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Food Culture Integration in Menu Plan for a Sustainable Homestay Business

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Abstract

Other than providing overnight stays and local activities, the provision of food and beverage is an important aspect in the homestay business. The food and beverage aspect of a homestay has the potential of being a crucial contributing factor towards a guest's experience whilst ensuring optimal monetary return to the homestay operators. This paper presents the findings on meal offerings provided by four homestay operators at Mantanani Island, an island off the Kota Belud coast of Sabah. This study also highlights the importance of food as an element of local culture and as an expression of the history, habits and traditions of a community. Discussions are pinned on rationalising the differences in meal offerings among operators and how this would implicate the operators' profit margins, as well as how the local culture reflects the menu offered by the homestay participants. Finally, recommendations for improvement on meal plans are proposed to enhance the economic benefits of these operators without compromising guest experience.

Keywords: homestay; Mantanani Island; menu; food and culture; guest experience.

JeIClassification: R11; L66; L83.

Introduction

Homestay is a form of accommodation business that has gained popularity in being an accommodation option for travellers when travelling to remote locations or where commercial accommodation is unavailable. For commercial accommodation (such as hotels), the meal plan is an optional component—although it is sometimes packaged and priced together with the room component. For homestay operation the meal plan is a compulsory component of its business model. In Malaysia, typically the homestay meal plan follows four cycles that include breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. This study was inspired by the importance of the food and beverage component in accommodation operations. While there has been vast research dedicated to investigating the food and beverage component of commercial accommodation that ranges from customer satisfaction to menu

planning, studies pertaining to homestay meal plan offerings have been scarce. This preliminary study intends to establish an initial understanding of meal offerings of an island-based homestay setting. Thus, the specific objectives of the current study are: (i) to identify the meal plan offerings at homestays in Mantanani Island; and (ii) to demonstrate the extent of menu planning to complement guests' experience within the setting of an island-based homestay.

1. Menu and Food Culture

As food reflects the culture of a community, food preparation and menu offering are always influenced by the economic conditions and surrounding environment of a particular place. For example, a community that lives on an island surrounded by the sea would make fish as the main menu item in the daily diet. Likewise, a community living in a valley and exposed to agricultural activities would have an entirely different menu and diet. Based on this understanding, it can be concluded that the background of a certain culture is linked to its daily menu and diet practices. As such, culture and meal offerings through a prepared menu reflect the practice and lifestyle of a particular community.

Food and accommodation are two related elements for tourists. Hence, offering local cuisine could enhance the tourist's experience and at the same time create an additional economic activity for a particular destination. Local food can be seen as a means to explore the local culture, history and people of a visited area whereby it provides an 'authentic' representation of the people's culture. Kivela and Crotts (2006), who studied gastronomy and tourism, highlighted food as an element of local culture as well as an expression of the history, habits and traditions of a community. Hence, typically traditional dishes and local food can truly enhance the tourist experience.

The menu acts as a medium between customers and food service providers as it displays the products offered by the latter. Radice and Arpaia (1986) defined menu as an extension that indicates the personality of the restaurant as it promotes food and beverage that adds value to guest satisfaction. When a restaurant possesses uniqueness, it has caught the heart of the guests—and this will provide the restaurant with good returns. Hence, menu is an important aspect for the success of any foodservice and considered as the soul of the restaurant (Jones and Mifli 2001). Mooney (1994) and Kreck (1984) noted that the menu can be interpreted as a list of products offered by a restaurant and at the same time, it can be a piece of literature or display used to communicate the product range to the customer. However, an earlier study argued that menus are more than the conventional function of a communications and selling tool but also a research and experimentation device that can be studied to increase restaurant profit (Seaberg 1991). Hence, in the context of homestay the menu or food provided by the operator could enhance tourist experience and understand the local culture (Pusiran and Xiao 2013).

The purpose of this article is to highlight the extend of Mantanani Island Homestay operators in Sabah integrate their food culture through meal plans for their guests. It is hoped to shed light towards possible improvement and opportunities to their current practices towards a more enhanced homestay experience.

2. Overview of the Malaysian Homestay Industry

The term "homestay" refers to the concept whereby the guest or tourist stays together with a host family within a certain period of time for a certain charge. The term is usually associated with bed and breakfast accommodation (B&B) because certain criteria are similar. In this context, the homestay host/operator is the family who offers their home to the guests. Meanwhile, a homestay provider refers to the coordinator or agents for promoting the program whereby the homestay guest refers to the guest who stays with the host family. Under the homestay program, the guest will be charged an affordable amount of money for his stay and this rental is a source of income for the family. Therefore, the definition of homestay is where the tourist stays with the host's family and experiences the everyday way of life of the family in both a direct and indirect manner (MOTAC 2018).

The Malaysian Government under the Ministry of Tourism, Art & Culture (MOTAC) has established some required standards or criteria for the participants. Before the Ministry approves a homestay application, the participants need to attend a two-week course on how to run the homestay and the applicant must exceed certain standards so that the tourist is satisfied with the service obtained for the money paid.

All homestay operators participating in the homestay program must adhere to strict rules and regulations imposed by the National Homestay Association. The rules and regulations are mainly concerned with cleanliness, private bedroom, water supply, electricity and proper toilet facilities. These facilities are constantly monitored by the authority to maintain the normal quality of standards.

The homestay program was first officially launched in 1995, when the Ministry of Tourism, Art & Culture (MOTAC) designated Kampung Desa Murni in Kerdau, Temerloh as the pioneer village or 'kampung' for this

project. The homestay program is unique as the guest has the opportunity to stay and live together with the host family. Guests will appreciate how Malaysians live their daily lives by getting personally involved in local activities such as fishing and paddy farming, depending on what the particular kampung has to offer or what the family does for a living (Pusiran and Xiao 2013).

As mentioned earlier, the tourists also get the opportunity to be involved in the locals' daily living activities such as learning to cook their traditional cuisine, paddy farming, amongst others. Such activities are special because foreign tourists, especially those who come from developed countries, would have never experienced them previously. This uniqueness has now become the key success factor contributing to the Malaysian homestay program, making it different from those run in other countries.

The Malaysian homestay program has shown evidence of receiving an increasing amount of response from participants. From the records in 2017, MOTAC recorded 3,994 participants registered for this program (MOTAC 2018). However, the number of homestay participants had increased to 4,210 participants in 2019 (Tourism Malaysia Statistics 2020). This is a positive move towards the promotion of Malaysia as a tourist destination, and good collaboration between the government, agents and operators will help the program become more successful. The economic income of the participating families would also increase accordingly. In summary, the homestay program represents the government's effort in encouraging rural community involvement in the tourism industry, which will in turn increase the said community's living income.

3. The Homestay Industry in Sabah

The homestay program in Sabah was officially launched in Sabah in 1996 as a new tourism product to generate side income for the local homestay operators and to increase the economic status of the local community, whereby operators needed only a 'ready setup' and little monetary investment to participate. A total number of 406 operators are involved in the homestay programs in Sabah (MOTAC 2020), representing the fourth highest number of homestay operators after Sarawak, Johor and Selangor. Sabah is aggressively promoting the homestay as a unique tourism product. The strength of the homestay program in Sabah is the abundant mix of ethnic groups with different cultures and ways of living that could not be found in other places in Malaysia. There are more than 33 ethnic groups living in different parts of Sabah. For example, in the Long Pasia homestay, the majority of the population is the Lundayeh ethnic group. Meanwhile, the Sungai ethnic group can be found along the Kinabatangan River; the Kadazandusun ethnic group dominates the Tambunan area and the Rungus people can be found in most areas in Kudat. This ethnic diversity is a unique selling point for Sabah homestay industry and if capitalised effectively, it has the potential to offer tourists to experience different and unique types of culture, beliefs and ways of life.

4. The Community of Mantanani Island

Mantanani Islands is a group of three neighbouring islands which include Mantanani Besar, Mantanani Kecil and Linggisan. These islands are located approximately a 45-minute ride by speedboat via Sabah's mainland town of Kota Belud (80 km north east of Kota Kinabalu). The two points of departure are Kampung Kuala Abai Jetty and Kampung Rampayan Jetty. Among the three islands, only the Mantanani Besar Island is populated.

Mantanani Besar Island, which can be regarded as the main island (due to it being inhabited and where all the resorts are located), consists of two villages namely Kampung Padang and Kampung Siring Bukit. Both villages are separated by a few individual resorts and are within walking distance to one another which takes approximately 15 minutes. The majority of the island inhabitants are settled in Kampung Padang rather than Kampung Siring Bukit. Geographically-speaking, all of Mantanani Besar Island is layered with soft dry sands, with limited vegetation other than coconut trees that are native to the island, which can be abundantly found throughout the island. There is no commercial livestock on the island except for chicken bred for own consumption. Interestingly, the presence of cows throughout the island is noticeable as they are found straying freely.



Source: Google map

Based on the latest national census conducted in 2010, Mantanani Besar Island has a total of 1,100 inhabitants whereby the majority of them are of the Bajau-Ubian ethnicity and of Islamic faith. They earned their living mainly as fishermen. Kumalah *et al.* (2015), in their study on the Bajau-Ubian community in Mantanani Island, categorised their delicacies and traditional *kuih* into sea-based and land-based as depicted in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Bajau-Ubian delicacies

Sea-based	<i>Kima</i> – a type of sea clam (tridacna) <i>Sinagol</i> - Shark and shark liver cooked with turmeric. It can also be cooked with another pelagic fish, such as sting ray (called Sagol Pari instead) or even puffer fish. <i>Kinilau</i> - 'sushi type' salted fish <i>Tehe'-tehe'</i> – eaten raw <i>Lato'</i> - sea grapes <i>Tayum</i> – Sea urchin <i>Baat</i> – Sea cucumber <i>Ikan masin</i> – Dried salted fish Assorted fish (tuna, stingray, etc.)
Land-based	<i>Putu</i> – steam cooked compressed cassava <i>Tompeh</i> – Oil-less fried shredded cassava <i>Binamban</i> - made of cassava flour wrapped in banana leaf
Traditional <i>kuih</i>	<i>Kuih tahai</i> , <i>kuih jah</i> <i>kuih panyam / penjaram</i> , <i>kuih kacang bertapak</i> , <i>kuih lidah</i> , <i>kuih gulintah</i> , <i>kuih bahulu</i> , <i>kuih tali</i> , <i>kuih batang buruk</i> .

Source: Kumalah *et al.* 2015

5. Mantanani Island Homestay Programme

Known as the Mantanani Island Homestay Programme (MIHP), homestay operations in Mantanani Besar Island commenced operations in 2012 and is still in its infancy stage. Currently, there are 13 participants in the MIHP and all are located in Kampung Padang. Out of the 13 main operators, 11 are female (mainly housewives) and 2 are male (one of whom has a fulltime job).

MIHP's modus operandi is coordinated by the founder of MIHP. Currently, all bookings will go through the coordinator. Thereafter, the coordinator will assign the bookings to the respective MIHP participant based on an agreed rotation system. These bookings are likely made via phone as the number is advertised on Facebook - the sole marketing medium of MIHP. Ironically, despite being registered and certified by the Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture (MOTAC) a few years back, MIHP has yet to be listed in the official Homestay Malaysia website at www.go2homestay.com. At the time of writing, MIHP has also yet to be included in the document entitled

'Homestay Coordinator Directory 2015' released by the MOTAC on its website, neither has it been included on the Sabah Homestay Association website at www.sabahhomestay.my.

The basic price for an overnight stay with MIHP is RM70.00 per person. The price includes accommodation at the foster family's home with breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. Extra charge is payable if one needs to engage in local activities (the price varies based on the type of activity). Additionally, the RM70.00 price excludes the speedboat return transfer between Mantanani Besar Island and the mainland which is priced at RM100.00. The speedboat service is collectively owned and operated by the island resort operators.

From the RM70.00 per person a homestay operator receives, ten percent (RM7.00) administrative fee will be paid to the homestay coordinator (for handling guests) and another five percent (RM3.50) will be paid into the MIHP fund. Hence for each paying guest, a homestay operator will have a gross income of RM59.50 (RM70-RM10.50) per person. The payment is on cash terms only and paid directly to the homestay host on the last day of stay.

6. Data Collection

Data collection for findings presented in this article stemmed from a field trip to Mantanani Besar Island by a group of 28 researchers from the Small Islands Research Centre (SIRC) of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) from 8th to 10th April 2019. The objectives of the field trip were to formulate and promote policies to the State Government for the preservation and conservation of small islands in Sabah for future generations. In response to the policies of the State Government, many aspects were chosen to be explored, hence the presence of researchers with expertise ranging from science and business to arts on the team.

The findings were obtained from two perspectives, that of the guests and of the host. The guests' perspective included feedback from four representatives that stayed at four different homestays respectively. The participants were given a self-completion open-ended questionnaire on their last day on the island while waiting for the speedboats to go back to the mainland. The questionnaire required them to recall and write down the meals prepared by their hosts throughout their stay. The second research input was obtained from unstructured interviews with the MIHP coordinator.

7. Findings and Discussion

The findings, as presented in Table 2, are a comparison of meal plan menus for four homestays, at which the participants stayed on Mantanani Besar Island. The homestays are labelled as A, B, C and D. As mentioned earlier, after deducting RM10.50 (coordinator fee and MIHP fund) from RM70.00 charged per guest per night, the gross income for each guest per night is RM59.50. Homestay D had the highest gross income as six guests stayed there for two nights, earning the homestay a total income of RM714.00. This was followed by homestays A and C with five guests each, which generated RM595.00 respectively. Homestay C earned the least with RM357.00 as it only hosted three guests. This uneven allocation of guests between homestays may have been contributed by the guests' requests (in this case SIRC-UMS) that takes into account factors such as gender and division of research cluster (to ease communications and discussion).

Table 2. Meal plan menus of four Mantanani Island homestay operators

	Homestay A (5 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 5 pax x 2 nights = RM595.00	Homestay B (3 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 3 pax x 2 nights = RM357.00	Homestay C (5 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 5 pax x 2 nights = RM595.00	Homestay D (6 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 6 pax x 2 nights = RM714.00
1st Day				
Lunch	Fresh coconut drink, rice, tuna cooked in sauce, Napa (long) cabbage, mango salad, soft drink (orange) 1.5 litres	Rice, travelly cooked with chilli-hot relish (sambal), squid salad, cabbage, squid, cordial drink	Rice, tuna, vegetables (cabbage), plain water	Rice, abalone, fish, vegetables, cordial drink (syrup)
Tea	Coffee, biscuits (purchased from village stall)	Coffee and tea, sugar-coated 'snail-shaped' cake	Coffee, biscuits	3 in 1 drinks (Nescafe, Milo), crackers
Dinner	Rice, chicken in soy sauce, long beans	Rice, sambal dried fish tuna in turmeric soup, salad, mixed vegetables	Rice, abalone, sea snails, fish soup	Rice, chicken, vegetables, cordial drink (syrup)
2nd Day				

	Homestay A (5 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 5 pax x 2 nights = RM595.00	Homestay B (3 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 3 pax x 2 nights = RM357.00	Homestay C (5 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 5 pax x 2 nights = RM595.00	Homestay D (6 pax) Gross income: RM59.50 x 6 pax x 2 nights = RM714.00
Breakfast	Fried noodle (rice vermicelli), sausage/frankfurter, coffee	Fried rice and fried noodle (rice vermicelli), fried egg, coffee and tea	Donut, banana fritters (purchased from village stall) coffee and tea	Fried noodle, bread, 3-in-1 drinks (Nescafe, Milo)
Lunch	Rice, bittermelon, abalone in soy sauce, tuna in turmeric soup, lime, soft drink (Coke) 1.5 litres	Rice, curry (<i>gulai</i>) grouper, salted fish in chilli-hot relish (<i>sambal</i>), mixed vegetables	Rice, mango salad, cabbage	Rice, chicken, vegetables, cordial drink (syrup)
Tea	3-in-1 drinks (Nescafe) – biscuits	Coffee and tea, traditional cake (<i>kuih</i>) (purchased from village stall)	Coffee, biscuits	3-in-1 drinks (Nescafe, Milo), crackers
Dinner	Barbeque – tuna, trawler, sea snails, rice, cordial drink (syrup), plain water (28 pax) Cultural Performance			
3rd Day				
Breakfast	Assorted traditional cake and coffee	(Brunch) Fried rice with sausage, fried noodles (rice vermicelli), omelette, salted fish in chilli-hot relish (<i>sambal</i>), coffee and tea	Traditional cake (purchased from village stall), homemade pumpkin fritters	Fried noodle, bread, 3-in-1 drinks (Nescafe, Milo)
Lunch	Rice, fried tuna, vegetables		Rice, oyster, fish, vegetables, plain water	Rice, abalone, lobster, vegetables, cordial drink (syrup)

In the context the SIRC-UMS group staying at MIHP, paying RM70.00 per person per night entitled them to an average of four daily meals that included breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner (one dinner was in a form of a seafood barbeque set for guests of all the homestays). Meal times varied between homestays and were dependent on the arrangements between the respective guests and the homestay hosts. Rice and noodles were the most common food servings in all homestays.

Breakfast

Fried noodles served with coffee and tea was the most popular menu item for breakfast among the homestay hosts, possible because fried noodles is the most cost effective and easiest to prepare. Nevertheless, participants from homestay A highlighted that the fried noodles were plain (with limited condiments) however, this was compensated by the accompaniment of fried sausages. Meanwhile, Homestay C never offered fried noodles; instead the host served *kuih* such as homemade doughnuts, banana fritters and pumpkin fritters. Homestay D was the only host which provided bread as a breakfast option; this appears to be an attempt to go the extra mile for the guests' benefit as bread is not part of the Bajau-Ubian regular diet.

Afternoon Tea

Afternoon tea was normally served around 4 p.m. comprising coffee and tea, biscuits, crackers and *kuih*. The majority of the hosts opted to provide ready-made purchased snacks and *kuih*. The *kuih* in particular was bought from fellow villagers at Kampung Padang. Although on a micro level, this demonstrated the multiplier effect of MIHP on the local economy.

Lunch and Dinner

For heavy meals such as lunch and (arguably) dinner, all homestays served the typical menu of rice, fish and vegetables. The serving of chicken for dinner and lunch by Homestays A and D and sausages by Homestays A and B for breakfast seemed to have strayed away from the spirit of giving guests a 'local taste'. In this aspect, 'local taste' would refer to the delicacies of the Bajau-Ubian people itself or to sea produce, as the homestay was on an island. Moreover, these (chicken and sausages) are examples of supplies obtained from the mainland and may not be easy to replenish.

Nonetheless, the serving of seafood by most homestays such as fish, abalone, squid, oyster, sea snails and even lobster was a welcome effort that may reinforce the 'island homestay' experience among guests. According to the MIHP coordinator, the cost of seafood obtained is minimal and sometimes there is no cost at all if the fellow villagers caught it themselves. This may be the reason why MIHP was able to cater a barbecue seafood dinner during the last night of stay. The inclusion of lobster on Homestay D's lunch menu on the last day would appear luxurious compared to the other homestays, most likely it was an expression of the homestay's gratitude in earning the highest amount of gross income.

Beverages

Beverages provided across all homestays during all meals range from plain water, cordial drinks, 3-in-1 instant ready-made hot drinks to carbonated soft drinks. In terms of plain water, Homestay A provided purchased bottled drinking water and Homestay D provided water sourced from their free water supply – which was pumped from the ground. The provisioning of beverages such as 1.5 litre soft drinks (orange and coca cola) by Homestay A during the two-day lunch seemed to be a luxury compared to the cordial drinks and plain water offered by the other homestays. In the same vein, the offering of self-served hot drinks during breakfast and tea (i.e. the 3-in-1 instant 'Nescafe' coffee and 'Milo' hot chocolate) as practised by Homestays A and D is arguably the most costly on a per guest basis compared to beverage brewed for communal serving.

Conclusion

This paper highlights MIHP's meal plans offering and serves as a preliminary platform to understand the rationale of meal plan offerings and the extent of menu planning among homestay operators. For MIHP hosts, they are able to collectively (although to a limited extent) to provide a range of 'seafood-based' foods which reflect the island theme of the homestay setting. However, the 'land-based' menu that reflects the Bajau-Ubian ethnic group is limited and to an extent was not provided by most homestay hosts.

While there are homestay hosts who tend to provide more than the minimum requirement in their meal plan menus, hence incurring extra costs, their justification for doing so was not included in the scope of this study and is a potential research area to be explored. Nonetheless, it is argued here that the hosts should note that guests would have adjusted their meal expectations when staying at a homestay; if more was expected they would have stayed at nearby commercial resorts in Mantanani Besar Island. Hence, there should be no obligation on the part of the hosts to go the extra mile from 'hosting' to 'celebrating' their guests if it means that income is compromised.

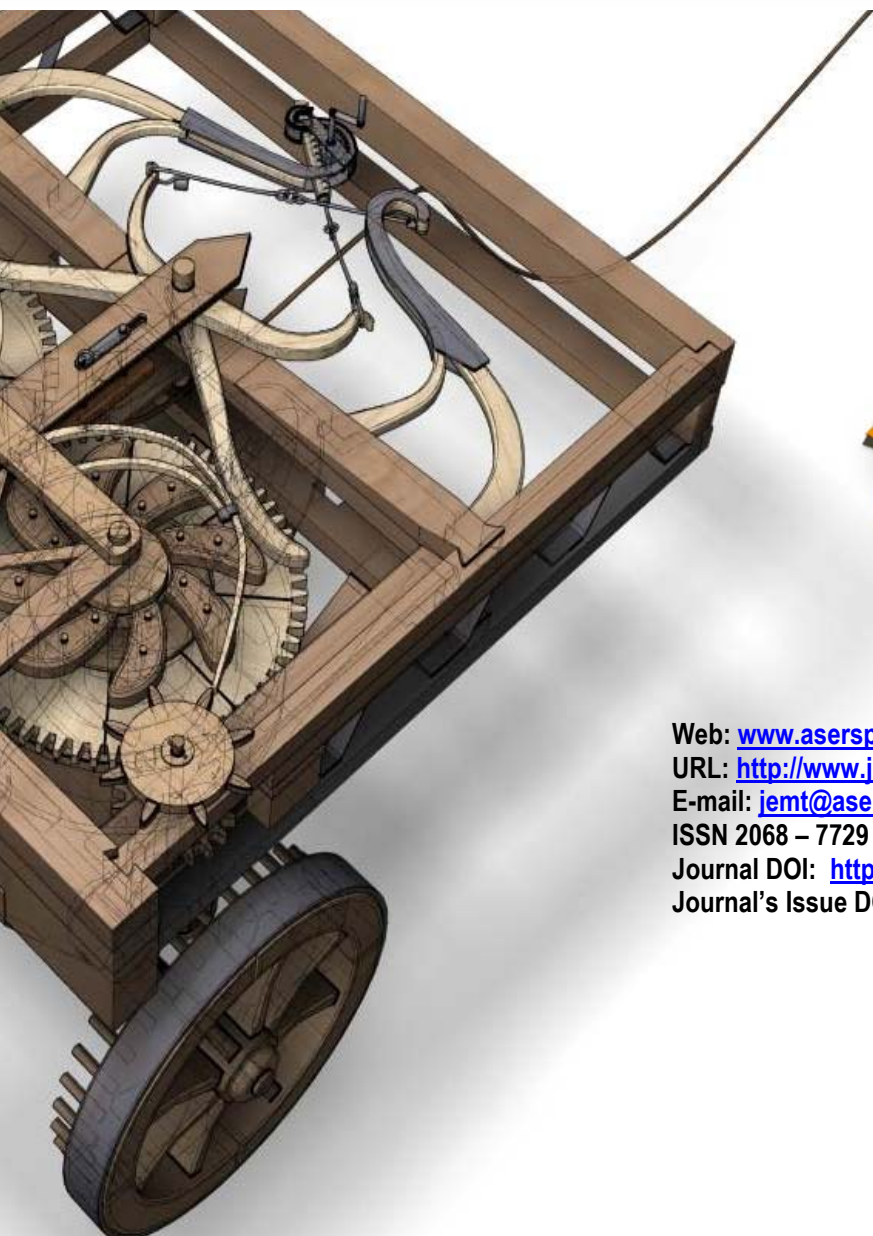
To this end, there is a need to organise an initiative among MIHP operators to instill awareness about menu planning to better enhance their meal offerings for guests. Prior to that, this study calls for a more qualitative in-depth study to be done involving hosts at respective homestays in Malaysia. Other than that, this study also echoes the prospects to study the financial or budgeting literacy among homestay operators. From a broader perspective, there is also scope to perform comparative studies between meal offerings among homestays in Sabah, within Malaysia and amongst homestays in other Asian countries in the region.

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