

Research Article

Development Strategies of Local Cuisine in Supporting the Local Community Economy on Jalan Alor, Kuala Lumpur

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Abstract: Local cuisine not only represents cultural identity but also functions as a significant economic force. This study highlights the development strategies of local cuisine on Jalan Alor, Kuala Lumpur, which has transformed into a premier culinary tourism destination. The research aims to analyze product innovation strategies, marketing, and community involvement in driving local economic growth. The research method employed is a qualitative approach with a case study design, involving in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document studies. Findings indicate that the success of Jalan Alor is supported by sustainable culinary innovation, digital promotion strategies, quality management, and informal community support. The economic impact created includes increased vendor income, job creation, and multiplier effects on other sectors. However, challenges such as sanitation, regulation, and resilience against global crises remain major obstacles. This study recommends the need for supportive policies and training programs for culinary business operators to ensure local economic sustainability.

Keywords: Local Cuisine; Economic Development; Culinary Tourism; SME Strategies; Product Innovation

1. Introduction

Local cuisine has long been recognized as a representation of cultural identity as well as an economic asset of a region. In the context of tourism and local economic development, regional specialty foods serve as strategic instruments to attract tourists and drive community economies. One prominent example is Jalan Alor in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which has developed into a renowned street food tourism center. This transformation did not occur spontaneously but through a series of strategies implemented by business operators, merchant associations, and other stakeholders.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of the culinary sector in creating employment and mobilizing the informal sector (UNWTO, 2021). However, there is still limited research focusing on adaptation and development strategies of local culinary businesses in the context of urban tourism areas such as Jalan Alor. Various approaches have been attempted, ranging from product innovation (Kotler & Keller, 2021), digital marketing (Rauf, 2016), to building cultural narratives (Sio et al., 2024), but their effectiveness and sustainability still need to be tested in specific local contexts.

This research offers a new contribution in explaining how innovative strategies in the street food sector contribute to the economic resilience of communities. Our focus is: (1) To identify local culinary development strategies on Jalan Alor. (2) To analyze their impact on the economic welfare of local communities. (3) To evaluate supporting and hindering factors for the success of these strategies.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Local Cuisine in Research Context

Local cuisine refers to foods and beverages characteristic of a region that are an integral part of the local community's culture and history. In the context of Jalan Alor, local cuisine reflects Malaysia's ethnic diversity Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others manifested in flavor combinations, presentation methods, and cultural narratives behind each dish (Mazuki et al., 2025). Cuisine on Jalan Alor is not merely a consumption product but also an expression of living culture passed down across generations.

2.2. The Role of Cuisine in the Local Economy

Local cuisine plays an important role in creating economic value through job creation, increased regional income, and strengthening community economies (Gurría, 2018). This sector has a strong multiplier effect from farmers and raw material suppliers to workers in supporting service sectors such as transportation and sanitation (Almansouri et al., 2022). Therefore, sustainable culinary development can strengthen the foundation of local economies in urban and tourism areas (Zainal et al., 2010).

2.3. Culinary Tourism and Its Relationship with Local Economy

Culinary tourism has become a strategic element in attracting high-spending tourists (Naumov & Dutta, 2020). Jalan Alor, as a culinary tourism destination, not only increases tourist visits but also enhances spending in hospitality, transportation, and retail sectors (Nurhayati Khairatun, 2020). Authentic dining experiences, whether in the form of street food or interactive activities such as cooking classes, enhance the competitiveness of tourism destinations (Shariff et al., 2024).

2.4. Development Strategies for Culinary SMEs

Culinary SME development strategies emphasize product innovation, digital technology utilization, quality management, and branding (Grassl, 2000; Kotler & Keller, 2021; Rauf, 2016). SMEs need to be responsive to market tastes while maintaining authenticity. Promotion through social media, collaboration with influencers, and presence on food ordering applications are key strategies in expanding market reach (Rauf, 2016).

2.5. Characteristics of Jalan Alor: History and Transformation

Jalan Alor has evolved from an ordinary trading area into a popular culinary destination since the 1990s (Zainal et al., 2010). Its main attractions are the vibrant night atmosphere, diversity of ethnic dishes, and direct street dining experience. This uniqueness is supported by strategic location and high accessibility, as well as business operators' adaptation to modern tourist needs without abandoning traditional roots (Jezierska-Thöle et al., 2025).

3. Proposed Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The main focus is to understand local culinary development strategies in depth and contextually on Jalan Alor, Kuala Lumpur.

3.1. Research Subjects and Informants

The research subjects are culinary vendors on Jalan Alor. Key informants consist of four vendors with different dish categories: grilled squid, traditional bread, grilled corn, and tom yum soup. Additionally, supplementary informants include merchant associations, local government representatives, and tourism agents.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

Data collection methods include:

In-depth Interviews: Conducted semi-structured with focus on business history, innovation and marketing strategies, challenges, and economic impact. Participatory Observation: Conducted on-site to understand activities, vendor-customer interactions, and culinary area dynamics. Document Study: Involving government policy documents, media reports, and academic literature related to local cuisine and community economy.

3.3. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Steps include : interview transcription, repeated reading and data coding, identification and grouping of main themes, interpretation of meanings and relationships between themes, synthesis and conclusions based on objectives and problem formulation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Culinary Profile of Jalan Alor: A Mosaic of Flavors and Multicultural Identity

Jalan Alor is a showcase of multicultural gastronomy displaying the richness of flavors from various Malaysian ethnic backgrounds. Observation and interview results identified popular dishes such as grilled squid, Char Kway Teow, Hokkien Mee, roti canai, grilled corn, and tom yum soup influenced by Thai culture.

The grilled squid vendor relies on fresh raw materials and traditional marinades passed down through generations. The bread vendor presents traditional bread with modern modifications, such as contemporary filling combinations. The grilled corn vendor offers simple yet tempting flavors, while the tom yum soup vendor emphasizes fresh spices to maintain authentic taste (Baum et al., 2020; Quan & Wang, 2004). This combination strengthens Jalan Alor's position as an authentic culinary destination capable of embracing both local and international tastes (Almansouri et al., 2022).

4.2. Applied Development Strategies: Vendor Adaptation and Innovation

Field findings reveal that vendors have implemented the following adaptive strategies :

1. Vendors not only maintain old recipes but also create menu variations and new sauce options. Innovation is conducted on a small scale but consistently to adapt to current customer preferences (Maria et al., 2022).
2. Most vendors use social media (Instagram, Facebook) and communication applications like WhatsApp for promotion. Support from local tour agents also serves as an important marketing channel. Reviews on Google Maps and TripAdvisor influence customer perception (Rauf, 2016; Tacardon et al., 2023).
3. Awareness of the importance of quality and hygiene drives vendors to maintain fresh raw materials and cooking area cleanliness. Some implement the use of gloves, covered containers, and clean water to support operations (Richards & Duif, 2018; Sio et al., 2024).
4. Although not in the form of formal organizations, informal communities among vendors are formed through cooperation, information sharing, and mutual assistance in maintaining surrounding areas. This solidarity strengthens business sustainability (Grassl, 2000; Hall & Gössling, 2016).
5. Some vendors acknowledge having participated in short training sessions from the government or NGOs, but financial assistance and direct facilitation remain limited. The greatest support comes from collective promotion of Jalan Alor tourism.

4.3. Impact on Local Economy: Inclusive Growth and Multiplier Effects

Research shows that culinary development on Jalan Alor makes significant contributions to the local economy:

Income Increase: Most vendors report increased turnover since the area became widely known as a culinary tourism destination. This increase enables them to improve living standards and save for business development (Tacardon et al., 2023)

Job Creation: These culinary businesses open employment opportunities, both full-time and part-time, for surrounding residents. Many workers are family members or neighbors of vendors (Hall & Gössling, 2016; Nurhayati Khairatun, 2020)

Economic Multiplier Effect: Economic impact extends to other sectors such as raw material suppliers, transportation, and surrounding shops. The circulation of money indicates the formation of a healthy and interconnected local economic ecosystem.

However, challenges such as intense competition, high rental costs, and regulatory uncertainty still overshadow business sustainability. Additionally, dependence on tourism makes this sector vulnerable to external fluctuations such as pandemics (Baum et al., 2020).

4.4. Success Factors and Challenges: Towards Sustainability

Success Factors there is strategic location in Kuala Lumpur city center. Unique multi-ethnic and authentic cuisine. Vibrant night atmosphere and direct culinary experience. Good reputation from customers and online reviews. Focus on fresh raw materials and service.

Challenges Faced :

1. Infrastructure and sanitation still need improvement.
2. Unclear and varying regulations causing confusion.
3. Dependence on tourism and low resilience to crises.
4. Limited access to training and business assistance.
5. Lack of added value based on culinary tourism experiences (e.g., culinary tours or cooking classes).

Therefore, Jalan Alor's success lies not only in food deliciousness but also in innovation, informal collaboration, and local ecosystem support. This sector's sustainability highly depends on synergy among business operators, government, and community (Mazuki et al., 2025; Sio et al., 2024).

5. Comparison

This research aligns with various previous studies highlighting the importance of local cuisine as economic force and cultural identity. For instance, Htet et al., (2024) and Naumov & Dutta, (2020) examined local culinary consumption at Jalan Alor night markets and emphasized the role of domestic tourists in supporting the local economy. However, that research focused more on consumer behavior rather than development strategies from business operators' perspective.

The study on cultural hybridity in Malaysian gastronomy is also relevant as it discusses how street food like that on Jalan Alor reflects the country's multicultural identity (Hall & Gössling, 2016; Shariff et al., 2024; Zainal et al., 2010). However, their approach is conceptual and does not address managerial aspects, innovation, or economic impact empirically.

Unlike both studies, this research focuses more on vendor adaptation strategies, their impact on the local economy, and micro-business sustainability. It also complements the UNWTO (2021) and Hall & Gössling (2016) studies stating that sustainable culinary tourism development requires integration among business operators, government, and community.

Furthermore, this research enriches literature by presenting current post-pandemic field data, an aspect not widely explored in the context of Jalan Alor. For example, Baum et al., (2020) highlighted COVID-19's impact on the hospitality workforce but did not specifically discuss vendor community resilience at street food destinations.

Thus, this research's contribution lies in a holistic approach combining culinary innovation, community management, and local economic strengthening not comprehensively discussed in previous research.

6. Conclusions

This research demonstrates that local culinary development strategies on Jalan Alor, Kuala Lumpur, significantly impact the improvement of the local community's economy. Through product innovation, digital media utilization, quality management, and community involvement, vendors have successfully maintained business sustainability in a competitive tourism ecosystem.

Jalan Alor's success as a culinary destination lies not only in food taste but also in informal collaboration among business operators, authentic atmosphere, and collective reputation built over time. However, challenges such as sanitation, regulation, and resilience against global crises remain urgent issues requiring policy intervention.

Recommendations from this research include local government needs to provide adequate sanitation infrastructure and waste management. Continuous training and technical support for culinary vendors are needed. Thematic culinary tours or cooking classes need to be developed as tourism value-added enhancement. SME-friendly regulations that do not restrict innovation are required.

This research enriches studies in culinary tourism and local economy fields, opening opportunities for further studies on street food sustainability in other urban areas.

Author's contributions:

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Data are not publicly available due to ethical reasons and informant privacy.

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Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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