentions for *nasi lemak* among Malaysian consumers. The study aims to interpret the underlying mechanisms driving consumers' decision-making processes. Overall, the TPB offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing and interpreting the factors influencing purchase intentions within the context of *nasi lemak* consumption.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employs quantitative methodology to examine the factors that influence the purchase intention of *nasi lemak*. Utilizing a cross-sectional design, this study indicates that data collection occurred only once throughout the research period. This study is correlational and descriptive in nature, aiming to investigate the factors influencing purchase intention among the targeted respondents.

3.2. Participants and Selection Criteria

Data were collected from 718 Malaysian consumers who were included in the study using a convenience sampling technique. The sample was selected based on availability while ensuring that respondents met the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for the study included the willingness of respondents to participate, being

Malaysian, and having experienced eating *nasi lemak*. Respondents who did not voluntarily agree to take part in the research and those who provided incomplete or unreliable survey responses were excluded from the analysis.

3.3. Instrumentation

The dependent variable in the study is the purchase intention of *nasi lemak*, while emotional experience serves as the independent variable.

To measure purchase intention, the study adapts three items from Singh and Verma [32] work, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .841. Meanwhile, emotional experience is derived from Ferraz, et al. [33] research, with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.864.

The responses were rated using a Likert scale with a maximum score of five on a range from "Strongly Disagree" (SDA = 1) to "Strongly Agree" (SA = 5). In addition, the moderating variable (food choice) was assessed using a Yes/No response.

3.4. Data Collection Procedures

The research team collected the data using an online survey tool called Google Forms, distributing the survey link through QR codes and Whatsapp, Malaysia's most popular social media platform.

By requiring respondents to answer all questions before submitting the questionnaire, Google Forms ensured data completeness.

The study allowed respondents to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences, and the researchers did not record their responses. To avoid duplicate submissions, the researchers restricted respondents to providing only one response each, verified by their email addresses.

3.5. Analysis Procedures

Before analysis, researchers carefully checked all usable data and extracted the data in Excel format from the Google Forms. Before starting the analysis, the researchers imported the data into SPSS and screened for any mistakes or errors in the data.

The analysis of data is performed using Smart PLS version 4.0 software, which utilizes the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) technique. Earlier studies utilized proximate analysis, Pearson chi-square, and descriptive analysis within their context.

However, there is a notable requirement for analyzing the data using advanced statistical tools to yield a more comprehensive set of results. This second-generation multivariate data analysis technique is particularly suitable for exploratory research that aims to explain the variance in dependent variables. In this study, the Smart PLS 4.0 PLS-SEM tool is employed to evaluate the measurement model's validity and reliability and to examine the hypothesized links between the latent constructs in the structural model.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1. Demographic Profiles

Table 1 reveals that the majority of respondents in the study were male (66.9%) and identified as Gen Z consumers (56.0%). A significant portion of respondents reported having obtained undergraduate qualifications (73.5%) and earning less than RM1100 (58.8%).

When asked if *nasi lemak* is their favorite food, most respondents agreed (75.1%), and nearly half reported purchasing it one to two times weekly (48.5%). These findings are consistent with Tibère, et al. [10] who identified *nasi lemak* as the top choice to represent Malaysia, followed by other dishes such as *roti canai* and chicken rice.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	480	66.9
	Female	238	33.1
Generation	Baby boomers	10	1.4
	Gen X	85	11.8
	Gen Y	221	30.8
	Gen Z	402	56.0
Educational level	Primary/Secondary	28	3.9
	Diploma/Certificate	88	14.4
	Undergraduate	528	73.5
	Postgraduate	59	8.2
Monthly income (RM)	Less than 1100	422	58.8
	1100 − 2000	84	11.7
	2001 − 3000	49	6.8
	3001 − 4000	51	7.1
	More than 4000	112	15.6
Is *nasi lemak* your favorite food?	Yes	539	75.1
	No	179	24.9
Frequency of purchase weekly	1-2 times	348	48.5
	3-4 times	217	30.2
	5-6 times	84	11.7
	7 times and more	69	9.6

4.2. Evaluation of Measurement Model

This section is critical in assessing the research model's accuracy and validity by examining the indicators or variables used. Researchers first assess the indicators' reliability to ascertain their consistency and stability. This evaluation involves identifying the factors that may affect an item's reliability and its relationship with the latent variables. To ensure that the measurement model is reliable, indicators with factor loadings above 0.60 are considered acceptable [34].

Figure 2 shows the measurement model of the direct relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention. According to the analysis, all indicators used in the research model met the standard factor loading requirement. This suggests that the model's indicators serve as reliable measures, accurately representing their respective constructs. Researchers also assess the validity of the measurement model to confirm its consistent and stable measurement of the intended constructs. The validity analysis examines the extent to which the indicators represent the underlying constructs and their relationship with other variables in the model. Overall, this section's thorough evaluation of the research model's reliability and validity provides a strong foundation for the subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data.
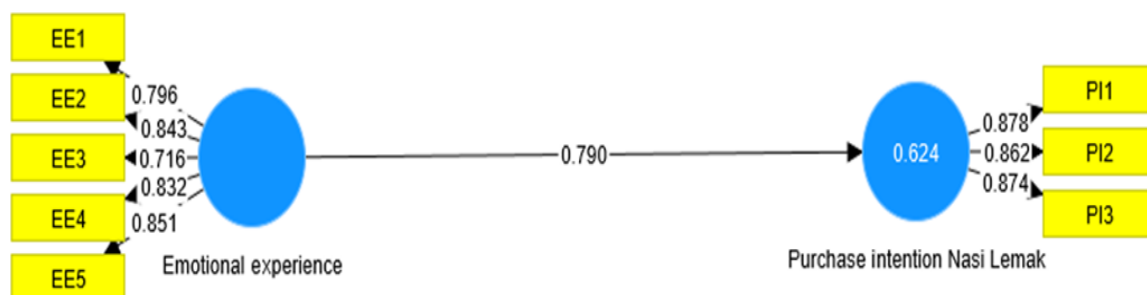

Figure 2. Measurement model.

Table 2 presents the reliability and validity of the constructs and their indicators. Researchers employed scale reliability to ensure the consistency of various indicators used in measuring concepts. In foundational research, Nunnally [35] recommends a minimum reliability of 0.70. As shown in Table 2, all constructs related to this concept comfortably surpass this requirement, with values exceeding 0.70.

The validity analysis evaluates the convergent validity of a construct by examining its various indicators. Researchers assess convergent validity using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), a statistical measure that shows the proportion of variance in a construct that its indicators explain. Fornell and Larcker [36] suggest that an AVE exceeding 0.5 signifies that the indicators of a construct account for over 50% of its variance. Therefore, researchers can infer that the validity analysis confirms convergent validity.

Table 2. Reliability and validity indicators.

Indicator	Loading	CR	AVE
Emotional experience			
EE1	0.796	0.904	0.655
EE2	0.843		
EE3	0.716		
EE4	0.832		
EE5	0.851		
Purchase intention		0.904	0.759
PI1	0.878		
PI2	0.862		
PI3	0.874		

Table 3 illustrates discriminant validity between emotional experience and purchase intention. Discriminant validity assesses the distinctiveness of a construct compared to others. Fornell and Larcker [36] developed a criterion that states that a construct should exhibit more variance with its own indicators than with those shared by other constructs. This implies that a construct's AVE should be greater than its variance with other constructs. To determine correlations between constructs, it is crucial to show that the AVE is less than the square root of the variance. The results indicate that the square root of the AVE for the model's latent variables (EE=.809, PI=.871) exceeds the correlations between them (r=.790), suggesting that the constructs are more strongly associated with each other than with other indicators.

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

Variable	Emotional experience	Purchase intention
Emotional experience	0.809	
Purchase intention	0.790	0.871

4.3. Evaluation of Structural Model

Following the validation of the measurement model, the structural model is then analyzed as provided in Figure 3. This process entails assessing the significance and strength of relationships among variables by taking into account the variance explained by endogenous variables and their path coefficients (beta). The R^2 value of a model serves as an indicator of its predictive power, representing the proportion of explained variance. Chin [37] suggests thresholds, such as 0.67 for "substantial," 0.33 for "moderate," and 0.19 for "weak." In this study, the R^2 value obtained for the variable purchase intention is moderate, approaching substantial at R = 0.624.
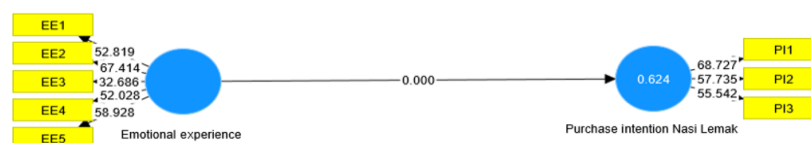

Figure 3. Structural model.

To assess the significance of path coefficients, a bootstrapping method is utilized, generating subsamples with 5,000 observations. These subsamples are randomly drawn and replaced with the original data, ensuring robust and stable results consistent with literature recommendations [34]. The results provide support for Hypothesis 1 (ß = 0.790; p-value = 0.000), that emotional experience increases purchase intention. The proposed model expects a single variable to directly influence purchase intention, which this study has empirically proven. The p-values results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Result of structural model.

	Beta	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	R²
Emotional experience → Purchase intention	0.790	0.019	42.319	0.000	0.624

4.4. Analysis of Moderating Role of Food Choice

Table 5 and Figure 4 provide details about the moderating effect. The study's results showed that food choice significantly influenced the relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention, acting as a moderator effect (b = 0.121; t = 2.051; p = 0.02). It is because the t-values are above the standard 1.96 [34] and the emotional experience was significantly related to purchase intention, and food choice significantly moderated that relationship (H2). The results showed that the food choice approach can help improve the relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention. It is a confirmation that when emotional experience is high, purchase intention can be improved by implementing food choice booster.
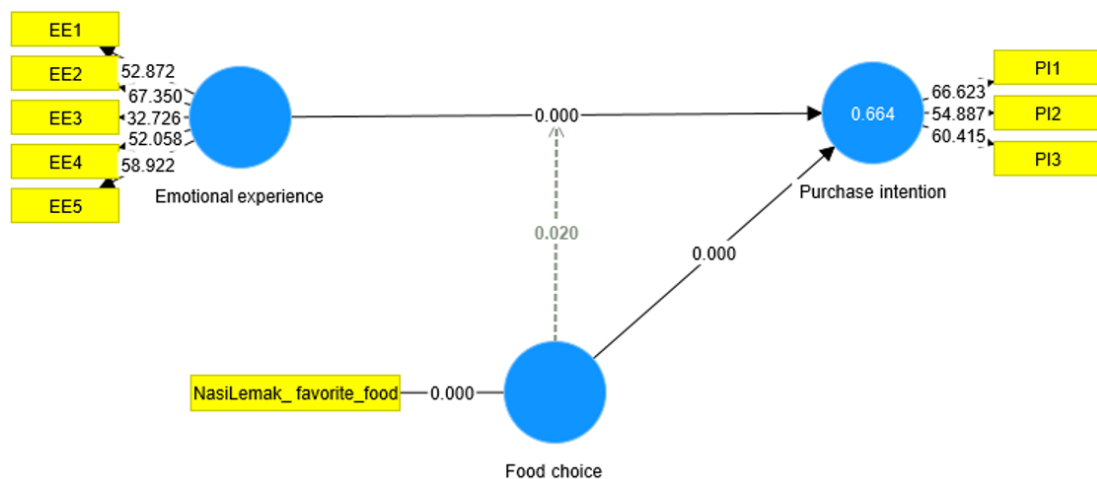

Figure 4. Moderating effect.

Table 5. Moderation analysis result.

	Beta	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values
Emotional experience → Purchase intention	0.657	0.030	21.625	0.000
Food choice → Purchase intention	-0.447	0.075	5.932	0.000
Food choice **x** emotional experience → Purchase intention	0.121	0.059	2.051	0.020

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Discussions of the Findings

This research contributes to the existing literature by examining the influence of emotional experience on Malaysians' purchase intentions regarding *nasi lemak*. The results of the study confirm the first hypothesis, which asserts that emotional experience plays a significant role in shaping purchase intention towards *nasi lemak*. These

findings align with previous research conducted by Pinochet, et al. [38] which highlighted the importance of consumers' subjective perceptions of a product in influencing their purchase decisions, particularly when they perceive the product as requiring minimal effort to use. Consumers also tend to rely on their prior experiences when making purchase decisions, and their cognitive adaptations to environmental and social circumstances influence their choices. According to Pinochet, et al. [38] emotional experience precedes perceptions and cognitive actions in purchase intention and is the construct that is most similar to respondents' judgments related to prior experiences. Therefore, in our study, respondents frequently based their selections on their prior experiences when making purchases. These findings suggest that retailers should focus on creating emotional connections with their customers to improve their competitiveness and desirability. By understanding the importance of emotional experience, merchants can create integrated strategies that appeal to both their customers' logical and emotional selves, thereby enhancing their purchase intention.

Hypothesis 2 posits that food choice moderates the relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention of *nasi lemak*. The study found evidence to support this hypothesis, indicating that food choice plays a crucial role in the relationship between emotional experience and purchase intention of *nasi lemak*. *Nasi lemak* is the most popular cuisine option in Malaysia, and its popularity can be attributed to its unique flavor, reasonable price, and widespread availability. With repeated exposure to *nasi lemak*, customers are more likely to develop a liking for it and choose it as their primary food option. No longer restricted to breakfast consumption, *nasi lemak* has become a ubiquitous food choice for people of all races, regardless of the time of day or night.

The strong correlation between emotional experience and purchase intention suggests that businesses that invest in strategies that appeal to consumers' emotions and rational selves will significantly enhance their competitiveness and appeal. Therefore, rather than treating customers as mere numbers, it is essential to treat them as unique individuals with specific emotional needs and preferences. To attract and retain customers, businesses must develop integrated strategies that consider the key factors influencing consumer decision-making processes. Furthermore, by highlighting the multiple facets of customer experience, particularly emotional experience, the research findings provide valuable recommendations for industry players in developing various managerial methods to enhance purchase intention. Given the integrated linkages between emotional experience and purchase intention, the research findings also offer specific guidance to industry participants on how to modify the consumer experience in their strategy planning. By focusing on the emotional experience of customers and designing innovative ways to improve it, businesses can gain a competitive advantage and drive higher purchase intentions for traditional foods like *nasi lemak*.

5.2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

These findings have significant implications for food industry managers. Researchers encourage businesses to invest in strategies that appeal to consumers' emotions and rational selves in order to enhance competitiveness and desirability. Treating customers as unique individuals with specific emotional needs and preferences is emphasized, with integrated strategies recommended to account for key factors influencing consumer decision-making processes. By focusing on improving emotional experiences and developing innovative ways to do so, businesses can gain a competitive advantage and drive higher purchase intentions for traditional foods like *nasi lemak*.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the current understanding of consumers' emotional experiences and purchase intentions towards traditional Malaysian foods. It highlights the importance of emphasizing the unique advantages and eco-friendly practices of such foods to enhance emotional value and align with health behaviors. Moreover, the study's findings offer support for an enhanced Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) model for predicting *nasi lemak* purchase intentions in the Malaysian context, aiding policymakers and businesses in formulating effective marketing strategies to promote traditional foods.

5.3. Limitations, Suggestions for Future Research, and Conclusion

Future studies could address several limitations, despite the benefits and contributions this study offers. First, the study relied on convenience sampling, which may have introduced bias and limited the generalizability of the findings to the broader Malaysian population. To address the limitations of convenience sampling, future studies could employ more rigorous sampling methods, such as random sampling or stratified sampling, to enhance the sample's representativeness. This would allow researchers to draw more generalizable conclusions about the broader Malaysian population. Additionally, researchers could employ qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of Malaysian consumers regarding *nasi lemak*. Researchers could conduct in-depth interviews or focus group discussions to explore the emotional connections, cultural significance, and purchasing behaviors associated.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the influence of emotional experience on Malaysians' purchase intentions regarding *nasi lemak*, a traditional Malaysian food. The research confirms the significance of emotional experience in shaping purchase intentions, with findings aligning with prior studies emphasizing consumers' subjective perceptions and cognitive adaptations in decision-making processes. Additionally, the study identifies food choice as a crucial moderator in the relationship between emotional experience and *nasi lemak* purchase intention, highlighting the importance of understanding consumers' preferences in shaping their food choices. This research advances our knowledge of food consumption, emotional experiences, and purchase intentions in emerging and developing markets, underscoring the significance of understanding consumer behaviors in shaping marketing strategies and initiatives.

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