

Factors Influencing University Students' Perception on Vegetarian Restaurants

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ABSTRACT

The number of vegetarian restaurants in Malaysia has been increasing as people are motivated by various reasons to consume vegetarian foods. In addition, university students contribute to the economy, hence it is important for investors or owners of vegetarian restaurants to understand university students' perceptions on vegetarian restaurants based on their own experiences. This research provided an insight of factors influencing university students, such as family members, religion, trend and health. The objective of this research was to identify the perceptions of university students on vegetarian restaurants. This research used a qualitative approach by conducting a focus group interview with university students as a source of data collection. The six respondents were selected based on the criteria of university students in Malaysia who are consuming vegetarian food. Findings enabled investors and owners of vegetarian restaurants to have an in-depth understanding on the factors influencing university students' perceptions on vegetarian restaurants and take necessary action to accommodate them.

Keywords: vegetarian restaurant, university students' perception, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, people are changing their eating style to vegetarianism by all sorts of motivation, such as pursuing a healthier lifestyle, protecting animal rights and so on. This vegetarianism also goes on trend as it is gaining attraction on social media rather than the traditional advertisements, which helps to further spread its awareness. Vegetarians are known as a dietary pattern which is considered as the intake of vegetable by avoiding animal products, such as meat, poultry or fish (Ginsberg, 2011; Watson, 2015). Furthermore, vegetarians are characterized by various forms such as lacto-ovo vegetarians, vegans and so on (Rivera & Shani, 2013). Vegetarian diets are now higher profile than ever in Malaysia and other countries, where magazines, movies and celebrity interviews would talk about how vegetarian diets benefit an individual by reducing disease and obesity (Ginsberg, 2011). This increased the demand for vegetarian diets as people believe vegetarian meals would offer healthier meals than the others (Newson, van der Maas, Beijersbergen, Carlson, & Rosenbloom,

2015). As the demand of vegetarian food increased, from the local grocer to restaurant to university's cafeteria, the range of vegetarian options increased as well (Ginsberg, 2011; Lee, Goh, Kang, & Lee, 2016; Lee, Liaw, Lee, & Rha, 2016; Morgan, 2014). Rivera and Shani (2013) mentioned that adding new vegetarian menu enables restaurants to improve their revenue as the vegetarians' market is expanding. Thus, it is important for Malaysia's food marketers to understand what the customers' needs and wants are and what factors influence their consumption of vegetarian food.

The purpose of this study is to find out the factors that influence the perceptions of university students on vegetarian restaurants based on their experiences. Family influence, religion, trend of the society or the health consciousness of students themselves could be the causes that influence university students' perceptions. Hence, the six university students were grouped together, discussed and shared their experiences. Through the focus group, this research could find out the main intention of university students on deciding to consume vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurant. The following research

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questions were addressed:

- (1) How family influences university students to consume vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants?
- (2) How religion of university students affects their food consumption on vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants?
- (3) How university students are aware of the trend among people on vegetarian food?
- (4) How university students behave themselves on their health by consuming vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Influence

Nowadays, Generation Y is known as the exclusive new youth market, who are spending more often on food and beverages as well as entertainment (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2003). Individuals who are born between 1980 and 2000 are categorized as Generation Y, in which most of them are pursuing their study career in university now. According to Bravo et al. (2006), family members are usually the core influencers who affect Generation Y's decisions as they often rely on their families as a trustworthy reference.

Bravo et al. (2006) stated that there are two dimensions: informative influence and normative influence, which merged utilitarian and value expression dimensions. Informative influence is recognized by its informational content as it improves an individual's knowledge to cope with decisions. On the other hand, utilitarian influence is defined as the agreement with others where value expressive influence is related to the desire of individuals to boost their self-concept (Bravo, Fraj, & Martínez, 2006). For example, university students would tend to dine at restaurants which they used to dine in with their family as they have the information and knowledge about the restaurant and its food. Therefore, university students tend to seek information and recommendation from their family which individuals would obey and follow. For instance, Generation Y would influence by their family members if they are having vegetarian food as their main food in daily life, and follow their family members to have vegetarian food.

Religion

Religious belief is easy to influence individuals in making choices with providing guidelines (Just, Heiman, & Zilberman, 2007). For example, guidelines regarding tolerable foods, combinations of food and eating behaviors which would have a great impact on the food selection or may have no influence depends on what kind of religion is followed and how much it is followed by the individual (Yao, 1998). With obeying these guidelines, it may create the belongingness of individuals (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Perry, & Casey, 1999).

Within a large cultural group, subgroups are existed where they might practice different eating patterns (Yao, 1998). For example, in China, Buddhism is the major religion where Buddhist's belief prohibits the taking of life, including animals' life, thus, most of the Buddhists are vegetarians. Yet, Buddhist in Malaysia may have similar or different beliefs from in China that resulted in the varied practices.

Besides that, some individuals may not be as religious to such a degree and would tend to follow their religion more loosely which mentioned earlier (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Perry, & Casey, 1999). There are subgroups where they might practice different beliefs, and according to Yao (1998) there are two kinds of vegetarians in Buddhism, including strict-vegetarian and lacto-ovo-vegetarians, but both still practice banning the taking of life belief. For instance, June and Addy can both be vegetarians, but they eat differently whereby June is a strict-vegetarian who doesn't take eggs and dairy products while Addy is a lacto-ovo-vegetarians who takes dairy products but no meat.

Trend

Malovany (2014) mentioned that Generation Y is brought up in the hi-tech era where everything changes so fast. Youngsters of this generation are continuously looking for opportunities to experience something new, where they could always connect with their friends by using easy-to-use mobile devices on the social media platforms. For Generation Y, also known as "the most influential generation", the food is being encompassed as a tool for storytelling and self-expression as they always communicate and interact with people via social media (Malovany, 2014). Furthermore, technology also enables Generation Y to increase their knowledge and awareness on the environmental problems while they surf on the internet. Morgan

(2014) stated that an environmental reason is one of the main factors, which leads to the vegetarian trend among Generation Y. There's a prediction on environment changes about food which high in fats and oils would lead to greenhouse gas emissions to increase by 80 per cent by year 2050 and caused habitat being destroyed for food production and agriculture purpose (Woollaston, 2014). Besides the natural environment, there's a group of people who avoid animal products for ethical reasons also lead them to have vegetarian food (Tancock, 2015). There are more and more people seeking to reduce their meat intake, which triggered the rapidly growing market for vegetarian food (Morgan, 2014). As the market is expanding, a number of companies, which providing vegan-oriented products, or products without animal products, are increasing to target at the consumer's needs and wants (Guilmet, 2014). In addition, owners of one of the restaurants mentioned that offering vegetarian dishes become part of the business, as partially of the consumers have been switching to vegetarians. There are fully vegetarian restaurants that are offering more complex dishes which can attract consumers, especially Generation Y consumers who would love to experience something different (Tancock, 2015). As Generation Y is inspired to have a healthier lifestyle, the number of people becoming vegetarians would be increased (Krisnantari, 2011).

Health

Health is another factor which leads to the rise of vegetarian trend (Morgan, 2014). Vegetarians believe in the potential risk of infection and the possible health welfares which related with vegetarian diets (Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998). Watson (2015) stated that younger generation's consumers are far more concerned about healthy and clean eating compared to the olden days, where there's a developing pattern toward vegetarianism among Generation Y. Seafood, vegetarian or vegan menu innovation would become essential as Generation Y symbolize a greater portion of foodservice consumers (Networld Media Group, 2015). Heavy meat consumption would increase the risk of dying from various diseases, such as heart disease and cancer (Moritz, 2009). These options are considered to be more healthful than beef, pork and poultry options (Networld Media Group, 2015). In addition, a study from Imperial College London showed that students who ate approximately 250

grams of burger a day would increase their weight over five years compared to those who ate less meat or the similar sum of calories (Hanson, 2015). Thus, vegetarian diets could be adopted on the motivation that perceiving threat of disease in the future, such as heart disease and high cholesterol (Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998). Diet is also perceived as fundamental to having good health and longevity (Fox & Ward, 2008). A vegetarian diet is well planned with foods that have appropriate nutrition for adults and children, which is able to promote health as well as lowering the potential of major illnesses (Craig, 2010).

METHODS

Data Collection and FGI

The data of this research was collected based on Sunway University's students in Sunway, Malaysia, since this research is focused on the perception of university students. Sunway University has a total student population exceeding 20,000 inclusive of local and international students. Within the 20,000 students, different religions of students were selected based on the criteria to conduct focus group interview. Moreover, the library of Sunway University provides Group Project Pods for students, which enables respondents to conduct this focus group interview in a convenient and quiet environment. The six Sunway University's students were selected as respondents where the focus group interview was located at one of the Group Project Pod in Sunway University's library. Respondents must meet the criteria of: (1) must be university student and (2) must be person who has been consuming vegetarian food at a vegetarian restaurant. Besides than the respondents, a skillful moderator was involved in the focus group interview to create a relaxed environment where respondents were motivated to engage and exchange their thoughts. After the careful selection of respondents, data is collected by having the one-hour focus group interview in between September to December of 2015. Furthermore, the focus group interview was recorded by audiotaping with a smartphone and by hand written notes instantaneously to avoid any fault of the recording device.

RESULTS

Critical Factor 1: Family Influence

Family can be believed and known as the greatest influence in a child's life. From the very first moments of their lives, children are dependent on their family as they trust and believe that family will always be there to support and protect them. Parents are treated as the pillar of a child, where they are child's first tutors. Being in that position, it's relatively important to be the powerful role models, whereby children would learn from parents, such as good behavior or bad habits, which referring to eating habits as well. Eating habits of children, which are established since childhood, will influence the eating behavior in their adulthood, such as eating vegetarian food.

According to the respondents of the focus group interview, majority of them mentioned and highlighted that their family influences them on having vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants since youth. One of the respondents mentioned, *"All of my family members are consuming vegetarian food. They have been consuming vegetarian food since I was a child."* The habit that has been cultivated since youth, it creates a basic impression and previous research supports that family has the strong inspiration and influence affecting their children based on the concepts of informative influence and normative influence, whereby it affects the university students' eating habits since youth (Bravo, Fraj, & Martínez, 2006). As in informative influence, university students used to improve their individual's knowledge with the habits and lifestyles of their family to manage their decisions during their childhood. Gradually, they are in the habit of doing or repeating the same matters, which form this eating behavior.

Additionally, utilitarian influence which is mentioned by Bravo et al. (2006) is also consistent with the opinion of the respondents. Utilitarian influence plays a role of being agreed with other individuals while building their own thoughts and perceptions on top of it (Bravo, Fraj, & Martínez, 2006). Respondents shared, *"Vegetarian foods are habitually my family's main dishes for daily basis. I even learn to cook vegetarian food from recipes to serve my friends and family when there's gathering to have pot luck meals together, which I think it is a blissful feeling"*, *"family always consume vegetarian food, no matter home-cook vegetarian food or dine in at vegetarian restaurant, which influence my daily eating habits from then*

on. I believed there must be some reason to have vegetarian food so frequently for my family. And I understand it when I started vegetarian food as my main meals." University students have the ability to understand and analyze anything or everything there are longing to know. Based on the result of in-depth focus group discussion, several respondents did try to find out the motive of family being a vegetarian, which shows the utilitarian influence of family on some individuals, especially university students.

Although family isn't the main influencer of consuming vegetarian food for another 2 of the respondents out of the 6, they still consume at vegetarian restaurants once in a while. One of the respondents stated that, *"It's not really because of family influences. Few of my family members do consume vegetarian food, occasionally. We will still dine in at a vegetarian restaurant together, yet, they wouldn't be the main reason of mine that affect me to consume vegetarian food."* As the respondent mentioned, dining at vegetarian restaurants is still an option when it comes to dining with family members. Respondents who disagreed that family isn't the main influencer on consuming vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants would be affected due to various reasons. Perhaps, they seldom refer their doubts to their family members, which leads to lower awareness on consumption patterns (Bravo, Fraj, & Martínez, 2006; Lee, Toh, & Kim, 2016). As such, these respondents have a lower possibility of following or imitating their family decisions on purchasing or repurchasing the products and services.

Majority of the respondents agreed that family influences their eating habits, which is consistent with the past research that emphasizes on the great influences on children's eating habits by family food preferences (Baranowski & Nader, 1985). Even though family doesn't significantly influence the particular respondent to consume vegetarian food, qualitative data that collected had indicated that respondents do have other influences that lead to their perceptions and consumption of vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants.

Critical Factor 2: Religion

Almost every major city, including the ones in Malaysia, is diverse in societies, including individuals with different backgrounds, such as religion, values, customs and so on. Religion

is one of the most important factors that affects the choices of foods consumed by an individual (Yao, 1998). All religions have their own rules and regulations to obey, such as dietary restrictions. Such dietary restrictions would affect their daily eating habits due to different level of obeying those constraints. In Malaysia, a multicultural and diverse country, there are several religions that people usually practice, which are Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and so on. To collect the representative qualitative data, university students who are diverse in their religion, such as Buddhist and Christian, were invited as the respondents of this study. The different background enables the researchers to provide diverse perceptions and opinions on consumption of vegetarian food through the in-depth focus group discussion.

One of the respondents noted, *"I am Buddhist and always obey to the dietary restrictions, such as not consuming meats. I just consume vegetarian foods in order to be a truthful and earnest Buddhist as well as get the blessing from God."* This denoted that the respondent, who is a Buddhist, embraces the concept of non-violence to all creatures, which results in the choice to refrain from consuming any meats, dairy or eggs.

However, from the observance today, there are also people who don't obey the dietary laws (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Perry, & Casey, 1999). For instance, new generation of teenagers would consider the religion's restrictions on food probably to be an outdated ritual and ignore them partially or completely, as they believed that they have the rights to eat and enjoy all that they wanted to consume. Respondents who rarely or don't obey with the restrictions on food shared, *"I am a Buddhist, yet, I do consume beef on regular basis in restaurants. I only follow those restrictions on festive seasons, such as Chinese New Year, Wesak Day and so on. I show the respectful to God on festive days, but please set me free on non-festive days,"*, *"I am Buddhist. I consume whatsoever food that I like and want, no matter what restrictions. To my parents, they think that by obeying these rules and regulations are sincere. However, in my opinion, not obeying the restrictions doesn't mean that I'm not a sincere Buddhist."* As the number of new generation is rising rapidly, youngsters are having different perceptions and views, which would lead to the bigger gap of definition in being sincere and truthful in their own religion backgrounds, and this will result in their

eating habits on vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants.

Through the analysis on collected qualitative data from the focus group interview with the university students, most of them disagree that religion will affect their perceptions and eating habits on consuming vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants. This result was consistent with the past research that highlighted in Neumark-Sztainer et al. (1999) on this matter, which indicated that there are individuals, especially Generation Y, who may not follow their religion on food restrictions as they don't want to obey the rules and regulations. Yet, Just et al. (2007) stated that religious belief would also affect an individual's decision on food selection. The results of the qualitative data do have a small percentage whereby respondents still follow the rules and regulations. Although there is low percentage of respondents still influenced by religion, the higher percentage still showed the result from the different viewpoints on religious factors that influences university students' perceptions on vegetarian food.

Critical Factor 3: Trend

Vegetarian restaurants are no longer targeting the small group of people who consume vegetarian food due to religious reason or family influence, but also the market who are avoiding animal products for ethical motives (Tancock, 2015). With the convenience of getting news and information easily through scrolling the social websites on any gadgets, the younger generation of consumers is aware of every situation that is happening around the world. In this tech-savvy generation, people can easily reach any kind of updates on social media websites, such as videos and images of cruel chicken farming process on food production line as well as unpleasant truths that is happening around the world.

One of the respondents mentioned, *"I believed that there's a trend on animal-free products, where part of the consumers is avoiding consuming any meats. I watched those videos on Facebook, which was disgusting and awful. Yes, I will join the group of people and go for animal-free products in the near future."* Nowadays, consumers have the ability to get higher level of education, such as going to high school, university or even go further to have PhD studies, to increase their knowledge and enhance their capabilities. Gradually, they realized that being responsible for the environment is a

must to protect the environment. It is not only about preserving the environment for the future generations, but also trying to protect animals that are suffering from being slaughtered and turned into dishes just because of humans' desires. From the statements of the respondents, it is consistent with the previous research of Woollaston (2014), whereby the research stated individuals starting to change their diet due to the environment issues as they are aware of the consequences of these matters in the long run, which is matching with the point of views of respondents.

Moreover, vegetarian food is also gaining the attraction on social media websites, where operators of restaurants often use it as one of the marketing tools to further spread the awareness instead of the traditional media, such as advertisements on televisions or newspapers (Malovany, 2014). Youngsters are keen on trying something new and different from the conventional food, and this leads to the development and growth of both restaurants and technology. One of the respondents agreed, *"True that it is a trend among my social circle. My social media websites, such as Facebook, Instagram and others, always full with images of trendy food. This has become a way of communication between my friend and I, where I would like to try out all those foods that they've taken and posted. And yes, vegetarian food is one of it."* As mentioned by the respondents, there are quite a number of vegetarian restaurants, which are promoting and advertising through the usage of social media websites. Today, people are very used to capture nice pictures of dishes before starting their meals for various purposes, including posting up to social media websites to share the information, reviews for the dishes, or just for fun purposes. These motives of consumers did help the restaurants to boost awareness (Malovany, 2014).

Nevertheless, there are also respondents who do not agree that vegetarian food it's a trend, but more to just a kind of eating habits. Respondents shared, *"I don't really see vegetarian food as a trend. In my opinion, although slaughtering animals for food are cruel, they are still the main food sources that we can actually grow healthy. I will still continue my eating habit on meats, but also vegetarian food"*, *"I consume vegetarian food isn't because of the trend, neither the ethical issues nor food trend, but just simply the influences of my grandparents."* The results from respondents who disagreed

on 'dining at vegetarian restaurants isn't a trend' are inconsistent with the research done by Woollaston (2014). Although past research stated that changing of environment will lead consumers to change their eating habits, unusually, this study reflects the complete opposite.

Critical Factor 4: Health

Nowadays, consumers are increasingly becoming more health conscious, where they started to purchase healthy food ingredients for organic foods, especially the younger generations (Krismantari, 2011). To get a healthier diet, reducing the total fat and cholesterol intake while eating more high-fiber food will help maintain good health, such as vegetables, fruits and others. A vegetarian diet is healthier than normal diet as it contains less animal fat and cholesterol but more fibers. Therefore, food that is high in animal fat and cholesterol are believed that will lead to higher risk of a diagnosis with numerous diseases (Moritz, 2009). As a result, consumers will try to exclude meats in their meals for those who adopted vegetarian diet usually due to the concerns on potential diseases.

Consumers, who are having heavy meat consumption for daily meals, are having a slightly higher possibility of a diagnosis with various diseases (Moritz, 2009). Respondents who are having vegetarian diet confessed, *"Yes, health is a concern for me on deciding my eating habits. My father was diagnosed with high blood pressure and minor stroke recently. This incident had changed my eating habits since then,"*, *"Well, I wanted to have a slim and fit body whereby I treat it as a health conscious thing."* As a result, respondents are successfully influenced and motivated to consume vegetarian food due to the health concern. Most of the replies from respondents have indicated that they are aware of the vegetarian diets and consuming it to get a healthier and stronger body (Jabs, Devine, & Sobal, 1998). In terms of perceptions of university students on vegetarian meals, it is consistent with the previous research mentioned in Fox and Ward (2008), whereby both supports that health does motivate individuals to go vegetarian.

Although it is a common sense that vegetarian food is healthier than other food, especially the consumption of meats, there are people who don't care for their current healthiness where they are still young. As mentioned that there are indi-

viduals who are less health conscious, respondents noted and shared, *"I wasn't consume vegetarian food because of my health. I think that I'm still young, whereby my body can accept and allow anything that I eat. I still would go for vegetarian diets but not frequently and because of health purpose."* Respondents are mostly students who are 18 to 25 years old, which they believed that they are still too young to start having healthier meals in their daily basis.

As the result, three out of six respondents have vegetarian food because of health conscious whereby they think vegetarian food is better and healthier than other conventional food. On the other hand, the remaining percentage of respondents think that it would not be a factor to them as consideration on having vegetarian food in order to get a healthier lifestyle. Possibly, the qualitative data that was collected are inconsistent with the previous research due to the demographic background, which leads to altered result.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study provided the perspective of university students on vegetarian food in identifying the factors that influence their food choice. In particular, this study identified the long term or short term effects of influences that affect university students on consuming vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants. This can boost the business of vegetarian foodservice operators as they are able to target the right market of consumers while offering the right product to the right customer at the right price and location. Results and discussions of this study enables food and beverage operators, especially investors and owners of vegetarian restaurants, to have an in-depth understanding and further exploring on the factors influencing university students' perceptions on vegetarian restaurants. Additionally, it's also important for operators to be aware of the factors that influence consumer's perception and decisions, but also allow them to take essential actions and managerial implications to capture more customers in the market by achieving customer's needs and wants.

This section sums up the implications that may be considered and applied by vegetarian restaurants operators and other foodservice providers. Firstly, in terms of vegetarian restaurants, managers could provide family friendly environ-

ments and atmosphere in the restaurant. As the findings from focus group discussion, there are respondents who consume vegetarian food due to family factors. Thus, vegetarian restaurants could provide comfortable and suitable furniture and settings, appropriate background music to fit the 'family theme' in the restaurant. Furthermore, to target and attract vegetarian consumers, who are considering their religion's restrictions on food selection as well as customers who have attention on food ethics, ensuring that food is authentically vegetarian to safeguard customer's religious and ethical beliefs. Moreover, the number of consumers who are health conscious is growing rapidly, whereby vegetarian restaurants operators should improve the quality of food, including nutritional value, balanced nutrition and so on. Vegetarians mainly consume vegetables, which do not consist of all kind of vitamins that provide a balanced diet. For instance, vegetarians who don't consume fish or eggs, could go for another choice that consists of the omega-3 fatty acids, which including pumpkin seeds, walnuts, certain leafy green vegetables, soybean oil, and canola oil. Including these ingredients in dishes not only attracts consumer but also offer them with the balanced vegetarian diet which able to boost the brand awareness to public. Besides the implications for vegetarian restaurants, there are also managerial implications that other foodservice providers can apply in their business. In Malaysia, the number of vegetarian restaurants that operate within these few years has been increasing, which showed the trend and demand of consumers which is causing the snowballing effect as well. Hence, non-vegetarian food service providers must include vegetarian products into the menu in order to capture this promising market. Expanding the menu with vegetarian dishes not only get the high possibility in earning revenue, and also get the better market share in food service industry. By understanding the factors that influence individuals' perception and eating habits, especially university students, foodservice providers able to target and capture more customers with incorporating these implications to their business.

This study has limitations. The number of the respondents for the focus group interview is the one of the methodological weaknesses of this study. Qualitative data collected were only gathered the university students of one university located in a state of Malaysia. Although six respondents who are in

different religious background joined the interview, the in-depth focus group discussion couldn't be generalized to other university students in the same or different universities due to the nature of the study. The six respondents couldn't represent the others as students from different demographic background may have diverse perception and consumption of vegetarian food at vegetarian restaurants, which would change the results. However, the collected data do provide an insight of the thought and feelings of Malaysian students of Sunway University. Consequently, future studies should be conducted on a larger pool of university students, preferably with a diverse demographic background that includes different religion, nationality and so on.

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