EAT TO LIVE OR LIVE TO EAT?
MAPPING FOOD AND EATING PERCEPTION OF MALAYSIAN CHINESE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of Malaysian Chinese towards food and eating by using a qualitative marketing research tool, known as the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. Twelve Malaysian Chinese were asked to collect photographs that represented their thoughts and feelings about food and eating. The results surfaced six broad meanings Malaysian Chinese have about food and eating: (a) health, (b) trying new food, (c) people, (d) home cooked food, (e) enjoyment, (f) happiness. The findings were supported by rich description and meaningful images that capture both the spoken and tacit thoughts and feelings of the respondents. The findings reflected the health concerns and food neophilia tendency of Malaysian Chinese. The findings also revealed the positive emotional value of food and eating linked to enjoyment and pleasure. These findings suggest numerous important implications for scholars and practitioners in the industry.

Key Words: Food and Eating Perception, Malaysian Chinese, ZMET, Qualitative, Marketing

INTRODUCTION

Consumer behavior is the foundation of marketing (Kahle & Riley, 2004). As such, food and beverage (F&B) marketers need to understand the changing dynamics of consumer behavior and attitudes, particularly consumers' perception, needs, and the potential market in order to succeed in the Malaysian food industry. From a postmodernism point of view, human behavior comes from how people perceive and classify their world (Geertz, 1973). Perner (2008) also pointed out that perception and cognition are the factors influencing consumer behavior. Having acknowledged the importance of consumers' perception, this study aims to move away from the traditional F&B perspectives, which typically focused on food service management (Rodgers, 2005), food quality and service quality (T. J. Lee, Cho, & Ahn, 2011; Namkung & Jang, 2007), restaurant servicescape and customers' satisfaction (Lin & Mattila, 2010), food choice factor (Duarte Alonso, O'Neill, Liu, & O'Shea, 2012; Prescott, Young, O'Neill, Yau, & Stevens, 2002), and food safety issues (Arendt, Paez, & Strohbehn, 2012; J. E. Lee, Nelson, & Almanza, 2010). In this study, we explore the most innocent-seeming yet important question for hospitality marketing and management: how do people perceive food and eating? Using the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), a relatively new research approach in the hospitality literature, the meanings of food and eating are explored through images and interpreted through a social-psychological perspective.

It is challenging to understand Malaysian food consumption behavior due to the diverse cultures – approximately two thirds of Malaysians are classified as *Bumiputera*, including ethnic Malays (54.6%) or indigenous persons (12.8%), while Chinese and Indians account for 24.6% and 7.3% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). Different ethnics have their own cuisines,

food preferences, and diet-health beliefs. In fact, many researchers have advised caution on using the cultural lens to try and understand food consumption behavior. For example, Bech-Larsen and Grunert (2003) recognized that cross cultural studies have been found to be problematic when seeking to characterize cultural differences in consumers' attitudes toward food and eating. Douglas and Craig (1997) further asserted that care must be exercised in segmenting and/or defining homogenous group of consumers to avoid the danger of making generalizations about geographic, national or specific cultural values. In view of the above cautions, and the many potential problems when comparing cultures in Malaysia, the research scope of this study only focuses on the Malaysian Chinese, instead of Malaysians in general, to form a more specific marketing insight for the Chinese food industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores a mental map to interpret how Malaysian Chinese think and feel about food and eating. Malaysia has a population of 28.3 million, of which 24.6% (6.9 million) are Chinese (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). The Chinese comprise of different speech groups which include Foochow, Hainan, Henghua, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Kwongsai, Teochew and others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010; Tan, 2001). They are distributed unevenly throughout all the states in Malaysia. Tan (2001), who discussed Chinese food in Malaysia extensively in an edited book--*Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia*, pointed out that the intercultural contexts and local adaptation of the Chinese in Malaysia have changed their food heritage. For instance, the Nyonya food in the states of Melaka and Penang are the most obvious evidences of incorporation of local food culture into traditional Chinese food through intermarriage. Malaysian Chinese food has been adapted to the local environment by adding

local ingredients into traditional Chinese food. Despite this, cultural differences still exist between Malaysian Chinese food and Malaysian food in general. The most prominent stereotype as pointed out by Tan (2001) is that the Chinese prefer their food to be served hot, such as hot tea and hot soup, while other ethnic groups in Malaysia tend to cool their food before consumption. Tan (2001) concluded that Malaysian Chinese food culture is a result of cultural continuity, local transformation and globalization. Given the rich socio-cultural background and psycho-socio influences that underpin Malaysian Chinese food, an investigation on the people's perception of food and eating could provide groundwork in understanding Malaysian Chinese food culture.

According to Geertz (1973), culture is a system of common values and these values shape the framework of the behavior of a cultural group. Rozin (1982) also suggested that it is fundamental to understand the origin (in evolutionary history or development) of the various forces that shape the person, the food, and the environment. These origins can be categorized as biology, cultural, and individual/psychological. There are evidences that traditions, beliefs, and values are amongst the main factors influencing preference, cuisine, serving and nutritional status. Thus, culture is one of the most important factors in determining how and what we eat (Atkins & Bowler, 2001). The meanings of food and perspectives of eating in our lives should be studied across a wide spectrum of societies and cultures. It is an exploration of culture through food.

Having acknowledged the relevance of culture in food study, nonetheless, the contemporary food research context is suggesting a different trend. With the increasing awareness on well-being, the food industry and academia are bombarded with discussion on

food-health issues. Hence, studies on health and safety issues has become the dominant trend in contemporary food research context. For example, Olsen (1999) explored how food insecurity and hunger impact health and nutrition outcomes in food-rich countries; Dosman, Adamowicz and Hrudefy (2001) investigated the perception of food safety-related risks; Chandon and Wansink (2007) did a research on fastfood and the perception of calorie intake. If the research of food and eating behavior can be seen as an iceberg, then research on health is only the tip of this iceberg floating above the sea. The big part that is under the sea surface, which remains less investigated, is the underlying factors of food perception and the meaning of food and eating. There are some researchers studying food choice motives (Frostling-Henningsson, 2008; Poulain, 2002; Prescott, et al., 2002; Rogers, 1996; Rozin, 1996; Ryu & Zhong, 2012; Saba, 2001; Satterfield, Kang, Baer, & Ladjahasan, 2008, July; Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995). These studies, mainly focused on factors underlying the food decision making process of the consumers using a variety of food choice questionnaires. Ryu and Zhong (2012) did a survey on customers' menu choice in Chinese restaurants, focusing on the antecedents and consequences of the decision making process. Frostling-Henningsson (2008) for example, conducted a study on the decision making process of household food consumption. Related to the decision-making processes for food, scholars have also looked into factors such as product design and packaging (Satterfield, et al., 2008, July). These two studies (Frostling-Henningsson, 2008; Satterfield, et al., 2008, July) are also some of the few examples of food studies employing ZMET as a tool for investigation.

Despite our knowledge on food choice processes, we know very little about how people perceive the food they eat from a social perspective. Indeed, there are scholars studied food

perception in the past decade but many adopted a scientific approach. For instance, Key, Charboneau and Cowan (2011) did a brain-based assessment on how the perception of food stimuli affects the brain processes; Bilt (2009) studied oral physiology and food perception including the perception of taste, odor and texture. These studies discussed food perception from physiological and neurological aspect, which is a totally different discourse from social sciences. Thus, it is important to reassert that the current study seeks to understand how people perceive food by exploring meanings and emotions attached to food and eating which is a relatively less investigated area of research.

Scholars have been trying to understand the meanings of food and eating for humans in their own ways. Their attempts simply implicate that food is more than sustenance to us. There must be more deep-seated meanings of food, which at least separate humans from any other animals. Lévi-Strauss suggested that “food is not only good to eat, but also good to think with” (as cited in Fischler, 1988, p. 275). Fischler (1988) claimed that food defines the eater’s identity. He advocated the idea of incorporation principle. According to Fischler (1988), incorporation is “an act laden with meaning” (p. 277). Human incorporates meaning from food; the identification of food constructs the identity of the eater. Under the incorporation principle, we become what we eat (Fischler, 1988). Falk (1996) offered a framework in understanding the meaning of food. It consisted of four dimensions: fuel, poison, medicine and pleasure. Douglas (1997) further claimed that people do not eat nutrients; they eat “food”. Using alliteration, Rozin (1999) summarized that food is “fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching” (p.9), and eating is “essential, elating, emotional, and expansive” (p.28). Food is a symbol that identifies and

differentiates “us” and “the others”; it is also a sign of community, sharing and socializing with friends and family (Niva, 2008).

As can be seen from the literature, there is no one ultimate explanation to define the meaning of food and eating. It is undeniable that a relatively small number of researches that have looked into this issue. To date, there is no consensus amongst scholars from different disciplines in their interpretations of food. Furthermore, majority of the food studies discussing the meaning of food were conducted in the Western world (Anderson, 2005; M. Douglas, 1997; Fischler, 1988; Jones, 2005; Niva, 2008; Rozin, 1996). The meaning of food in France might not be same as in Malaysia. Therefore, the current study would like to take this opportunity to explore what people think and feel about food and eating in an Asian context, specifically, in Malaysia, and more specifically, among the Chinese.

There is only a minimum number of food researches conducted in Malaysia. Of these, studies are concerned with organic food (Ahmad & Juhdi, 2010) and halal issue (Al-Nahdi, Ismail, Haron, & Islam, 2009). One exception is that of Prescott, Young, O'Neill, Yao and Stevens (2002) who studied food choice motives of female consumers in Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan and Malaysia (ethnically Chinese). Their findings show that health, natural content, weight control and convenience are the food choice motives of Malaysian Chinese. However, none of the studies explores the meaning of food and eating in Malaysia. That is the gap that this study aims to fill. In view of the complexity of the meanings of food and eating, the title of this study is set as “Live to Eat or Eat to Live?” to further explore the multiple aspects of the meanings of food.

METHODOLOGY

This research seeks to explore the meanings of food and eating from the perspective of consumers. A qualitative research method known as the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) was employed in this study. ZMET combines the use of respondents' self-collected images with a series of in-depth interview tools, namely means-end chain theory, laddering technique, projective technique, and Kelly Repertory Grid, the result is claimed to be more valid, reliable and relevant than traditional structured interviews (Chen, 2006; Christensen & Olson, 2002; Warden & Chen, 2009). Each of these techniques compensates each other's' deficiencies to form a more comprehensive tool to uncover consumers' deeper thoughts and feelings. In addition, as argued by Zaltman himself, human thought is image based, not word based, and most of our communication is nonverbal (Zaltman, 1997). Therefore, by using respondents' self-prepared photographs, more relevant information can be elicited than the traditional structured or semi-structured interviews (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Perhaps, ZMET interview can be described as a research tool that leads the researchers and the respondents to think out of the box. Therefore, given that the research topic is to describe and illustrate the set of meanings, values and beliefs shared by a specific ethnic group, ZMET seems to be the most appropriate instrument for this study.

In total, 12 Malaysian Chinese were invited to participate in this study by using convenience sampling technique (Marshall, 1995). Everyone eats. Therefore, any Malaysian Chinese who was born and grew up in Malaysia can be a suitable respondent for this study. As presented in Table 1, the sample profile in this study includes respondents from different industries. The age range of the sample stretches from early-twenties to mid-thirties.

Unintentionally, all the respondents falls on Y generation according to the age criteria suggested by Loughlin and Barling (2001). There are 7 female and 5 male respondents in the profile. It is acknowledged that the demographic information is presented merely for reporting purpose. This study does not aim to investigate on gender or age difference of Malaysian Chinese food and eating perception.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The sample size is consistent with past ZMET studies which generally included eight to sixteen respondents (Chen, 2006; Khoo-Lattimore, 2008; Warden & Chen, 2009). Our sample size for this study has surpassed the heuristic threshold required to assure saturation, as Zaltman (1997) noted “at most, data from four or five participants ... are generally required to generate all of the constructs on the consensus map” (p.432). All interviews were conducted from July 2011 to September 2011. The respondents were briefed two weeks in advance regarding the guidelines for image collection. The respondents were requested to prepare six to eight images that can best represent their thoughts and feelings about food and eating. For each respondent, a 90-minute 9-step ZMET interview was conducted based on the images prepared.

There are several versions of the ZMET interview process proposed by Professor Gerald Zaltman in his past studies (R. A. Coulter, Zaltman, & Coulter, 2001; R. H. Coulter & Zaltman, 1994; Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). Considering the feasibility and nature of this study, the researchers employed the version that outlined in Zaltman (1995) and Khoo-Lattimore (2008). The main difference is the exclusion of *Vignette*, which is a step that required the respondents to imagine a short movie that describes their thoughts and feelings about the topic.

The ZMET steps followed by this study are presented in Table 2. The core steps include story-telling (step 1 & 2), sorting and comparison (step 3-6), exploring sensory representation (step 7), and creating summary image (step 9). Each step in the interview worked as a protection net to capture information which might have been missed out in the previous steps and also to cross-validate the relationships among the constructs. Laddering technique was employed throughout the interview to discover the underlying thoughts and feelings of the respondents, both spoken and tacit.

[Insert Table 2 here]

All 12 interviews were transcribed and translated manually. The interviews yielded 234 pages of transcripts. These transcripts were read and reread by the researchers to identify the key concepts. The key concepts were compared, categorized and labelled using the respondents' own words or metaphors. These labels constituted a list of constructs. A construct could be an attribute, a consequence, a value, a category of ideas or a concept by itself (Christensen & Olson, 2002). The number of constructs fluctuated throughout the coding process. Some constructs were eventually grouped into a more overarching construct while new constructs were identified one after another. The constructs and transcripts were combed through once again for construct pairs. Construct pairs are essentially relationships among the constructs and were identified and then analysed to draft a consensus map (Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995).

A consensus map is an aggregate mental model that illustrates the relationship among the concepts elicited from the study group (Christensen & Olson, 2002; Zaltman & Coulter, 1995). The focus of the consensus map is on the causal connections among the constructs which is how

an idea links to another. Whenever a construct was identified, the researchers drew a box in the consensus map labeled with the name of the construct. Similarly, when a connection between two constructs was recognized, a line was drawn in the map connecting the two relevant construct boxes with arrow indicating the causal direction. Referring to the criteria suggested by Zaltman (1997) himself, only constructs mentioned by more than half of the respondents will be retained in the final consensus map for further analysis. As for the construct pairs, only those agreed by at least one-third of the respondents would be retained in the final map (Zaltman, 1997). The ultimate consumers' thoughts and values arose from the findings are categorized under Kahle's list of values (LOV), which is a key value measurement in the study of consumer behavior (Kahle & Kennedy, 1993).

In total, 59 constructs and 207 construct pairs were generated from the Malaysian Chinese respondents. These constructs were classified under six categories based on their characteristics and nature, namely, physiological, experiential, socio-cultural, environmental, high end values, and others. In average, 80.5% of the constructs generated by any of the respondents were included in the final consensus map. Past studies suggest that a consensus map should include around 25 to 30 constructs which represents 80% (Zaltman & Coulter, 1995) to 85% (Zaltman, 1997) of the constructs mentioned by each respondent. During the interpretation stage, the consensus map was broken down into broad meaning themes according to how the constructs are connected to each other. Each of these themes is a smaller unit of meanings which illustrates the way the respondents self-organized their thoughts and feelings through the reasoning processes.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

Figure 1 presents the themed consensus map of food and eating perception shared by the respondents. The consensus map was constituted by 23 constructs and 28 construct pairs. Six broad meaning themes were revealed: (a) health, (b) trying new food, (c) people, (d) home-cooked food, (e) enjoyment, (f) happiness.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Each theme was highlighted in different-shaped boxes in each subsection of the consensus map, for instance, constructs related to health theme were illustrated in triangular boxes while constructs clustered under the theme of enjoyment were enclosed in pentagonal boxes. The broad meaning themes were named after the dominant constructs in that thematic region. A dominant construct was a construct which had the highest x value or y value (refer Figure 1) among other constructs under the same theme. In other words, a dominant construct was either an origination point or a destination point in that thematic region. It was the most prominent idea in a theme. For example, people, sharing, and warm relationship with others were three interrelated constructs which formed a broad meaning theme. The theme was named *People*, as people was the originator construct in that thematic region ($x=7$). The x value indicated that seven construct pairs were originated from *People* in the initial consensus map. These dominant constructs were enclosed by dotted outline in Figure 1 for easy identification.

Theme 1: Health

The theme of health includes three constructs (freedom, health, and nutrition). There is full consensus amongst the respondents that food may affect overall health. To some extent, the

respondents expressed concern regarding risk with the idea of food being poisonous. For instance, “illness or disease enters through the mouth. So, food can make people sick, for example, contaminated food may cause food poisoning, or maybe cancer is caused by what we eat” (M1). This sentiment is echoed by another: “The image of a worried face represents my overall perception on food, sad to say. I think nowadays food is not as nutritious as it was in the past, because of the food additives, colourings and chemical substances” (M7). Some of the respondents used images of medicine pills to represent the medication process to cure illnesses as a result of ingesting harmful foodstuff. The message that the respondents were trying to convey through the images of medicine pills was not that food could cure illness, but on a contrary, that food causes illness. Figure 2 consists of some sample of images brought by the respondents that reflect the idea of health.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Out of all 12 interviews, 11 respondents mentioned health when they thought of food and eating. When the researcher probed on the importance of being healthy, two ultimate values were unearthed. They were freedom and enjoyment. An unhealthy condition of body will constrain one’s freedom in food choice:

If I fall sick and lay on the bed, I do feel constrained with my food choice due to my terrible health condition.... I end up losing my freedom in food selection... I will become unhappy. I have to eat the same thing that tastes the same every day, with the same cooking method at the same time. (M3)

The status of one's physical well-being will also affect the value of enjoyment: "(If unhealthy) you will have to spend a lot of money and time on medical treatment. You cannot enjoy other things in life. You cannot travel. You cannot eat the food that you like" (M4). The above findings reflect the overall concern of Malaysian Chinese towards nutrition and health. In general, these respondents are concerned of food safety issues, as depicted by the worried face in Figure 2. The respondents' concerns are consistent with some of Falk's (1996) four dimensions of food which addressed the paradox of food being medicine and poison. According to the respondents, the status of health will affect one's freedom, which will eventually affect the ultimate value of living a "fun and enjoyment life" (Kahle & Kennedy, 1993, p. 8).

Theme 2: Trying New Food

Findings show that Malaysian Chinese are relatively adventurous in trying new and exotic food. There are seven constructs directly or indirectly linked to trying new food. The images in Figure 3 are some of the examples used by the respondents to represent their thoughts and feelings of food and eating. These images include a kissing couple, a tattoo and a girl jumping up to the sky. Respondent M2 who referred to the image of the tattoo said:

The whole effect (tattoo) looks like Spider Man's uniform is actually in the skin of that guy. I choose this photo simply because of this word – 'wow'. You will feel 'wow' at the first glance.... The first impression, settings, decoration and presentation (of novel food) just surprise you when you look at it. (M2)

[Insert Figure 3 here]

For many of the respondents, the temptation to try new food is significantly influenced by the food presentation. M4 used a photo of a kissing couple to represent the importance of food presentation and first impression. She mentioned, “Food presentation is like love at the first sight.... If the presentation of a dish does not appeal to me, I will not give it marks for impression” (M4). From the above statements, it can be concluded that food presentation is a determinant factor which encourages Malaysian Chinese to try new food. It seems as if the respondents build up expectations based on the first impressions of how food is presented.

The other factor that motivates Malaysian Chinese to try new food is curiosity. It can be curiosity based on the food itself or on the physical environment. One of the respondents raised an interesting point on how to predict if the food is good when eating out. He said, “If I see a lot of people queuing up waiting to be seated in a restaurant, my instincts tell me that the food must be very good, or else why would so many people be willing to wait for it?” (M8) The findings correspond with a study done by Warden and Chen (2009) in Taiwan, regarding a Chinese value called *renao* (crowded environment). According to Warden and Chen (2009), queues are indicators for food quality and will attract consumers to some extent.

One of the benefits of trying new food is to enhance knowledge, which commonly happens when travelling or trying exotic food from other culture. Through eating, one can learn about different food culture and thus enhance one’s knowledge. M9 mentioned, “Food in every place is different. It represents the culture of a place.... To understand the local’s habit, daily life, how they dress, what they eat, what they use. It’s the meaning of travel” (M9).

Corresponding with Falk's (1996) four dimensions of food which indicated food as pleasure, 90% of the respondents revealed that they feel excited when trying new food and one third of them admitted that trying new food made them feel satisfied and contented. According to Kahle's list of values, the ultimate values of trying new food can be categorized under "excitement" and "fun and enjoyment life" (Kahle & Kennedy, 1993, p. 8).

Theme 3: People

As illustrated in Figure 1, three constructs (people, sharing, and warm relationships with others) are categorized under the theme of people. Out of all 12 interviews, 10 respondents related food and eating to people, be it a friend, family member, colleague or any dining partner. One of the respondents literally used an image of a bridge to express his idea. By quoting his word, food is "a communication bridge that connects people together" (M6), which corresponds with the literature suggesting food as a sign of sharing and socializing between people (Niva, 2008). In fact, many of the respondents collected images of people gathering around when they thought of food and eating. The example of images related to people are depicted in Figure 4.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

The respondents provided some explanations regarding food as a tool for connecting people. Respondent M6 explained:

Only food can make everyone's target become the same. Food can unite people.... Because while we are eating, we are chatting, it can actually bring out other topics. So we can talk deeper. If without food, purely chatting, chats are unlikely to be long, unless we are very close friends. (M6)

As reflected from the above testimonial, the presence of food provides topics of conversation for the people dining together, which enhance the exchange of ideas and feelings. In addition, food is a lubricant in a gathering as it is able to ease the atmosphere and makes it into a less formal ambience which encourages people to open their hearts and connect to others.

By using an image of a graveyard, respondent M11 expressed his idea on food and family gathering during *Ching Ming Festival* (Tomb Sweeping Festival): “It makes me think of stew pork. Every year during *Ching Ming Festival*, we will prepare stew pork to worship our grandparents. Every time after the worship ceremony, we will eat the stew pork together in front of the gravestone” (M11). When M11 was asked about the importance of having stew pork together, he replied, “We can gather around. It is a kind of reunion” (M11). The above statements confirm food as a communication bridge. For these Malaysian Chinese respondents, food and eating always link back to people. Food promotes a more relaxing atmosphere which allows them to chat freely with their dining partners. When they are eating together, the focus is no longer on food but people. Therefore, most of them agreed that food tasted differently and even nicer when they were dining with others. The ultimate value of dining and sharing with friends and family is to build up “warm relationship with others” (Kahle & Kennedy, 1993).

Theme 4: Home-cooked Food

Three constructs (home-cooked food, love, and taste) located at the bottom left of the consensus map depict the theme of home cooking. Most of the respondents agreed that when they thought of food and eating, they thought of their mothers’ cooking. As shown in Figure 5, images that can express love (hugging mushroom and mother) or peace (garden) were used to express the

idea of home cooking. Using the image of hugging mushrooms as a metaphor, respondent M5 said, “It represents home-cooked food. The bigger mushroom represents a mother while the smaller one represents a child. Certain food ... when you eat it, it reminds you of the taste of mom’s cooking” (M5).

[Insert Figure 5 here]

The respondents suggested that the most significant difference between home-cooked food and outside food is love: “One is cooked with love while the other is cooked to earn profit – without love” (M5); “Mom cooks with love, wholeheartedly. You know there is love inside, you can feel the food” (M10). The findings resonate with Persson Osowski, Göranzon and Fjellström (2010) who suggest that home cooking holds a symbolic meaning of love. One third of the respondents agreed that the taste of home-cooked food is different from outside food: “Taste is the major difference. Outside food uses a lot of flavoring.... It has a heavier taste. Home-cooked food will use less flavoring. You can taste the real flavor of the dish itself. You can taste it very clearly” (M1). Past study (Aloia et al., 2013) suggests that people perceive home-cooked food as healthier. Instead of relating home-cooked food to health, the respondents of this study value more on the taste of home cooking.

Some of the respondents also revealed that restaurants that serve traditional cuisine reminded them on home-cooked taste. Images of wooden house (M8) and oil lamp (M9) were used to depict this idea. The findings evolved from this theme suggest a viable market for restaurants that emphasize traditional home-cooked cuisine, for example, Nyonya restaurants in Melaka and Penang.

Theme 5: Enjoyment

The findings show that food and eating always link to enjoyment. As presented in Figure 6, images of a smiling face were used by many of the respondents to represent the enjoyment aspect of food and eating. Some of the respondents also collected images of rain and hammock to express the relaxing feeling they have when enjoying food. There are five constructs grouped under the theme of enjoyment, which include enjoyment, comfort, relax, time, and sustenance.

[Insert Figure 6 here]

Enjoyment is one of the overarching constructs in the consensus map. It is connected by two broad meaning themes (health and trying new food) and leads to the theme of happiness. The enjoyment factor of food and eating echoes with Falk's (1996) four dimensions of food – pleasure and Kahle's List of Values – “fun & enjoyment life” (Kahle & Kennedy, 1993, p. 8). Many respondents agreed that eating is an enjoyment, or in other words, they live to eat:

We have so many kinds of food in this world. Maybe eating different varieties of food is a kind of enjoyment. The level is higher than merely to sustain life. If I only want to sustain my life, I don't have to eat ice-cream. I can just use a drip, obtaining a certain level of glucose. I still can continue my life. But I think people living in this world, having such a good environment, are meant to enjoy. (M3)

Nevertheless, to enjoy the food, one has to be in a relaxed state. According to the respondents, eating and relaxation is a two-way relationship. On one hand, eating leads to relaxation. On the other hand, eating should be proceeded in a relax manner in order to enjoy the food. As illustrated in the consensus map, one's relaxation status is determined by the time factor.

Time is an attribute in the means-end chain which leads to the consequence of relaxed and rested on the high end value of enjoyment. Time is also directly connected to enjoyment and sustenance, which are two opposing consequences. This means that whether eating is hedonically an enjoyment or merely for filling an empty stomach depends on the time factor. Therefore, it can be concluded that the period of a meal as well as the time taken to eat a meal will determine the meaning of food and eating – whether it is a pleasure or fuel (Falk, 1996). The findings surface the two sides of a coin in the meanings of food – *eating to live* or *living to eat*. For these Malaysian Chinese, the coin flips consistently. The functions of food being an enjoyment or sustenance exist at the same time.

Theme 6: Happiness

Happiness is a construct mentioned by all of the respondents and a destination point for 20 construct pairs. Three out of the other five themes eventually lead to happiness, which include the theme of trying new food, people, and health. In ZMET, this is known as the overall-end-state construct which stands alone as a broad meaning theme as well. One of the respondents brought an image that explicitly expressed the idea of happiness, which is the image of a smiling face. With this image, she explained: “I think eating is a happy thing. So when I eat, I feel happy” (M6). Other respondents related food and eating to happiness after the laddering process taken place. For instance, respondent M5 mentioned:

Eating gives us happiness and peacefulness. We pursue a lot of things in our life and we desire a lot of things which eventually make one forget about these feelings. But we are able to get these feelings from food and go back to what we actually want, which are happiness and peacefulness.
(M5)

The researchers considered that words mean different things to different people. In order to understand what happiness really is to these respondents, they were asked to describe happiness. Respondent M1 used the metaphor of a marathon to portray happiness:

If there is something happy, you will want to tell other people. Happiness will make your heart feel comfortable, release your pressure. If I manage to finish 10km marathon, I will have the same kind of happiness. I think it is also some kind of self-satisfaction. (M1)

The above findings indicate the hedonic pursuit of food and eating of these Malaysian Chinese respondents. It resonates with the idea that food is a kind of pleasure (Falk, 1996) and the notion of *living to eat*. To summarize, in the voice of a respondent, “eating is a happy thing” (M6).

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, & CONCLUSION

The initial quest of this study is to explore the meanings of food and eating in the minds and the lives of Malaysian Chinese. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, scholars have pointed out that how people perceive and classify their world would have influence on how they behave (Geertz, 1973; Perner, 2008). Thus, in order to provide additional insights to the F&B industry targeting Malaysian Chinese consumers, the consumers’ perceptions were explored instead. The paper’s contribution to knowledge can be discussed from two dimensions. First, the data of this study was collected using ZMET, a contemporary marketing tool which incorporates the concept of photoelicitation and means-end chain theory. According to the literature, ZMET is considered very new in the field of food research as only a few studies were conducted using this tool

(Frostling-Henningsson, 2008; Satterfield, et al., 2008, July; Venkatraman & Nelson, 2008). The contribution of ZMET to this study is the richness of the elicited data. The data is supported by very detail narrative description and meaningful images, providing an insight for the researchers that neither quantitative nor the traditional qualitative methods can ever provide (Chen, 2006).

Second, this study has enhanced understanding on the meanings and perceptions of food and eating, which have been relatively neglected in the hospitality literature. There are various models and theories (Falk, 1996; Fischler, 1988; Jones, 2005; Rozin, 1999) to define the meanings of food for human being. Considering culture as the determinant factor that shapes the foodways in a society, we assumed that what was found in the West might not apply directly to an Asian context. This is especially pertinent for the Malaysian Chinese, a society with complicated cultural backgrounds greatly influenced by both the Chinese values as well as the local culture (Tan, 2001). By revealing Malaysian Chinese food and eating perception, the paper has provided a ground to advance understanding on Malaysian Chinese food and eating behavior – a field that has been neglected in past studies.

Findings show that Malaysian Chinese are highly concerned with health. The emphasis of health on food and eating in the Chinese culture is not something new. Since thousand years ago, the Chinese already believe in the regulation of diet and the balance of *yin-yang* in food and eating (Zhao, 2003). Traditionally, Chinese perceive food as medicine; it is a preventive measure from illness (Wu & Tan, 2001). But the findings reveal that for Malaysian Chinese, food is poison instead. The respondents believe that ingesting harmful food may cause illness. Findings also show that these Malaysian Chinese are willing to try new food. It is a new discovery which

has not been explored in past studies. The food neophilia tendency of Malaysian Chinese can be attributed to its multi-cultural background, as Malaysian food culture itself is diverse in nature. For these Malaysian Chinese, food and eating is a means for sharing and socializing. They value the pleasure dimension of food. Findings suggest that the meanings of food and eating change accordingly with the presence of others and the time factor. It resonates with Falk's (1996) four dimensions of food, which suggested that food can be both fuel and pleasure. This paper goes a step further by mapping out the conditions which determine the function of food as sustenance/fuel or enjoyment/pleasure. The findings are consistent with the literature to some extent (Falk, 1996; Niva, 2008; Prescott, et al., 2002; Rozin, 1999; Warden & Chen, 2009). However, we also found that Falk's four dimensions of food might not be enough to explain the symbolic meaning and spiritual dimension of food and eating, for example, the function of food as a communication bridge and a spiritual sustenance. Further study should be undertaken to establish a more inclusive theory on the meaning of food and eating.

For food researchers from the academic field, the findings of this study may provide a reference for further examination on food perception and eating attitudes in Malaysia and other contexts. Particularly, the broad meaning themes may provide some insight in setting the dependent variables for quantitative survey. For the F&B industry, this study has provided a better understanding from a social-psychological standpoint, of how Malaysian Chinese consumers perceive food and eating. For practitioners who would like to introduce exotic cuisine to Malaysia and target Chinese consumers, the findings evolved from this study may shed light on their marketing strategies, for example, emphasizing on health, promoting group dining ambience, and creating fun dining experience. As Malaysian Chinese generally associate food

and eating to home-cooked taste, it also implies a market for traditional cuisine which emphasizes the tastes of nostalgia and home. Resonating with the argument at the beginning of this paper, understanding what the consumers want and how they feel about food and eating will definitely increase the probability of success for any business venture, including F&B industry.

Finally, no research is totally perfect (Krauss, 2005). ZMET is a very complicated tool which incorporates a bundle of techniques from other theories. Therefore, special training is required in order to fully master each and every skills attached to it. In this study, two of the researchers have undergone long hours mastering the ZMET interview technique. Future study are cautioned by the limitations of ZMET as insufficient training and familiarity on the tool might affect the depth of laddering and the probability to capture tacit thoughts and feelings, which eventually affect the quality of data collected. Despite its limitations, this paper has presented the feasibility of ZMET as a viable research tool in the food study context.

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TABLES

Table 1

Respondents' profile

Respondent	Gender	Age	Occupation
M1	Female	26	Master Student
M2	Male	34	Chef
M3	Male	28	Chief Secretary
M4	Female	30	Area Sales Manager of Investment
M5	Female	25	Food Production R&D Executive
M6	Female	22	Student
M7	Female	22	Student
M8	Male	25	Auditor
M9	Female	25	Account Executive
M10	Female	28	Event Planner
M11	Male	29	Lecturer
M12	Male	33	Software Engineer

Table 2

ZMET interview process

No.	The steps	What do respondent do...
1	Story Telling	Respondent describes what is in the image, why it is chosen and how does it relate to food and eating.
2	Missing Image	Respondent describes the image that he/she was unable to obtain, if there is any.
3	Sorting Task	Respondent sorts the images into meaningful groups and describes the meaning of each group.
4	Construct Elicitation	Interviewer randomly selects 3 images and asks the respondent how any 2 images are similar, yet different from the third, based on the idea of food and eating.
5	Representative Image	Respondent chooses image that can best represent his/her thought and feeling on food and eating.
6	Opposite Image	Respondent describes the opposite meaning of the chosen image.
7	Sensory Image	Respondent explores other senses to convey what is and what is not representative of the meanings of food and eating.
8	Mental Map	Previously discussed constructs are reviewed. Respondent creates a map to illustrate the connections among the constructs.
9	The Montage	Respondent creates a montage using his/her images and describes the story of the reconstruct image.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Broad meaning themes for Malaysian Chinese food and eating perception. (1) Numbers on the connection indicate respondents who contribute to that connection. (2) N= number of respondents agree on a particular construct. (3) X-Y = X: frequency of this construct being an origination point in a relationship with another construct; Y: frequency of this construct being a destination point in a relationship with another construct.

Eat to Live or Live to Eat?

Figure 2. Example of images related to health.

Figure 3. Example of images related to trying new food.

Figure 4. Example of images related to people.

Figure 5. Example of images related to home-cooked food.

Figure 6. Example of images related to enjoyment.