Food Neophobia Amongst Young Malaysians - Understanding Young Malaysian Perceptions of Novel Foods Concerning Individual Demographic Backgrounds

Khairul Azfar Adzahar *; Mohd Fazil Jamaludin; Mohd Shafiz Saharan
Faculty of Business and Management
UiTM Cawangan Kedah Kampus Sungai Petani
Email: azfar938@uitm.edu.my

Rosmaiza Abdul Ghani
Faculty of Business and Management
UiTM Cawangan Melaka

Purnomo M Antara
Faculty of Business and Management
UiTM Cawangan Negeri Sembilan Kampus Rembau

* Corresponding Author

Abstract
Purpose: This study aims to examine the demographic background effect on food neophobia among young Malaysians.
Design/methodology/approach: Quantitative tools were employed in the study through a questionnaire survey. Non-probability convenience sampling was implemented, and the questionnaire was distributed to 200 respondents to represent the total population. All collected data was then analyzed using SPSS.
Findings: The acceptance and adoption of certain foods by young Malaysians were influenced by various demographic factors, especially age. As the age increases, the scores are lower. Besides, young Malaysians' who are female, live in a more urbanized area and hold a tertiary education level, may play a role in reducing their food neophobia scores.
Research limitations/implications: -
Practical implications: The study suggests that understanding the various demographic factors that influence young Malaysians' food choices can help marketers develop competitive strategies to promote new food products.
Originality/value: This study examines food neophobia based on the demographic background among young Malaysians.
Keywords: Food neophobia, demographic backgrounds, young Malaysians

Introduction
A world where no boundaries have led to an influx of food choices in a country. Malaysians place a huge emphasis on food, from the selection and preparation of the ingredients to the way the food is served. Over the years, Malaysian cookery has evolved through an intricate interaction of socio-economic relations, cultural diaspora, and trends. However, food neophobia, the fear of trying new or unfamiliar foods, presents both challenges and opportunities from a business marketing perspective. On one hand, it can limit the appeal of

innovative or exotic menu items, potentially deterring customers from venturing beyond their culinary comfort zones. Savvy marketers could turn this obstacle into a strategic advantage.

Food neophobia or generally known as a phenomenon in which people refuse novel foods or in other words, the avoidance of new foods is most significant in early childhood and decreases as the individual grows older. However, little is known about the levels of food neophobia among young adults (Muhammad, Abdullah, Zahari, & Sharif, 2015); do they still prefer local and familiar foods or are they willing to try out foods from different parts of the world and whether their behaviors are shaped by attributes like demographic and socio-economic factors. Therefore, age may also be a significant factor in the perception of novel foods (Predieri et.al.,2020). Younger individuals may be more open to trying new and unfamiliar foods than older individuals who prefer traditional foods. Gender may also play a role, as males may be more adventurous in their food choices compared to females. Understanding these factors can help in developing strategies to promote the acceptance and adoption of novel foods in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Food and Beverage industry is one of the main contributors to the national account, growing at a rate of 7.6% annually (Flanders Investment & Trade Malaysia Office, 2020). Thus, amplifying the need to discover young Malaysian perceptions of novel foods with age, gender, level of education, area of living, and family monthly income. To better understand young Malaysian perceptions of novel foods, this study is conducted to collect data on their demographics, food preferences, and attitudes towards novel foods to gather information on their willingness to try new foods and their reasons for accepting or rejecting them. Based on the findings of such studies, targeted strategies can be developed to promote the acceptance and adoption of novel foods among young Malaysians. These strategies can include education and awareness campaigns, product demonstrations, and collaborations with popular food bloggers or influencers to increase exposure and interest in novel foods.

Literature Review
Financial, economic, social, and legal liberalization granted increased access to vast and diverse world markets. As a result, the salient factors affecting the desirability of young Malaysians to try out new culinary experiences are important as foreign food experiences can break down the cultural and social gap in today's "global village" (Losekoot & Hornby, 2019). Food not only serves as a national identity, but it also serves as the basis of the national economy; this is very true in Korean society where they were not only proud of their local food but actively promoting it globally through an aspirational theme of "Korea Brand": creating a positive flow of income to the country (Lee, 2020). To encourage better eating habits and lifestyles amongst the citizens of a country, insights on relationships between dietary habits and individual demographics backgrounds such as age, gender, level of education, area of living, and monthly income would provide is crucial as it would have a direct impact on the individual's food neophobia level (Muhammad et al., 2015). Young people's willingness to try "novel" meals is becoming an increasingly important field of study. According to research published in the journal Psychological Science, younger individuals are more prone than older people to be neophobic about trying new cuisines. This study examines the relationship between Malaysian young adults' interest in trying new foods and their demographic backgrounds. There is a relationship between gender and willingness to try new cuisines, with females being more likely to be neophobic than males (Lopes et al., 2006). Furthermore, individuals that were born and raised in rural areas are more likely to be neophobic than those born and raised in urban areas (Flight et al., 2003). This is because

people living in rural areas may be more limited in their food options due to geographical limitations, which can lead to a lack of exposure to new foods, increasing their likelihood of being neophobic. Contrarily, those who grow up in cities have access to a greater range of food alternatives than people who grow up in rural areas, which might lessen their propensity to be neophobic (Mascarello et al., 2020).

Compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia, Malays were more likely to be neophobic (Muhammad et al., 2015) compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia since their religion forbade them from trying dishes with unidentified preparations and ingredients. This may require specific strategies to encourage them to broaden their food choices and open up to sampling new cuisines. In addition, it was shown that individuals with greater levels of education were more likely to try new foods (Helland et al., 2023), probably as a result of having been exposed to other cultural experiences and having a wider perspective on the world (Mascarello et al., 2020). A broader perspective and exposure to many cultures can boost one's appreciation of various cuisines, which in turn can increase one's desire to try new and unfamiliar foods. The willingness to try new foods was also shown to be higher among young individuals whose households earned more monthly income (Meiselman et al., 2010), possibly as a result of their increased access to a wider range of foods and their capacity to pay for the expense of doing so. They are more likely to be exposed to other cuisines and develop more experimental eating habits when they have access to a greater variety of foods.

Malaysia's rapidly changing food landscape has increased the availability of novel and unfamiliar food products. However, the acceptance and adoption of these foods by young Malaysians may be influenced by a variety of demographic factors, including age, gender, ethnicity, and education level. Understanding the perceptions of young Malaysians towards novel foods is therefore critical to informing effective marketing strategies and public health campaigns. Despite the importance of understanding these perceptions, there is currently a lack of research on this topic. Existing studies have mainly focused on older populations or specific food products, leaving a gap in our understanding of how demographic factors influence the attitudes and behaviors of young Malaysians toward novel foods. There is a lack of understanding regarding the perceptions of young Malaysians towards novel foods, and how individual demographic backgrounds influence their acceptance and adoption of these products. This research aims to address this gap by investigating the factors that influence the attitudes and behaviors of young Malaysians towards novel foods, and how these factors interact with individual demographic backgrounds. By achieving this objective, the study could provide insights that can inform effective marketing strategies and public health campaigns, ultimately promoting healthy eating habits among young Malaysians.

Methodology
Quantitative tools will be employed in the study through a questionnaire survey. The survey question is divided into two (2) main parts (i) Demographics, and (ii) 5-point category scale to measure respondent's perception towards novel food using the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS) (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). The researcher will distribute questionnaires to UiTM Kedah students from various departments and courses. More reliable results can be confidently generalized to the population by having an adequate sample size and the right sampling technique. Non-probability convenience sampling will be used in this study as the elements do not have a predetermined chance of being selected as subjects. The questionnaire will be distributed to 200 respondents to represent the total population. All collected data will then be analyzed using SPSS. To ensure the research questionnaire design and instruments

are valid, reliable, and practical, and also to certify that the findings can be applied to the population of interest, 10 participants who are similar to the target population for this research, to participate in the pilot study. All necessary amendments and feedback were taken into account. Overall, conducting a pilot study is a crucial step in the research process. It helps to test the feasibility of their research design, identify any problems or issues that need to be addressed, and refine their research design to improve the accuracy and validity of their data (Ouabi et al., 2022).

Findings and Discussion
Demographic Profile of Respondents
Table 4.1 below shows the demographic profile of respondents. Most respondents are female, with 85.1% (n=183), and the remaining 14.9% (n=32) are male. Besides, most respondents range between 20-31 years old, with 96.3% (n= 207). The remaining is below 20 and between 20-43 years old, with 1.9% (n=4), respectively. In terms of the level of education, 58.1%(n=125) of respondents graduated with bachelor's degrees, and 40.0% (n=86) are Diploma graduates. Other than that, 0.9%(n=2) are SPM holders, and 0.5% (n=1) is STPM holder and PhD holder, respectively. Besides, almost half of the respondents, 43.3%(n=93), live in the Semi-Urban area. It was followed by rural and urban areas with 36.7%(n=79) and 20.0%(n=43), respectively. Regarding household income, most respondents' household income range between RM1001-RM2000 with 24.2%(n=52). It was followed by above RM5001 with 23.3%(n=50), RM2001-RM3000 with 19.1%(n=41), below RM1000 with 15.3%(n=33), RM4001-RM5000 with 11.6%(n=25) and RM3001-RM4000 with 7.4%(n=16).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic	Details	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	32	14.9
	Female	183	85.1
Age	<20	4	1.9
	20-31	207	96.3
	32-43	4	1.9
Level of Education	PhD/DBA	1	0.5
	Master's Degree	0	0.0
	Bachelor's Degree	125	58.1
	Diploma	86	40.0
	STPM	1	0.5
	SPM	2	0.9
Area of Living	Majlis Daerah (Rural)	79	36.7
	Majlis Perbandaran (Semi-Urban)	93	43.3
	Majlis / Dewan Bandaraya (Urban)	43	20.0
Household Income	Below RM1000	33	15.3
	RM 1001 - RM 2000	52	24.2
	RM 2001 - RM 3000	41	19.1
	RM 3001 - RM 4000	16	7.4
	RM 4001 - RM 5000	25	11.6
	Above RM5001	50	23.3

Food Neophobia Scale (FNS)

Ten 5-point category scale questions were adopted from (Pliner & Hobden, 1992) to examine the level of Food Neophobia among young Malaysians. The results of the questions are shown in Table 4.2. The result shows that most respondents chose neutral as their feedback on most of the FNS: items 1,2,5,7,9 and 10 and only a few items show that the respondents were relatively in agreement with the statement: items 3, 4, 6 and 8.

Table 2: Food Neophobia Scale

Question	Item	Mean	SD	N
Q1*	I am constantly sampling new and different foods	2.59	0.90	215
Q2	I do not trust new foods	2.71	0.98	215
Q3	If I don't know what is in a food, I will not try it	3.57	1.20	215
Q4*	I like foods from different countries	2.08	0.98	215
Q5	Ethnic food looks so weird to eat	2.74	1.10	215
Q6*	At dinner parties, I will try a new food	2.08	0.87	215
Q7	I am afraid to eat things, I have never had before	3.07	1.17	215
Q8	I am very particular about the foods I will eat	3.75	1.07	215
Q9*	I will eat almost anything	2.80	1.19	215
Q10*	I like to try new ethnic restaurants	2.56	1.03	215

Reverse coded

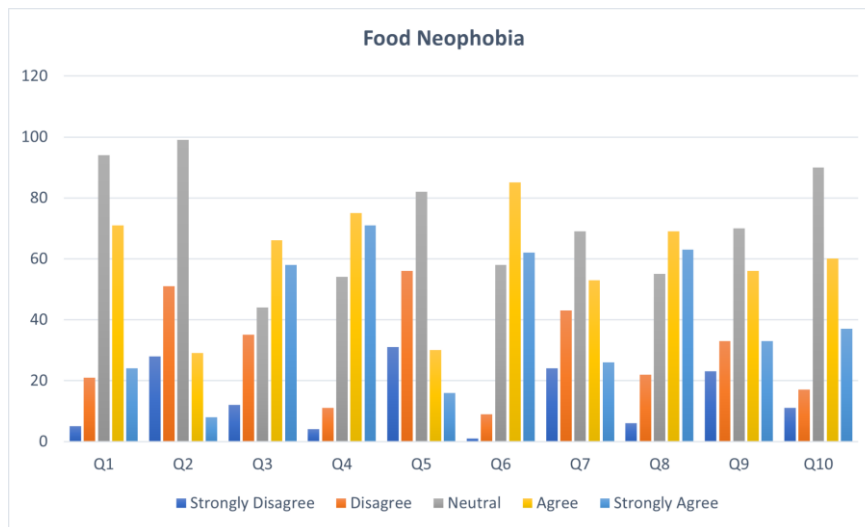
Figure 1: Food Neophobia Scale Responses

Level of Food Neophobia among Young Malaysians

In order to see the level of Food Neophobia among young Malaysians, the food neophobia score was calculated and divided into three groups which are high, medium, and low, based on previous literature (Pliner and Hobden, 1992) shown in Table 4.3. Most of the respondents show a medium level of food neophobia at 62.33% (n=134), followed by a low level of food neophobia at 28.84% (n=62) respondents and a high level of food neophobia with only 8.84% (n=19).

Table 3: Food Neophobia Level among Respondents

NOE_LVL	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Percentage, %
Low Level	20.82	2.843	62	28.84
Medium Level	29.69	2.687	134	62.33
High Level	38.84	3.760	19	8.84

The food neophobia scores based on each demographic factor were also calculated as shown in Table 4.4. As the age increases, the scores are lower. According to the results, older participants were often more likely to try new cuisines than younger participants. The result was different from Rosmaliza Muhammad et al. (2015) but similar with McFarlane and Pliner (1997) and Hazley et al., (2022). The table showed the score was lower among male respondents which are similar to the findings of Predieri et al., (2020) but contradicts Tuorila et al (2001), Rosmaliza Muhammad et al. (2015) and Hazley et al., (2022). Based on the results, those with tertiary education were more open to trying out new cuisines compared to those with secondary education. As the level of income increases, the scores decline. The results indicate participants with a higher family monthly income were more likely to try new cuisines compared to those who came from a lower family monthly income bracket. The results are in line with the findings of Sahrin et al., (2023).

Table 4: Food Neophobia Scores Based on Demographic Factors

Items	Categories	Mean	N	SD
Gender	Male	27.63	32	6.298
	Female	28.00	183	5.877
Age Level	<20	28.00	4	6.683
	20-31	27.96	207	5.754
	32-43	27.25	4	13.696
Level of Education	PhD/DBA	31.50	2	3.536
	Bachelor's Degree	24.00	1	
	Diploma	28.44	86	4.958
	STPM	27.42	125	6.324
	SPM	47.00	1	
Area of Living	Majlis Daerah (Rural)	28.91	79	5.137
	Majlis Perbandaran (Semi-Urban)	27.78	93	6.335
	Majlis / Dewan Bandaraya (Urban)	26.51	43	6.181
Income Level	Below RM1000	28.42	33	6.447
	RM 1001 - RM 2000	28.19	52	5.061
	RM 2001 - RM 3000	27.29	41	5.354
	RM 3001 - RM 4000	30.00	14	9.140
	RM 4001 - RM 5000	28.56	25	4.601
	Above RM5001	27.02	50	6.394

Food Preferences
The respondents were also asked about their preference for local and foreign food. The results are shown in Table 4.5. Most respondents prefer local food over foreign food, with a mean of 3.85 (SD=0.824). Then, the total score for foreign food choices was calculated to examine young Malaysians preferred foreign food choices. The data are presented in Table 4.6. The preferred foreign food among young Malaysian is Korean food, followed by Thai, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, and Italian food. The least preferred foreign food is Mexican.

Figure 2: Foreign Food Choice

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it appears that the acceptance and adoption of certain foods by young Malaysians are influenced by various demographic factors, especially age. As the age increases, the scores are lower. A lot of other factors included suggests that young Malaysians' who are female, live in a more urbanized area, holding a tertiary education level, may play a role in reducing their food neophobia scores. For instance, their age may affect their openness to trying new foods, while their gender and ethnicity may influence the types of foods, they are willing to eat. Additionally, education level is giving an impact their awareness and knowledge about various foods and their nutritional value. The preferred foreign food among young Malaysians is Korean food this may be due to the influx and popularity of K-pop culture in Malaysia, followed by Thai because of its geographical location and proximity to Malaysia, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, for various cultural reasons such as religion and cultural diasporas and followed by Italian food. The least preferred foreign food is Mexican.

Food neophobia can also have social and cultural consequences, especially when interacting with different cultures and cuisines. Young individuals who are more food neophobic may miss out on learning about diverse cultures and traditions via food, limiting their world experiences and understanding. Food neophobia can have an impact on one's general health and well-being, as well as social and cultural engagement. As a result, regardless of demographic background, it is critical to address food neophobia among young people to encourage a diverse and nutritious diet as well as to promote cultural understanding and appreciation. Overall, the study suggests that understanding the various demographic factors that influence young Malaysians' food choices can help marketers develop competitive strategies to promote new food products.

Acknowledgment

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