

The Dining Culture and Well-Being of Indians in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to investigate the wellbeing of Indians in the context of factors influencing them to dine out and the relationship of dining-out culture with their well-being.

Design/methodology/approach: Quantitative research methodology was utilised to collect the data. Questionnaires were prepared according to the Likert scale measurement and distributed to 100 respondents via Google Form. The samples are based on a random sampling technique of Indians who are residing in Klang Valley. The data that is gathered uses the descriptive analysis method of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The outcome of these findings described the factors influencing the Klang Valley Indians to dine out and their relationship with well-being.

Research limitations/implications: The limitation of this study is that the sample is limited to Indians residing in Klang Valley.

Practical implications: This research is significant for analysing and understanding the transformation in dining culture as well as how the last decade led Indians in the Klang Valley to abandon traditional Ayurvedic food consumption guidelines.

Originality/value: The findings of this research will inform society about the advantages and disadvantages of dining out culture, as well as encourage the Indians to reconsider their Ayurvedic food consumption habits.

Keywords: Dining Culture, Wellbeing, Indians, Klang Valley

Introduction

Food is an intriguing word as all living beings depends on it for survival. It is a cultural universal perspective where this basic necessity meets the human needs across all cultures. As such, we eat to live to sustain a good health of ourselves. However, this concept may not adhere to the present society due to the rapid urbanization. The paradigm shift had caused our conservative value to undergo immense changes especially in the context of eating behaviour.

At one-time, meals were prepared at home by the womenfolk for their family members. Nowadays, the females are working and they are unable to cook in time for their household. Apart from that, the urbanites are spoilt for choices as there are various restaurants that offers from the local to international cuisines. In this case, the consumers who have cash could purchase any foodstuff they desire. Nevertheless, the type of food we consume is essential in making sure our nutrient intake is sufficient for a healthy body.

Intrinsically, the Ayurveda is a traditional health care practice that existed during the Indus Valley Civilization era (Junaid et al., 2017). This ancient system concentrates in one's wellbeing (Payyappallimana & Venkatasubramanian, 2016) in the context of body, mind and spiritual. Hence, the food that we eat will determine the condition of our health. In essence, the current scenario witnesses the city folks are dining out due to numerous reasons that prevents them from cooking at home. Nonetheless, the selection of food will be in question. Food that does not meet the dietary requirement may cause imbalance to one's body that leaves a person in poor health.

On that account, this paper intends to explore the dining culture of the Indian community in Klang Valley. It is to examine the wellbeing of this ethnic in regard to their food practice. As we are aware working individuals spend seven to eight hours in their office excluding their travelling time. This means they are spending more than half a day outside their home. Moreover, the traffic congestion in the metropolitan escalates the fatigue among these working-class group. By its very nature, it will demotivate them from doing any house chores once they return home. Thus, the objectives for this study will delve into 1) to identify factors influencing the Indians in Klang Valley to dine out and 2) to find out whether the dining out culture has any relationship with the Indian community's well-being. Therefore, the significance of the findings will address the insights towards the issues of dining culture that are imperative to the Indian diaspora specifically those who are residing in the Klang Valley region.

Literature Review

Malaysia entered the endemic phase of the Covid-19 on April 1, 2022 after two years of 'fighting' the pandemic. The transition to the endemic stage is an exit strategy that enables Malaysians to return to a nearly normal life (Sin et al., 2022). Moreover, the dining culture of the Malaysian urban society has undergone countless transformations during this period of time. The obvious behaviour in food practice is that people are opting to eat-out in the post-Covid era especially the youths and middle-aged individuals. Factors such as food varieties (both local and international cuisines), socializing face to face, time out for oneself, family bonding, health consciousness and promoting positive food intake are some of the sensible reasons that urges dining out behaviour. Restaurants, food courts and food stalls are servicing not only those who want to eat at mealtimes but also those who want to enjoy food with friends and family members in-a relaxed manner. According to Ramly et al. (2003), the restaurants are frequently used for socializing or discussion among friends where panoramic views of restaurants' patrons are seen surfing their time from eating to dining, chatting, mingling,

observing people and having serious conversations. This impacts on one's well-being in terms of psychology that provides happiness and bliss. Dining out in a restaurant with family and friends in relation to behavioral intention, perceived usefulness, ease of use, enjoyment, trust, social influence and attitude affects the dining culture among the Malaysians. In addition, according to Ali and Abdullah (2012), dining out allows to relax, chat and spend quality time together without being distracted. Furthermore, leisure and fun were commonly cited as motives for dining out (Warde et al., 2000). Therefore, this study examined the factors that influenced the dining out culture among the Indians in Klang Valley locality.

According to Novita and Husna (2020), behavioral intention is the study of consumers' behavior on how they make decisions to meet their needs and desires via purchasing and disposing products and services. Jian et al. (2021) reported that there are many factors that influences the consumer's behaviour such as psychological, social, cultural, personal and economic. In addition, the study indicates that perceived trust, performance expectations, social impact and timeliness influence the customers' behavioural desire to purchase the meals. Besides, eating out can be done with minimal effort. Perceived usefulness is related to dining out which includes time-saving orientation and convenience motivation. From this perspective, people eat out to save time efficiently where service and goods can be purchased and used appropriately. Hence, consumers will feel motivated to dine out in restaurants (Novita & Husna, 2020).

The health of an individual's body and mind is influenced by social factors that shapes one's social identity. The social identity approach in social psychology has highlighted the core to scholarly understandings of health and wellbeing (Haslam et al., 2018). Hence, identity is vital and relates to one's well-being and it gives us a sense of individuality. According to Tajfel (1978: 63) social identities refers to part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. Moreover, it is a social psychological theory of how people conceptualize themselves in terms of groups through membership, processes and intergroup relations (Hogg, 2006). Social influence was described as a user's behaviours that may be influenced by friends (Wang et al., 2020). Hence, individuals prefer to identify themselves as group members because of the need for positive relationships. Based on self-categorization theory (Turner, 1975 & Turner et al., 1987), an individual categorize himself or herself through race, religion or gender. Therefore, our point is that identification with different types of groups in particular racial, cultural and ethnic groups were reasons for dining out among the Indians in Klang Valley vicinity. To build and maintain group identities are social representations and it is beneficial in defining the community's purpose of behaving and communicating. Hence, it shows that identities as a process that serves a social function which allows the individuals to participate in social life through the pathway of dining out. Furthermore, by practicing different social representations of eating in a group, an individual is regenerating and maintaining that group's guidelines and identity markers (Lahlou, 2001). As such types of food choices and dining out practices has become a communication tool between individuals and the types of eating practices. Thus, it is a part of the group's social identity among the Klang Valley Indian community.

Kuala Lumpur provides an opportunity for numerous foodservices due to the demand of local and international delicacies; this has caused the capital city to be saturated. Report's from Euromonitor International (2014) stated that consumers are choosing to eat in outlets located conveniently near their offices or home. Thus, leisure has become an increasingly ideal location

for consumers looking for relaxation after work. This is due to the changes in the lifestyles of urbanites which prefer to dine out instead of eating at home and this trend is prominent amongst young working adults and young families. Moreover, the foodservice industries in Klang Valley have positive growth compared to the previous years. Restaurant businesses is seen as one of the vast developing foodservice sectors in Malaysia because it is able to boost cities and towns throughout the region. Thus, a foodservice establishment seems to function more than just a place to eat. Enjoyment is an essential factor that motivates consumers to try and purchase services and products. Enjoyment is referred to favorable emotions by the consumers that show an essential component of the advantages gained by the consumer in the communication process (Cicco et al., 2020). Therefore, dining out can bring about enjoyment to the customers of the restaurants. A consumer's behavioural intention to select, use and promote the service is significantly influenced by attitude (Gupta & Duggal, 2020). The attitude was described as a mental quality by considering the nature of the human body's informational system related to distinct and specialized cognitive aspects. It centers the awareness of fine-tuning of cognitive functions and features (Gaiseanu, 2021). Dining out might also improve the attitude of the customers in terms of de-stressing oneself from work.

In addition, some people may look out for eateries which have traditional food that contains a lot of medicinal values. There are many Indian restaurants in Klang Valley which promotes and prepare ayurvedic cuisines such as *Love Light Studio* where the food is prepared by a trained ayurvedic chef. The Ayurveda plays an important role in the present health care. It is an ancient art of healthy living and also one of the world's oldest medicine systems from India. The knowledge of the medicinal value and the uses of plants and other substances traverses back to ancient times (Lahiri & Singh, 2010). People are concerned about the wellbeing and especially when it comes to food types. Therefore, this study will also find out whether the factor of well-being in dining out is significant.

Method

The methodology employed for this research consist of quantitative approach. The samples are Indians and live in Klang Valley area. Besides that, this snowball sampling is relevant as there are abundance of food retailers and choices that are available. As such, questionnaires were circulated via Google Docs. A total of 100 sets of questionnaires were distributed and considered adequate for a significant result. The items in the questionnaire were adapted and modified from Sinha (2013). Hence, it is designed with a sequence to ensure the appropriateness and the validity prior to its distribution. The modification to the indicators was implemented to measure each element in order to achieve the objective of this study.

The instrument comprised of two out of three sections of Likert-scale in the questionnaire. The points on the Likert scale were: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree and 5 = Strongly Agree. Section I consist of demographics of the respondents. Section II inquired the factors influencing them to dine out. Section III looked into whether the dining out culture has any relationship with their well-being. In addition, a pilot test was conducted on 30 respondents with the Cronbach Alpha that reported 0.73. After the pilot study, the survey was updated and improved. Thus, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) programme was utilized to produce frequency, means and standard deviation to perform the descriptive statistical analysis. The charts and tables of scores are presented in the following sections.

Findings

The primary data were collected from the respondents through the questionnaires and were analysed using the statistical tools which were interpreted in the following tables. Apart from that, the survey consists of a total of 100 respondents that is shown in the Table 1. The highest range of respondents' age were between 18-30 years old equivalent to 35 percentage. Furthermore, the single status is (57 %) followed by nuclear family (20%) and finally the extended family (17%). The table also depicts that 43 percent of respondents have no children and the greatest household income lies between RM2 501-RM5 000 per month.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents' demographic profile

Category	Percentage	Category	Percentage
Age (<i>n=100</i>)		Number of Children (<i>n=100</i>)	
18-30 years old	35	None	43
31-39 years old	10	1	16
40-49 years old	21	2	22
50-59 years old	26	3	16
60-69 years old	8	4	1
		5 and above	2
Family Status (<i>n=100</i>)		Household Income (<i>n=100</i>)	
Single	57	< RM2500	16
Nuclear	26	RM2501-RM5000	27
Extended	17	RM5001-RM8000	15
		RM8001-RM11000	20
		RM11000 and above	22

Factors influencing to dine out

Next, table 2 represents 10 questions to assess the factors that influences the respondents to dine out. There were three items showed the highest frequency of agree and strongly agree which are item 1, 2 and 3. The first item represents 86 respondents that mainly agreed that the reason for them to dine out is to meet and socialize with friends. This is followed by 82 respondents for highly agreed that spending time with family causes them to dine out. In addition, 80 respondents also agreed that they choose to dine out because they want to have leisure time. All these three items linked to each other where majority of the respondents choose to dine out for socialization purposes. Besides, item 8 also noted to be among the highest frequency which shows 75 respondents wanting to taste a variety of food when dining out.

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of factors influencing respondents to dine out

No	Statements	Frequency (<i>n=100</i>)				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	Spend time with your family	2	6	10	63	19
2	Meet and socialize with friends.	0	5	9	62	24
3	Leisure time.	1	9	10	61	19
4	Eat good food.	8	15	21	42	14
5	Eat nutritious food.	8	26	26	31	9
6	Eat traditional Indian food.	4	18	21	42	15
7	I have a passion to eat out.	8	28	33	25	6

8	I love to taste variety of food.	0	7	18	55	20
9	I choose to dine out because of the influence of advertisements and media.	8	23	24	37	8
10	I don't like to cook.	23	38	22	13	4
11	I am not a good cook and have poor culinary skills.	18	38	16	20	8
12	I don't want to spend time cleaning.	18	38	7	32	5
13	I don't have time to cook.	13	26	21	35	5
14	Informal business meeting.	5	15	31	44	5
15	Just for entertainment and recreation purpose.	4	11	25	54	6
16	Be stress free and relaxed.	2	9	21	61	7
17	Prestige and status.	20	36	23	16	5
18	Emotionally upset.	17	30	24	27	2
19	Avoid heavy traffic after work.	11	21	21	41	6

The respondents' knowledge on well-being

The third part of the questionnaire has examined the perception of respondents towards their knowledge on well-being. Table 3 shows the descriptive findings of these 6 items. The highest frequency shown by item 3 which 94 respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they prefer to have balance diet or meal. Interestingly, item 4 also showed the second highest frequency which 90 respondents mainly agreed that eating out may bring unfavorable metabolic and cardiovascular affects to their well-being. In summary, it can be seen that respondents understood that eating out may bring negative effect towards their well-being. They are hardly able to obtain recommended nutrients that the body needs but at the same time they are also aware on the importance of having a balance and healthy diet.

Table 3: Descriptive analysis of respondents' well-being

No	Statements	Frequency (<i>n</i> =100)				
		SD	D	N	A	SA
1	When dining out, I am able to obtain the recommended daily nutrients	11	43	26	1	1
2	I am aware of taking unhealthy food daily but I have no choice	2	24	17	4	13
3	I prefer to have balance diet or meals	0	1	5	6	33
4	I understand eating out may have unfavourable metabolic and cardiovascular affects	1	2	7	6	23
5	I wish I can have traditionally cooked food because its healthy	4	1	6	5	34
6	I still manage to get healthy food at some restaurants	6	15	21	5	4

The relationship of factors dining out to well-being

Research question 2 focused on examining the relationship between perception of respondents to dine out with their well-being. Table 3 illustrates that there is no significant relationship between both variables ($p=.089$). This means the factors of the respondents dining out does not associate with their well-being status.

Table 3: Analysis of relationship between dining out and well-being

		Well-being
Factors of dining out	Pearson	.171
	Correlation	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.089
	N	100

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous studies highlighted the frequency of dining out among Malaysians and concluded that Malay respondents dined out for more than three meals weekly compared to Chinese (11.1%) and Indians (22.2%) (Lim, 2019). In line with this, the current study found that the majority (86%) of Indians choose to dine out to meet and socialize with friends. Hence, this study reveals that the majority of Indians in Klang Valley dine out for socialization purposes. Dine outs or food consumed outside of the home are eaten in the company of friends who are outside the purview of the primary kinship.

Malaysia has a multi-ethnic population, namely Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Bharath et al., 2007). Friends usually come from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Therefore, dining out provides them with a relaxed and enjoyable environment, opportunities for interaction, sharing meals and creating memorable experiences with various ethnic groups. Social connections are essential because they serve as the agent that offers social support when a person needs it the most. Therefore, it can be concluded that food connects individuals with the wider social network and fosters a sense of community among people. It has also promoted the well-being of both the collective and the individual. This finding is consistent with Ramly et al. (2003) that restaurants are frequently used for socialization or discussion. Due to the long business hours, most customers make use of the chance to meet up with their friends at the *mamak* eateries. The findings also revealed that socialization has become a priority for customers, influencing them to visit *Mamak* restaurants. However, how far it goes to strengthen social bonds becomes a question as socialization is independent of any particular situation.

Interestingly, 82 percent of respondents in this study dined out to spend time with their families. Work life in the city is stressful and many people return home in the late evening due to heavy traffic. According to Ali and Abdullah (2012), Malaysian urbanites primarily use weekends and public holidays to spend quality time with family members. Meal preparation and cleaning are time-consuming. Thus, they choose to dine out merely to consume foods of their choice from a diverse range of cuisines and dishes and expand their culinary horizons with their children. Dining out allows them to relax, chat, and spend quality time together without being distracted. Kim (2018) asserted that having family meals away from home benefits overall happiness. Sun and Morrison (2007) found that older adults dine out to get together with family members and friends. Hence, dining out is a good option to strengthen family bonds and happiness. Overall, it can be joyful and gives everyone a break from their regular routines and an opportunity to enjoy delicious cuisines.

The Klang Valley Indians also dine out during their leisure time. 80 percent of the total population in this study agrees or strongly agrees with the statement. While 69 percent of total respondents dine out for relaxation and to be stress-free. The Klang Valley is the most developed region in Malaysia. As such, urbanization has transformed the landscape of

environment and the local authority. The government bodies face numerous challenges due to the transition of lifestyle among the urbanites to achieve the quality of living and sustainability (Ali & Abdullah, 2012). With regards to this, the local authorities built more shopping complexes with many food outlets, food courts and cafeterias. Findings also revealed that Klang Valley Indians dine out during their leisure time and are most probably seeking serenity to escape their daily life routine after a long day at work during the weekdays. This finding is consistent with Warde and Martens (2000). They found leisure and fun aspects were commonly cited as motives for dining out behaviour. A hassle-free approach to enjoy a meal and unwinding is made possible with the availability of various food services which liberate people from cleaning up at home.

The majority of the respondents which is 75 percent, opined that they dine out to taste a variety of food. Malaysians are generally adventurous when trying new food. Klang Valley is a popular destination when it comes to various types of food. Chiao et al. (2014) found that Malaysian Chinese are relatively adventurous in trying new and exotic food. Malaysians like eating out whether at hawker stalls or high-end restaurants because they offer a variety of delicious food. It is common to see families from all ethnics, particularly urbanites, gathering at restaurants and spending quality time together while tasting a variety of dishes. Previous research stated that a person's previous eating experience substantially influences their future food choices. For example, if a person has a wonderful experience eating a certain cuisine with his or her family, that person is more likely to return of having the same food again (Bakar et al., 2020). Moreover, Chiao et al. (2014) found that eating gives happiness and peace to some people. It takes pleasure in revisiting favourites or discovering new ones, turning dining out into a leisure activity with an element of adventure. Moreover, indulging in a good meal and taking a break from daily responsibilities when dining out may also be forms of self-care.

However, most Indians in Klang Valley disagree that the reason they dine out is not because they dislike cooking. This reveals that even though they dine out, that does not mean that they dislike cooking at home. This is because most of them eat out for socializing purposes and to spend quality time with family. Cooking at home is still not compromised. This may have a connection to the Indian family's tradition. Indian women are valued as the lady of the house, responsible for running the home, and devoted mothers. This is why most ancient Indian moral and ethical epics like the Mahabharata (Queen; Kunti, Draupadi, and Gandhari) and Ramayana (Queen; Seeta) portray women as direct providers of meals and selfless when it comes to their family's needs. When the King and Queen were exiled from their kingdom, it can be seen that the queen, who had long governed, suddenly took up cooking and prepared the meals. Kunti and Draupadi cooked for the *Pandavas* and other *rishis* when they were in the forest. Therefore, until today cooking and eating together are regarded as integral parts of the Indian family. The act of eating at home is a ritual or family value. For Indians, cooking activities encompass emotions, expressions, and utterances of feelings that capture the continuity between their family members (Devasahayam, 2005). Devasahayam (2005) discovered that even though many Malaysian Indian Hindu women work, they continue to cook for their families. In line with this, the current study reveals that 61 percent of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree that they dislike cooking. Hence, cooking at home holds cultural significance rooted in tradition and family values for celebrations and festivals. Cooking for religious occasions is usually done at home to preserve purity and sanctity.

It is worth noting that dining out does not contribute to the respondent's wellbeing. The majority of respondents (90%) are aware that dining out may have unfavourable metabolic and

cardiovascular effects. However, they still eat out either for socialization, to spend time with family members or to taste a variety of food. Therefore, its implications towards health is not stopping them from consuming food at the eateries despite of the lack of nutrition, overeating, an imbalanced diet, late eating, irregular eating patterns and dirty premises (Ali & Abdullah, 2012). This is the reason there is no relationship between dining out and wellbeing in this study. This also illustrates that Indians in the Klang Valley may not always adhere to the Ayurvedic principles that "food is medicine, and medicine is food". Ayurveda is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and emphasizes the holistic health benefits of specific foods and how they should be prepared. It also focuses on one's welfare in the context of body, mind, and spirituality, which were handed down centuries ago (Payyappallimana & Venkatasubramanian, 2016). However, dining out does not always align with Ayurvedic concepts because it is often associated with socializing, spending quality time with family, indulgence, and enjoyment of food which may prioritize taste over strict adherence to Ayurvedic food consumption guidelines.

This research is limited to only Indian ethnic groups in the Klang Valley and future studies should explore factors influencing other ethnic groups. Besides, this study identified that Indians are aware of the implications of dining out on their health but still prefer to dine out. It is to socialize, have quality time with family and taste new cuisines in Klang Valley. Eventually, they abandoned the Ayurvedic principles in their daily food consumption. Ayurveda's purpose is to develop and sustain the health, vigour, and longevity of the individual (*swastha*), as well as to cure disease. Many principles are detailed in Ayurvedic literature in *Ahara Vidhi*, where the laws of dos and don'ts on diet. However, when dining out, we might be exposed to unhealthy food due to overeating and emotional eating. Moreover, food that are too spicy, salty, oily or frozen might be detrimental to our health if taken in excessive amounts. Apparently, there is an increased prevalence of lifestyle disorders due to unhealthy food habits. As such, Ayurveda recommends adhering to the guiding principles in order to prevent various ailments. Hence, there is a need for awareness programmes to increase knowledge. The significance of Ayurvedic food intake principles in daily life is necessary (Sawai et al., 2016). Individuals should be mindful of their choices when eating out. They should seek healthier options and nutritious meals to support their overall wellbeing by balancing dining out with home-cooked food. Restaurants should take the initiative to be responsible for public health. Nowadays, many people dine out to unwind, socialize with friends and spend quality time with family members. At the same time, people are aware that the food served in restaurants is unhealthy but still dine out to have pleasurable moments. Restaurants may play a crucial role in supporting those choices by providing a variety of menus, adopting healthy cooking methods and providing nutritional information. Restaurants additionally have to ensure that their ambiance and layout are suitable for larger groups. It can also improve sales by offering special packages, group discounts, timely service, complementary goods, child-friendly options, accessibility for people with impairments and entertainment options. In this way, Indians in the Klang Valley neighbourhood may preserve their ancient eating principles while maintaining the new trend.

Dining out is a popular way for people to socialize with friends and spend quality time with family. It provides a relaxed, comfortable, and enjoyable environment for sharing meals and creating memorable experiences. In addition, it gives access to a diverse variety of cuisines, which broadens people's culinary horizons. Overall, it offers a break from daily routines, socialization and the opportunity to savour good food. However, dining out can be lethal to health for several reasons, such as unhealthy food choices and oversized portions, which will potentially increase calorie intake and the risk of obesity. Dishes may contain additives,

artificial flavourings and preservatives. Therefore, it is important to note that the Ayurvedic principles passed down by the ancestors have significance that needs to be revisited due to our food choices and our overall well-being. Ultimately, the decision to include Ayurveda perspectives in one's diet, whether in or out of the home, is influenced by personal health and cultural practices.

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