

Hyper-Local Branding of Perak Cuisine: A Conceptual Framework through Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines the potential of hyper-local branding to preserve and promote Perak's culinary heritage through the lens of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model. Hyper-local branding foreground's regional identity, cultural narratives, and authenticity in local cuisine, yet the growing influence of globalization, homogenization of taste, and the commodification of food culture pose significant threats to sustaining culinary distinctiveness. The problem addressed in this study is the lack of a systematic framework that connects semiotics, cultural identity, and branding in the Malaysian food context, particularly for under-represented cuisines such as those from Perak. While previous research has examined food tourism, authenticity, and cultural preservation, there remains a research gap in integrating communication theory—specifically Hall's model—into the study of hyper-local branding practices. This paper contributes novelty by proposing a conceptual framework that reconceptualizes cuisine as a cultural text encoded by producers and decoded by diverse audiences. Methodologically, the paper adopts a conceptual and theoretical framework development approach, synthesizing insights from semiotics, gastronomy, and communication theory. By explicitly addressing the research gap in applying Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model to hyper-local branding, the study develops propositions that can guide future empirical testing. The framework links literature on food heritage, flexible visual identity, and semiotics with audience reception studies, positioning it as a bridge between cultural theory and branding practice. By addressing the decoding of local cuisine branding, this paper advances the discussion beyond static notions of authenticity toward a more dynamic, dialogical understanding of branding as cultural negotiation. Implications extend to gastronomic tourism, heritage preservation, and branding practices, offering both theoretical and practical pathways for sustaining Perak's culinary identity in the face of global cultural convergence.

Keywords: hyper-local branding, Perak cuisine, encoding/decoding model, semiotics, food heritage, Malaysia



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1 INTRODUCTION

Food is a profound marker of identity and memory, especially within a multicultural society like Malaysia (Barthes, 1961; Bell and Valentine, 2017). Perak's food heritage like "rendang tok", "ikan pekasam", and "nasi kandar" reflect the cultural lineages. As globalisation accelerates, the distinctiveness of such cuisine is threatened by commodification and dilution (Everett and Aitchison,

2008; Hasan and Ismail, 2022). Thus, the hyper-local concept serves as an effort to reduce this kind of threat to bring value to both sides (local and global impact).

The concept of hyper-local has emerged as a significant approach in media, branding, and cultural studies, referring to practices that concentrate on very specific geographical or cultural contexts (Hess and Waller, 2014). Hyper-local branding offers a counter strategy by embedding local narratives and cultural symbolism into the branding of food items (Richards, 2020; Ghazali and Yong, 2021). As a sample global food chain like McDonald (Malaysia) have been introduced the “Nasi Lemak Burger” as new Flavors to their burger line for their seasonal products in Malaysia market. The Nasi Lemak Burger features a tender, coconut-infused chicken thigh patty wrapped in a crispy cornflake coating, layered with sweet and spicy sambal, a fried egg, caramelised onions, and fresh cucumber slices. To unpack how these kinds of hyper-local narratives are communicated and received, this paper employs Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model (Hall, 1980), conceptualising cuisine as a cultural text whose meaning is co-constructed.

This paper aims to theoretically articulate how hyper-local cuisine branding functions as encoding/decoding. Secondly to demonstrate the semiotic power of Perak's culinary identity; and lastly to offer a framework to guide future empirical research and branding practice in the context of hyper-local branding.

However, despite the rich body of work on food heritage, authenticity, and tourism, much of the scholarship has concentrated on well-established gastronomic hubs such as Penang or Malacca. Perak's culinary heritage, while equally distinctive, remains under-explored in academic discourse and underutilised in branding strategies. The problem lies in the absence of a systematic framework that connects semiotics, cultural identity, and branding in the Malaysian food context, particularly in relation to cuisines at risk of dilution through globalisation and commodification. Without such a framework, local producers struggle to articulate the cultural significance of their offerings, and audiences may interpret these narratives in fragmented or oppositional ways.

This gap signals the need for an approach that can theorise how cultural messages are embedded in cuisine and how they are subsequently received by diverse audiences. Existing studies on food branding often remain descriptive or emphasise authenticity without theorising the interpretive processes at play. By drawing on Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model, this paper directly addresses that gap, offering a theoretical framework that operationalises encoding strategies, decoding positions, and cultural negotiation within Perak's culinary branding context.

The novelty of this paper lies in proposing a conceptual framework that bridges hyper-local branding with Hall's communication model, positioning Perak cuisine as both a cultural text and a branding strategy. This integration not only contributes theoretically by expanding the scope of semiotics and cultural communication in food studies but also provides practical insights for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and tourism managers. It highlights how provenance cues, flexible identity systems, and embodied practices can be strategically encoded and decoded to sustain cultural identity while enhancing gastronomic tourism and community empowerment.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Unlike global or even national branding, hyper-local strategies emphasise community narratives, cultural authenticity, and place-based value creation. This focus resonates with the idea that meaning making is deeply rooted in local identities, traditions, and socio-cultural practices (Mei and Padil, 2024). These are a few cores elements that resonates the hyper-local as shown is Table 1.

Table 1 Core Elements of Hyper-Local

Core Elements	Description	Key References
Cultural Relevance	Embedding local traditions, dialects, festivals, and symbols in the brand/message.	Holt (2004); Askegaard & Linnet (2011)
Community-Centric	Building trust and participation at the neighbourhood level, fostering belonging.	Grewal et al. (2017); Zukin & Maguire (2004)
Authenticity	Avoiding “cultural appropriation” by engaging with local stakeholders.	Beverland (2005); Napoli et al. (2014)
Localisation of Product/Service	Adapting offerings (food, design, packaging, communication style) to reflect community preferences.	Robertson (1995); Varman & Belk (2009)
Semiotic Anchoring	Using signs, icons, and visual codes that are immediately meaningful within the cultural context.	Barthes (1972); Mick (1986); Mei BingFeng & Padil (2024)

Hyper-local is about going deeper than local. It is a cultural branding practice that thrives on semiotic connections, authenticity, and community identity. It’s increasingly relevant in Malaysia (and Asia more broadly) because of diverse cultural textures and rising consumer demand for representation over globalisation.

2.1 Hyper-Local Branding and Place Identity

Hyper-local branding emphasises place-specific cultural specificity, where brand narratives are constructed around the unique cultural, social, and historical attributes of a locality (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). As shown in Bujang Valley, community co-creation in branding can enhance the authenticity and legitimacy of regional identity claims (Salim et al., 2023). Unlike standardised global branding approaches, hyper-local strategies embed symbolic markers, such as dialects, heritage practices, culinary traditions, and visual semiotics. These markers resonate deeply with the community and visitors alike. In the context of food tourism, this approach plays a particularly critical role, as food is both a cultural artifact and an identity marker that reflects the heritage of a place.

By foregrounding local recipes, preparation techniques, and storytelling, hyper-local branding sustains local identities and provides visitors with experiences that are authentic, memorable, and culturally differentiated (Lopez-Guzman et al., 2019; Richards, 2020). This not only strengthens the economic value of regional tourism but also acts as a cultural preservation mechanism, ensuring that local communities remain active participants in shaping and benefiting from their unique cultural assets.

2.2 Food Heritage and Cultural Sustainability

Gastronomic heritage serves as a crucial pillar in sustaining cultural continuity, linking contemporary practices with ancestral traditions through food-related knowledge, rituals, and community sharing. It embodies not only the tangible elements of cuisine such as recipes, ingredients, and preparation techniques, but also the intangible values, narratives, and social meanings attached to food. Malaysian researchers have emphasised that culinary heritage functions as a form of cultural diplomacy, strengthening international recognition of Malaysia’s multicultural identity while also reinforcing local identity and pride within communities (Omar et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2023).

Within this framework, regional cuisines offer distinct expressions of place-based culture. For example, Perak’s Lenggong Valley cuisine illustrates the ways in which food traditions embody ancestral practices and sustain regional uniqueness. Rooted in centuries-old methods of preparation and indigenous ingredients, the cuisine not only reflects the valley’s heritage but also acts as a living archive

of local knowledge and identity (Raji et al., 2020; Aziz and Ismail, 2022). Such examples demonstrate how gastronomic heritage is central to both cultural preservation and place branding, making it a vital component of hyper-local strategies in tourism and community development.

2.3 Semiotics of Food and Authenticity

Food operates as a system of cultural signification, where ingredients, preparation methods, and consumption practices function as symbolic markers that communicate identity, belonging, and cultural meaning (Barthes, 1961; Counihan and Van Esterik, 2013). Within this semiotic framework, culinary elements are not merely nutritional but are encoded with signs that reflect heritage, ritual, and social hierarchy. Like the reinterpretation of “*tanggam*” in contemporary sculpture, hyper-local branding of cuisine can embed heritage symbols into modern packaging or visual systems, allowing audiences to decode layered meaning (Yusoff et al., 2025).

In the realm of food branding, authenticity plays a central role in shaping consumer perceptions, as it conveys a sense of realness and intangible cultural value that distinguishes local products from mass-produced or globalised alternatives (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Kivela and Crotts, 2016). Authenticity is communicated not only through the food itself but also through its symbolic representation in marketing and design.

In Malaysia, packaging and visual identity have become powerful carriers of cultural meaning, where motifs, typography, and colour schemes are strategically employed to signify authenticity and regional distinctiveness. The study on Eid envelope design shows how cultural symbolism is negotiated by users and producers through visual design cues (Wahab et al., 2024), which parallels how culinary branding must negotiate meaning across diverse consumer audiences. Such design practices transform packaging into a semiotic medium that embodies local narratives and reinforces hyper-local identities (Yusoff and Ishak, 2022; Mei and Padil, 2024). This alignment of food, design, and cultural semiotics highlights how hyper-local branding can both preserve heritage and enhance market differentiation in an increasingly competitive global food landscape.

2.4 Flexible Branding in Cultural Contexts

Flexible visual identity systems provide brands with the ability to adapt across diverse cultural contexts while maintaining coherence with their core identity markers (Mei and Padil, 2024; Huang and Nien, 2022). Unlike rigid identity systems that prioritise uniformity, flexible systems embrace modularity, variation, and contextual responsiveness. This elasticity allows brands to resonate with local audiences by incorporating place-specific cultural cues such as symbols, colours, languages, and patterns without diluting the brand's overarching narrative. Using the cultural elements taxonomy developed by Muhamad et al. (2023), we position cuisine as a hybrid of material (ingredients, practices) and symbolic (heritage, narratives) elements, which the encoding framework systematically operationalises.

Within the domain of hyper-local culinary branding, such adaptability is particularly valuable, as it enables food brands to reinterpret their identity in ways that align with local gastronomic traditions and cultural aesthetics. For example, packaging or promotional materials can be reconfigured to emphasise regional motifs or linguistic markers, thereby reinforcing authenticity and cultural distinctiveness, while remaining recognisable as part of the larger brand system.

This balance between consistency and flexibility not only strengthens consumer trust but also enhances cultural resonance, positioning hyper-local branding as both globally coherent and locally meaningful.

2.5 Encoding/Decoding Model in Cultural Communication

Hall's encoding/decoding model remains a cornerstone for understanding how meaning is produced, circulated, and interpreted within cultural systems (Hall, 1980; Lillis, 2016). The model emphasises that messages are not passively absorbed by audiences but are actively decoded, often in ways that may align with, negotiate, or resist the intended meaning encoded by producers.

This dynamic framework has been widely applied to media studies and is increasingly extended into the field of branding, where brand narratives are similarly contested and reinterpreted by consumers. Branding, much like media texts, operates as a site of cultural negotiation: while organisations encode meanings through visual identity, packaging, and storytelling, consumers decode these signs based on their cultural position, prior experiences, and community values (Johnson, 2013).

Such interpretive plurality highlights that branding is not a one-directional communication but rather a dialogical process in which meanings evolve through consumer interaction. More recent scholarship emphasises that this process is particularly visible in hyper-local branding, where local consumers may resist homogenised global narratives and instead reinterpret brand messages to affirm local identity and authenticity (O'Reilly, 2021). In this way, Hall's model provides a critical lens for examining how cultural power and resistance are embedded within the semiotics of branding.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Methodologically, the paper adopts a conceptual and theoretical framework development approach, synthesising insights from semiotics, gastronomy, and communication theory. By explicitly addressing the research gap in applying Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model to hyper-local branding, the study develops propositions that can guide future empirical testing. The framework links literature on food heritage, flexible visual identity, and semiotics with audience reception studies, positioning it as a bridge between cultural theory and branding practice. This theoretical framework, applying Hall's model, local cuisine in Perak is understood as a communicative system:

3.1 Encoding: Producers and Strategies

Producers encode cultural meaning via material and discursive means: recipe fidelity, ingredient sourcing, menu narratives, interior decor, signage, and social media storytelling. In Perak, for example, linking a product to the Lenggong Valley or using limestone imagery referencing Ipoh's landscape are deliberate encoding moves (Raji et al., 2020; Mei and Padil, 2024).

3.2 Cultural Texts: Food as Semiotic Artifact

The cultural text includes the physical dish, the menu description, packaging, and mediated representations (Instagram posts, promotional videos). Each element is a node of meaning where producers accumulate symbolic capital (Bourdieuian perspective) and signal authenticity (Barthes, 1961; Yusoff and Ishak, 2022).

3.3 Decoding: Audience Interpretations

- Dominant-hegemonic decoding: Local community members may accept the encoded meanings as legitimate, reinforcing cultural continuity and pride (Lopez-Guzman et al., 2019).
- Negotiated decoding: Domestic tourists or younger locals may accept the heritage claim but reinterpret it through contemporary tastes or convenience needs (Omar et al., 2021).
- Oppositional decoding: Certain audiences (e.g., cosmopolitan consumers or critical cultural commentators) may view heritage branding as commodification, exposing a gap between encoded intentions and perceived authenticity (Cohen and Avieli, 2021).

Conceptual Framework: Encoding/Decoding Model Applied to Hyper-local Cuisine Branding in Perak

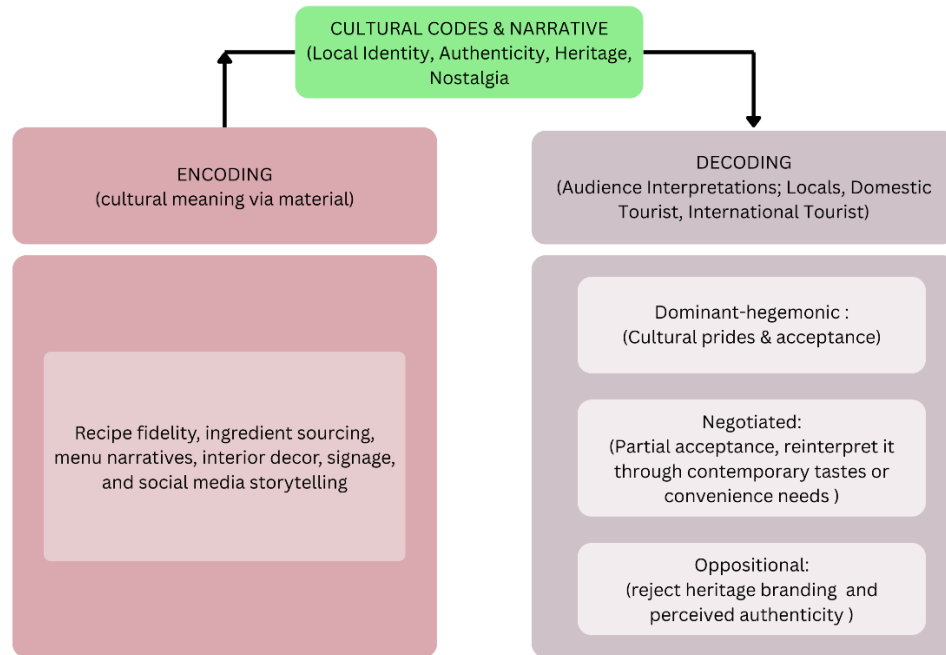


Figure 1. Encoding/Decoding Model Applied to Hyper-Local Cuisine Branding in Perak
Note. Adapted from Hall (1980). Illustration by Author.

3.4 Dynamics and Propositions

From the theoretical discussion of encoding/decoding and its application to hyper-local branding, several propositions can be derived for empirical testing. These propositions link semiotic encoding strategies with consumer interpretation, highlighting how cultural alignment, visual adaptability, and perceived authenticity shape decoding outcomes.

- **P1: Higher encoding fidelity (clearer provenance cues, embodied rituals) will increase the probability of dominant decoding among locals.**

This proposition suggests that when brands successfully embed authentic cultural markers—such as provenance cues (e.g., geographical origin, local ingredients) and embodied rituals (e.g., preparation practices, communal dining traditions)—local audiences are more likely to adopt the intended or “dominant-hegemonic” decoding (Hall, 1980). The alignment between cultural identity and brand messaging strengthens recognition, legitimacy, and trust within the community.

- **P2: Flexible visual identities will mediate the relation between encoding and positive decoding among tourists.**

For external audiences, particularly tourists, cultural familiarity may be limited. In such cases, flexible visual identity systems (Mei and Padil, 2024; Huang and Nien, 2022) serve as mediators by translating complex cultural meanings into accessible visual codes. By adapting identity systems across contexts while retaining core brand signifiers, brands can facilitate negotiated or positive decoding among non-local consumers, enabling them to appreciate authenticity without requiring deep prior cultural knowledge.

- **P3: Excessive commercialisation or misalignment between claims and practice will increase oppositional decoding.**

When brand claims of authenticity are perceived as exaggerated, commodified, or inconsistent with actual practices, consumers are more likely to engage in oppositional decoding, rejecting or resisting the intended narrative (O'Reilly, 2021). This backlash often arises in hyper-local culinary contexts where heritage is seen as being exploited for profit rather than preserved as cultural capital. Such dissonance undermines trust and may lead to consumer scepticism, resistance, or even public criticism.

Together, these propositions establish a framework for testing how encoding strategies and visual identity systems influence consumer interpretation across different audience groups. They also underscore the risks of over-commercialisation in weakening the credibility of hyper-local branding.

4 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a conceptual paper, this mixed method lays the proposed groundwork for empirical studies, a multi-site study in Perak is recommended.

Phase 1: Semiotic Audit (Encoding)

Collect and code artifacts (menus, packaging, signage, social posts) from 30–40 food SMEs. Develop an Encoding Density Index (EDI) across categories: provenance cues, narrative depth, visual iconography, ritual description, and sourcing claims.

Phase 2: Ethnography (Practice)

Conduct non-participant observation in Perak eateries to understand cultural context (old town kopitiam, heritage restaurants, night markets). Document embodied practices (preparation methods, service rituals) and how producers communicate heritage on site.

Phase 3: Producer Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with chefs, owners, and tourism officers, suggest ($n \approx 25$) to capture encoding rationales, authenticity dilemmas, and feedback loops.

Phase 4: Audience Reception

Use focus groups (locals, domestic tourists, international visitors) to elicit decoding positions when exposed to curated stimuli (menus, reels). Supplement with a structured survey, suggest ($n \approx 400$) measuring decoding scales, perceived authenticity, place attachment, willingness to pay (WTP), and advocacy intentions.

Phase 5: Comparative Analysis

Include a benchmark site (e.g., Penang) to test place-specific effects and external validity.

5 DATA ANALYSIS

The study will employ a mixed-methods approach to capture both the depth of cultural meaning and the structural relationships among constructs.

5.1 Qualitative Analysis

Semi-structured interviews and visual materials will first be analysed using thematic and semiotic analysis, supported by NVivo software. Thematic analysis will allow the identification of recurring patterns in participants' interpretations of hyper-local branding, while semiotic analysis will focus on unpacking the use of cultural codes, provenance cues, and visual signifiers in food branding (Barthes, 1961; Mick, 1986). This qualitative phase is intended to provide contextual richness and to inform the operationalisation of constructs for the quantitative phase.

5.2 Quantitative Analysis

Survey data will be analysed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to identify underlying dimensions of decoding and authenticity, followed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) will then be used to test hypothesised mediated relationships, particularly the pathway from Encoding–Decoding–Interpretation (EDI) → Decoding → Outcomes. This approach enables the testing of mediation effects, such as the role of flexible visual identity in shaping positive decoding. Furthermore, multi-group analysis will be conducted to assess differences between cohorts (e.g., locals vs. tourists), allowing for the evaluation of how cultural proximity influences decoding strategies and brand perceptions.

This combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches ensures both theoretical depth and empirical rigor, making it possible to capture the complex processes through which hyper-local branding is encoded, decoded, and contested across different audiences.

5.3 Justification of Sample Sizes

For producer interviews, a target of approximately 25 participants (chefs, owners, and tourism officers) is proposed to achieve thematic saturation while ensuring diverse perspectives from SMEs and heritage-focused operators. This number balances depth with feasibility, reflecting common practice in qualitative research where saturation typically occurs within 20–30 interviews. For the survey phase, a target of around 400 respondents is proposed. This sample size is methodologically justified as it provides sufficient statistical power for exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (EFA/CFA) and is adequate for structural equation modelling (SEM), which generally requires 10–20 responses per estimated parameter. Thus, 400 respondents ensure robust testing of the framework while accommodating subgroup comparisons (locals, domestic tourists, international visitors).

5.4 Justification for Mixed-Methods Approach

A mixed-methods design is particularly well-suited for applying Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model. The qualitative phases (semiotic audit, ethnography, interviews) capture the richness of encoding practices and contextual meanings, aligning with Hall's emphasis on cultural positioning and negotiation. The quantitative phase (survey + SEM) allows testing of hypothesised relationships, such as how provenance cues and flexible branding mediate decoding outcomes across audience groups. This integration ensures theoretical depth while also providing empirical validity, reflecting Hall's model as both a cultural theory and an analytical framework that benefits from multiple forms of evidence.

5.5 Quality and Ethics

Ensure triangulation, member checking, and ethical clearance. Provide anonymised reporting or opt-in credit for producers

6 DISCUSSIONS

This framework extends Hall's encoding/decoding perspective into culinary branding and place identity studies. It operationalises encoding (EDI) and decoding (Decoding Position Scale) constructs and highlights the role of flexible identity systems in mediating audience reception. Some of the Practical Implications are:

a) For Entrepreneurs

Use clear provenance cues and embodied practices to increase perceived authenticity among locals while employing flexible visual identities for tourist legibility (Mei and Padil, 2024).

b) For Policymakers

Design heritage-sensitive grant criteria and labelling systems that reward authentic sourcing and community involvement without freezing practices into static "museum" forms.

c) For Tourism Managers

Develop interpretive programs (guided tastings, storytelling sessions) to scaffold tourist decoding and reduce oppositional readings.

Even though this concept might give some positive value, there are risks and caveats to managed. Such as commodification (with over-branding risks would hollowing cultural depth, essentialism (by representing cuisine as a single static identity misrepresents the fluid, hybrid nature of culture) and market limitations (hyper-local products may face scalability issues).

7 CONCLUSIONS

This conceptual paper has highlighted how the integration of the hyper-local approach with Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model provides a robust framework for understanding the dynamics of local cuisine branding in Perak, Malaysia. The paper began by identifying a central problem: the risk of cultural dilution and commodification in local cuisines due to globalisation, coupled with the limited academic attention given to Perak's gastronomic heritage compared to other Malaysian regions.

The study addressed this research gap by extending cultural communication theory into the domain of food branding. Whereas previous studies have focused primarily on authenticity, tourism, or heritage preservation, few have examined how culinary practices operate as communicative systems where meaning is encoded by producers and decoded by diverse audiences. By proposing a conceptual framework rooted in Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, this paper offers a novel theoretical contribution: positioning cuisine as a cultural text subject to negotiated and contested interpretations.

The novelty of this framework lies in demonstrating how provenance cues, flexible visual identity systems, and embodied culinary practices mediate decoding outcomes across different audience groups. This approach provides actionable insights for entrepreneurs, policymakers, and tourism managers by linking cultural preservation with branding strategies that are both authentic and adaptable.

Ultimately, the paper advances the discourse on hyper-local branding by showing that sustaining culinary heritage requires not only safeguarding traditions but also actively engaging with the interpretive practices of local and global audiences. Future empirical studies based on the proposed framework can validate how encoding strategies translate into measurable outcomes such as authenticity perception, willingness to pay, and cultural pride—thereby ensuring that Perak's cuisine continues to thrive as both cultural heritage and economic asset.

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All authors played equal contributions towards the production of this paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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