

## **Gastrodiplomacy as a Soft Power Tool to Enhance Nation Brand**

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### **Abstract**

Public diplomacy has been used widely by targeting the foreign publics, using manipulative activity to influence them and at the same time holding up the national foreign policy in certain matters. The practice of sharing a state's cultural heritage through cuisine is called gastrodiplomacy. Malaysia has the potential to make its own stand in the eyes of the world by its capacity of using food as a soft power tool. This research is intended to fill the gap which is to look into the action taken by the government of Malaysia in improving Malaysian gastrodiplomacy, to look into the possible impacts of gastrodiplomacy and to propose a guideline for Malaysia gastrodiplomacy initiatives. This research uses qualitative techniques and through in-depth

interview. Questions were asked via face to face interview and Skype interview. From the findings, all respondents were of the consensus, gastrodiplomacy is essential as soft power capability for Malaysia. In constructing a nation as a brand, the mission will take longer time to achieve a nation brand. However, in terms of gastrodiplomacy approach, Malaysia is on the right track. For conclusion, it indicates that, Malaysian Government, government agencies and NGOs have actively played their roles in gastrodiplomacy activities. Lastly, Gastrodiplomacy is a tremendous opportunity for Malaysia by showcasing Malaysia as a cultural-galore destination. The outcome from this paper will benefit Government agencies such as MATRADE in expanding Malaysia trade, exposing local food abroad and boosting the number of visitors visiting Malaysia.

**Keywords:** *Public Diplomacy, Gastrodiplomacy, Nation Branding, Soft Power*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Public diplomacy has been used widely in the world; in targeting the foreign publics, using manipulative activity to influence them. Throughout the manipulative activities, strategies are created in order to influence the foreign publics in supporting a state foreign policy on certain matters. Public diplomacy should be perceived as an essential element in safeguarding the national security through strengthening national policy objectives [17].

Public diplomacy always lists out from anything to everything and it has been recognised as the main component of warfare in the new era [16]. As a soft power tool, public diplomacy works in every approach of the nation, while at the same time fulfilling the national agenda. There is one aspect of public diplomacy that seems to be not important but yet it is very powerful and has the tendency to influence many people in a simplest way; which is food. Food can be used as tool for public diplomacy. National cuisine is a national brand which highlights the identity of a particular state. In short, food can be used as a diplomatic tool.

The practice of sharing a state's cultural heritage through cuisine is called 'Gastrodiplomacy'. In gastrodiplomacy, food is the substance in the diplomatic process. In this study, the word gastrodiplomacy consists of two words which are 'diplomacy'; also referred to as public diplomacy and 'gastronomy'.

Besides, Tourism plays an important part in the economic and financial health of a country. Other countries in Southeast Asia such as Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia derive a big portion of their income from their tourism industry. Like other countries, Malaysia too should not miss the opportunity. In Malaysia, tourism is perceived as an industry which is getting bigger compared to other economic sectors.

Other than good scenery, sun and beaches, food and beverage are also the catalyst that can bring visitors to Malaysia. The strategy is specifically called gastronomy. Thailand has established its own gastronomy product abroad. It is called Thai Kitchen [26]. The brand sells Thai food-based culture to foreigners, thus attracting prospective visitors to visit Thailand.

2014 was a Visit Malaysia Year. Since then, The Ministry of Tourism had been promoting this huge international event actively. Every year, budget has been provided by the government to promote tourism locally and abroad. It included the gastronomy products, which are the food and beverages. Culture-related food is essential to expose the Malaysian culture to potential tourists abroad.

In the past, gastronomy was only related to the manufacture and preparation of food and beverages. Today, food and beverages have become the necessary elements in local society and abroad. The concept of gastronomy has broadened into many disciplines. Today, gastronomy has acquired new dimensions which are important in the form of social, cultures, historical components, literature, philosophy, economics, religion, and others with food as the central axis.

Therefore, it would be a good opportunity for Malaysia as Malaysia is a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-cultural society. This fact will definitely produce variety of culture-based food. Therefore, food could be the main catalyst for Malaysian public diplomacy.

### *1.1 Problem Statement*

In today's environment, it cannot be denied that food also plays an important role as it is not just a meal to fulfill an empty stomach but also a tool that can influence gastrodiploamcy activities to safeguard the nation's foreign policy [17]. Food is the national brand which carries the national culture and identity as well. There is no doubt that food or cuisine could promote a better perception of national identity. As for example; though Thailand is dealing with its political downturn and instability, however, its tourism activities, including the cultural and culinary activities has continued. The Tom Yam is still referred to as Thai's cuisine. "Tom Yam is Thai; Thai is Tom Yam". It has thus created a significant identity to Thailand.

Malaysia too can promote the natural uniqueness and beauty of her food culture. Malaysia possesses the uniqueness of having many cultures and ethnic groups. Thus gastronomy diplomacy, could generate more income, create a positive image of Malaysia and play an important role in the national branding.

The practice of sharing a state's cultural heritage through cuisine is called gastrodiploamcy. Malaysia has the potential of using food as a soft power tool . However, there are only a few researches done to prove that Malaysia's authentic culinary has the potential to be put on the global stage and adopted as a form of Malaysian soft power capability. This research intends to look into the action that has been taken by the government of Malaysia to improve Malaysia's gastrodiploamcy and to analyse its possible use as a soft power tool to enhance the nation's brand.

### *1.2 Research Scope and Limitations*

This research will cover the gastrodiploamcy activities of Malaysia abroad. In terms of limitations, there are few aspects of the study which may affect the result adversely but it involves the aspects which the researcher has no control in. First, the researcher would need to find the right person to be interviewed, therefore in terms of time limitation, finding the right person is time consuming. The lack of past research on gastrodiploamcy in the local context has also impacted the progress of the research. Second, the researcher

faced difficulty in approaching the respondents. The researcher intended to interview representative from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chef Norman Musa, Food Ambassador of Kuala Lumpur and a representative from Tourism Malaysia. However the researcher could not get all of them due to lack of time. A few of the respondents also have very packed schedule. As a result, the researcher was only able to get five respondents.

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the literature review, the researcher had done the Systematic Review of past literature concerning the key topics of Gastrodiplomacy, Soft Power, National Cuisine and National Identity.

### *2.1 Soft Power*

Public diplomacy has gone beyond conventional diplomacy and has been expanded to the general public by utilising soft power [4]. A government may depend on the pleasant sides of its identity to other state governments and by embedding cultural diplomacy; its soft power will be spread. Food and cuisine are a perfect illustration of state's soft power [4]. As mentioned by Savarin (2014); *"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are"*. He explained the food is actually explaining the original place of a person. [4] added, *"In order for a country to display itself on the strength of food, it requires a national cuisine upon which to establish itself"*. It is obvious that food may become the soft power by reflecting the image of a country, plus its culture.

For instance, Jacques Chirac, the former president of French was said to have better relationships with Japanese as the Japanese mastered the French cooking and their gumption in serving him his own country's meal. Diplomacy also can be considered as a structure of cultural transfer. The term transfer refers to the exchange of goods, ideas and people.

According to [21], gastrodiplomacy is a tactic which the middle powers have utilised to form a better brand acknowledgment. Many of the middle power countries in the world have spent significant capital

resources for gastrodiploacy developments in order to improve awareness of their particular cultures and at the same time to develop better national brand status and ‘soft power’. In fact, by increasing the soft power, it will create more robust nation brand through gastrodiploacy. Moreover, [21] also indicated that, as a soft power; gastrodiploacy makes a link with the target audiences in terms of tangible sensory relations plus cultural links which in the future will long within the targeted strategic communication.

Therefore, gastrodiploacy can be an instrument of foreign policy to enhance national brand and widen cultural contact through the use of soft power. The use of culinary as a part of cultural diplomacy approach offers a capacity for middle power countries to fortify their nation brand identification and at the same time enhance their soft power approach.

## *2.2 Public Diplomacy*

*“Public Diplomacy is not merely words”*. Public diplomacy is about public opinions where in order for the nation to work, the national assets must be disaggregated. One example is the pandas used by China. China has utilized pandas as their soft power tool for the public diplomacy process and also as China’s powerful informal ambassador. According to Lodish (2011) as mentioned in [12], Pandas are important to China as they are China’s cultural icon which carries the meaning of friendship and peace. The use of Panda, also known as Panda Diplomacy is apparently refers to a façade to a more serious bilateral relationship such as trade.

The importance of panda has made United States’ President to lobby China to get pandas. Looking at the relations between the U.S. and China, these cute mammals have played an important roles in defrosting diplomatic, commercial and public relations between China and the US. Malaysia too has loaned two pandas from China in conjunction with the 40th anniversary celebration of its long-standing bilateral relationship with Beijing. The animal is used as a diplomatic tool to forge the highly complicated relationship between states.

Furthermore, public diplomacy is considered as an important tool to promote security democracy and economic stability all over the world. In fact,

it is a crucial element to maintain national security and to strengthen the national policy objectives [17]. For instance, according to Gregory (2011) in [17], the U.S. administration used public diplomacy to understand, inform, engage and influence global audiences, reaching beyond foreign governments to promote greater appreciation and understanding of U.S. culture, society, institutions, values and policies. In short, public diplomacy strategies were strengthened by many countries trying to depart from strict convention of superpower domain applications [17] and to maintain the order among the countries.

There are many ways public diplomacy can be practiced. One of them is through cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy tools have a wide range of diplomacy under the same notion. These tools are part of soft power that seeks attention from the world through daily life activities and also human interest. The examples of cultural diplomacy are music, fashion, sports and not to forget the food.

Food brings the human race as one. From time to time, food has spread through migration, trade routes and globalisation [10]. This form of cultural diplomacy has been coined as gastrodiplomacy. It evolved from public diplomacy to cultural diplomacy, and then now, gastrodiplomacy. It has been said that food may bring uniqueness towards the country's image and perception to the other countries. Besides, food also may act as a unique process of introducing a country's cultural heritage to the global communities. Gastrodiplomacy activities offer opportunities to increase trades, economic investment and tourism as well as spreading out one's soft power capability.

### *2.3 Gastrodiplomacy*

The power of culture existed in many ways. It is the whole complex of distinctive objects, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional traits that typified a community or citizenship, including lifestyle, fundamental human rights governmental systems, practices and credence. According to Parsons in [13]:

*“If you are thoroughly familiar with someone else’s language literature, if you know and love his country, its cities, its arts and its people, you will be instinctively disposed, all other things being equal, to buy goods from him rather than from a less well known source, to support him actively when you consider him right and to avoid punishing him fiercely when you regard him as being wrong”.*

Therefore, cultural diplomacy is a part of diplomacy that can be fully utilized in building a better diplomatic relations. The supremacy and link of food and nationalism had directed most people to believe the possibility of utilising the connection as an instrument of international relations.

#### *2.4 Best Practice of Gastrodiplomacy by Other Countries*

Below are the five states that actively run gastrodiplomacy campaigns through their dynamic and unique approaches to promote the state’s cuisines and cultures to the world.

##### *a. Thailand*

Gastrodiplomacy was introduced by Thailand; extending its cultural diplomacy and soft power. In 2003, Thai restaurants have rapidly expanding from 5500 to 8000 around the globe. Thailand has introduced its Global Thai programme which supplies Thai ingredients to aid Thai restaurants, provide Thai chefs and fuel the programmes’ expenditures.

The Thai Government also proceeds with second campaign – Thailand: Kitchen of the World. The Thai gastrodiplomacy operation successfully achieved its aim to educate the global communities on Thai dishes. In fact, the Thai Government also has outlined the standard and criteria for Thai restaurants to meet. [4] stated that the nation branding made by Thailand has built Thai’s reputation and persuaded more Thai restaurants to be opened abroad.

In short, the Thai’s gastrodiplomacy initiative has hit the high target market at the international level. According to brand recognition and brand perceptions survey in 2005, conducted by Kellogg School of Management



and Sasin Institute; Thai food has been ranked fourth in the ethnic cuisine category and ranked sixth in the category of favourite food type. One conclusion illustrated from the Thai's effort is that *Tom Yam* now is familiar for Thai as *sushi* for Japanese.

*b. Peru*

Peru is one of the highest-flying countries that run gastrodiplomacy programme. Peruvian Embassy's Chief, Dr. Luis Miguel Castilla once mentioned that; "*We want our food to be as well know as Thai in this country (America)... We want 5000 – no 10 000 (restaurants in the United States). We want Peruvian restaurants everywhere*". Peru's campaign – 'Cocina Peruana Para El Mundo' (Peruvian Cuisine for the World) has practiced gastrodiplomacy to boost its nation cuisine worldwide. In fact, according to Wilson (2011), they have targeted Peruvian dishes to be listed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as the 'intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

*c. Taiwan*

Taiwan is another country that actively ran its gastrodiplomacy programme. The campaign is called 'All in Good Taste: Savor the Flavours of Taiwan'. The campaign has become one of Taiwan's policy priorities (Caltonhill, 2011). In 2010, Taiwan Today reported that the Government of Taiwan has spent US\$34.2 million for four years to promote in the Taiwan gastrodiplomacy programme and to promote Taiwanese cuisine worldwide.

In this programme, Taiwan has sent its local chefs to compete in the international competition, introduce Taiwan restaurants abroad, and promoting island's food culture and dishes. In fact, Taiwan also has established its own national cuisine foundation which served as a culinary think tank that will help the restaurant's owner to endorse Taiwanese dishes out of the country. The pearl milk tea is originates from Taiwan and is well known as one of the global hits now.

*d. Japan*

Japan's effort in gastrodiploamacy is undeniable. Japanese cuisine has long been popularized since they introduced its cuisine as a global consumption. Furthermore, Japan is very firm in protecting its cultural heritage. Therefore, Japan has legislated its cultural heritage as National Cultural Treasures in 1950, to sustain its intangible tradition. This also involved its national cuisine.

*e. South Korea*

South Korea Government has put gastrodiploamacy into practice when they began the campaign in April 2009. Their ultimate goal is doubling the number of Korean restaurants around the world and boosting Korean food into the top five ranking in global cuisines. They have targeted to be in top five by 2017. South Korean Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries have put '*bibimbap*' and '*bulgogi*' as their main dishes. They also tried to popularize street food such as '*tteokbokki*'- pronounced as *duck-bo-key*; a garlicky, splendidly spiced dish of rice cakes soaked in red chili paste. Even few restaurants in America now started to mix up Korean food and American food, making them into hybrid food such as *tteokbokki* crossbred with Italian '*gnocchi*' in a little flaming, herb-spiked pork gravy. They even provided hotdogs covered with *bulgogi* and burgers served with *kimchi*.

According to [15], the Korean dishes now have become trendy after a few years being introduced to American. The food actually has played its role – speaking about them and at the same time promoting South Korea.

## *2.5 Enhancing Nation Brand*

Nation brand can be defined as the exclusive, multi-dimensional intermingle of aspects that provide the nation with culturally positioned differentiation and significance for all of the nation's target audiences. [5] in his book had mentioned that brand-building process needs a long-term dedication and small payoff for a short-term goal.

A nation has to admit the reality of today, where nation-branding is essential as it may increase currency strength, help restore international

credibility and investor confidence and increase international political influence. Besides, nation branding is well associated with integrated national identity. The national identity will become the dominant factor which characterise a nation. According to [5], there are three elements that made up a nation brand's vision. They are; (i) desired long term future, (ii) rationale and; (iii) values.

More and more countries now are dealing with nation branding. Middle power countries are benefiting from the visitors, internal investment and increase in exports. Thus, these countries will make effective efforts to maintain their position and to improve their country. Besides that, a country that deals with nation branding also may draw the attention of international higher education students as well as skilled workers.

Overall, the main objectives of nation branding are to draw more visitors, fuel more investment increase exports, boost currency stability, improve international credibility as well as financier confidence, reverse international downgrades, enhance worldwide political authority, stimulate better international partnership and boost nation building .

In the age of globalisation, nations and national identity are of major importance. A state which abandons the needs of nation-branding will face hard times in boosting the economic and political stability, enhancing image plus reputation.

Furthermore, nation-branding is associated with national identity. There are ranges of concepts that can be highlighted as one's national identity. Among them is food and drink. Gastronomic state of a nation reflected the production of food and beverages related to national promotions along the past years.

#### *a. Middle Power State*

Middle power states can be defined as a state which is wealthy, small to medium-sized country, posses no nuclear weapon and have no permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Examples of middle power states are Austria, Belgium, Canada, Mexico, Netherlands and Malaysia.

Middle power states have become important actors on the world arena; usually by carrying out significant role in international politics. Their foreign policy deliberations are unlike other superpower countries [18]. Besides, middle power states are pictured as actors that are weaker compared to super power countries in realist and structural logic.

As a middle power state is conceived as a weaker state, there are always ways to overcome the weakness. A weak state can also influence a stronger state. According to [8], middle power is a phrase used in the discipline of International Relations to define states which do not have great power standing but however have international influence. Keohane as mentioned in [8] also described middle-power state as weak state nevertheless can have great influence with the assistance of international institutions or non-state actors.

Middle power state may face a subtle balancing act as both an opportunity and a challenge. In global politics, middle power states are seeking big role and more recognition for the sake of their economic significance and also their political influence. They also crave for greater position in international organizations [18]. According to [20], middle power states have the facility to utilize useful public diplomacy, in order to be recognized. The right public diplomacy can become an effective device for the foreign and security policies of a state.

Therefore, instead of going for ‘hard power’, middle power states use their soft power. Furthermore, as mentioned by Cooper in [8], middle powers have the capacities to increase their worldwide acceptance and influence through their specific abilities. This is called as ‘niche diplomacy’. They may utilise their specific attribute such as their national cuisine. National cuisine can be an essential warfare tool as it will generate the economy of the state [17].

#### *b. National Cuisine*

A state’s gastronomic capacity is represented by its uniqueness within the state and beyond. The intrinsic connection between state’s gastronomic culture and the past is an inheritance that tells apart a state from other states. In fact, gastronomy and food are pieces of culture that characterise the urban fabric

of the state, particularly inside a multiracial country like Malaysia. For example, an ingredient does more than making up a delicate meal. In fact, they convey a background. As mentioned by Pampille (2010) in [7], “*Every grain*” of the special salt that connoisseurs recommend for the *pot-au-feu* “contains a miniature landscape” which means that; every diner tells a story and it describes the background of the food, and tells what country the food comes from. Thus, culinary and meals carry together the background of the provinces and states.

Besides, culinary nationalism also works to identify cuisine and country. However, there are a few issues being highlighted, i.e. (i) How do we assess claims to culinary singularity? And; (ii) To what extent does cuisine differentiate a country that share the same culture? There are different countries with almost the same culture and slightly similar food identity such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Furthermore, Anholt (2014) in [4], said that a country’s identity strongly affects how the people inside and outside a place think about it. Thus, nation branding tries to enhance that identity aims to give the foreigners a better outlook at a nation. At the same time, it also indicates that nation brand is actually a product. Food and tourism are the indication of the local culture and way of life, which can be utilized to support, placement and brand a country. Okumus (2014) in [4] mentioned that local culinary can be utilized as a helpful instrument and can boost the country’s image and brand.

### *c. National Identity*

Identity can be defined as the connection between the individual and the world they live in. Usually, it is described as socially recognized by others. Symbols and representations are important in the production of identities. How we speak, the clothes we wear, badges, scarves, uniforms, or flags, all other symbols of identity. In fact, the organizations of society, class, gender, ethnicity and places are important in shaping the national identity and part of the culture of a society.

*“Identity is connected to a particular place, by a feeling that you belong to that place. It is a place in which you feel comfortable, or at home,*

*because part of how you define yourself is symbolized by certain qualities of that place”.*

According to [2], the world is particularly shaped by the political system given by the West, especially after the Treaty of Westphalia. It was charted by secularism, nation-state and also unorthodox capitalistic democracy. The consciousness of interdependence has increased, including the demand for nation's political structure. Furthermore, socialism has collapsed and capitalism nowadays has led people to frustration with more new ideologies and concepts brought around the world. Therefore, many states now begin to search for new model identities in order to survive and stay alive.

*“Once, we say that ‘we belong to the Turkish nation’ we will begin to show in our language, aesthetic, morals and law and even in theology and philosophy, the originality and personality which befit Turkish culture, taste and consciousness” (Ziya Gokalp in [2]).*

Thus, in those aspects, the uniqueness of one could reflect his or her originality. His or her appearance reflects the identity that he is presenting. If a state failed to establish an identity, the state will be left behind, especially the middle power country as they are weaker countries. In order to survive, it must have at least one prominent identity that is strong and acknowledged by the whole world. Belongivity is another level of identity which will secure a state in certain aspects.

National identity is an arbitrary construct. It is supposed to be rationally renounced rather than emotionally invest in. [24] in *Nation and Identity in the New German cinema: Homeless at Home*, emphasized representation or showing an identity as – “it is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning”. Therefore a citizen is responsible for its representation towards a state.

Construction of an identity took an inherently process-like, multi-voiced, imaginary and constantly changing. According to Kristeva (1986) in [24], it was proposed that; a nation of a process of identity actually constituted by historical sedimentation. In addition, Fanon (1969) in [24] also suggested that national identity was formed through national culture which encompasses

pedagogical knowledge and continues national narratives. Both elements adopt stereotyping and truth and speak for the national past as a sequence of occasions that occurred.

Modernization theorist claimed that developing a state demands a rigid political structure in order to intensify power to secure speedy economy growth and at the same time, assists in boosting up the merging of democracy. Moreover, Kotkin (2010) in [25] also strongly brought the concept that people share a common sense of belonging such as values, culture and identity to an ancestral homeland claiming, by facilitation of those elements and thus, it will help the community to survive in this challenging economy.

*d. Nationalism*

National identity is closely related to nationalism. It took years to build a Roman Empire. The same concept applies to nationalism. Nationalism is not formed in one night but it rather took years. According to [25] nationalism is further than a sentiment and it is more than a political business. In addition, the goal of nationalism is not merely to applause, fight for a nation. However, it is naturally designed to form an identity for a country.

Nowadays, constructing a state without building or preserving a nation is no longer relevant. To stand still, the state must build 'one' aspect, which is the nationalism. As mentioned by [11], other than race, religion and achievement, there is one more factor that shapes the national identity which is the nationalism. Nationalism should be put as a *raison d'être* for nation-building. Nationalism does not limit one within one single race only but it has also run across multiracial and cultural edge. Based on that, it formed a similar experience and focuses on similar aspirations.

As in the United States, nationalism involved a struggle to join similar territories and gather together ethnic, regional linguistic and segmented communities. In fact, foreign policy, military and domestic cultural hegemony are among the elements which had made up United States

National identity today. In short, nationalism is part of national identity which consists of a sense of belonging to the nation, a sense of security, a feeling of national pride and attachment to the nations.

In terms of food, the vast majority of eaters, for instance sushi in America and McDonald's hamburger in Japan and China, may have little sense of making such statements about cultural identity through their consumption. Most people think that eating foreign foods bring no such intensity of feeling to their gustatory pleasures; most it seems, have no particular dream of a foreign place that accompanies the falafel or tortillas or lasagna they consumed. It is proven that people consume foreign foods, the fact that some people seeks out foreign taste; while others shun them.

*“Everywhere there is Chinese food, pita bread, country and Western music, pizza and jazz. The global pervasiveness of ethnic forms represents the cosmopolitanisation of specialty. Globalization does not mean the end of segments. It means, instead their expansion to worldwide proportions [14]”.*

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

For this research, in the first phase, the researcher had selected the topic of gastrodiplomacy as the main theme and later developed it into a more specific area of study. The researcher was aware that the research title should be catchy and memorable to captivate the attention of the readers as well as to emphasize the content of the research study and makes it more reader-friendly. After considering the objectives of the study, the research objectives, the limitation and the scope, the researcher then looked into past literatures to identify the research gap that need to be discovered in order to justify an inquiry for the research. Later, the researcher determined that the research method shall be qualitative method. The research planning led to the development of the research proposal. When constructing the research proposal, the researcher had conducted a systematic review to synthesise the past literatures on the proposed topic “Gastrodiplomacy as a Soft Power Tool to Enhance Nation Brand”. Here, the systematic review had assisted the researcher to improve the proposal as well as identify the research gap.



Research design can be explained as a structure or a blueprint of a research. The purpose of a research design is to make sure that the proofs gained will facilitate the researcher to answer the research questions. This paper proposed that branding national culinary as a national identity under the premise Gastrodiplomacy would effectively capture the state's gastrodiplomacy ability, image and uniqueness at the worldwide prospect. This research was done using Qualitative Research Design and this study also is based on in-depth interviews.

Systematic purposive sampling technique was chosen for this research where the researcher selected few experts from different organisations. This sampling technique was chosen because it is the most effective technique for the researcher to study certain cultural domain with the help of knowledgeable experts. Respective interviewees that were chosen from the organisation are the experts related to gastrodiplomacy who possessed broad knowledge in food and culture, public diplomacy and food promotion, and gastrodiplomacy activity itself.

Throughout the data analysis, the samples were referred to as respondents. From the past literatures, there were lack of sources and experts on gastrodiplomacy in the local context. Therefore, the process of choosing individuals to be interviewed was done carefully. The sample consisted of respondents from Malaysia External Trade Development (MATRADE), Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Gastronomy academician, Malaysia Food Ambassador, and Paul Rockower. Paul Rockower was selected because he was the first scholar who coined the topic of gastrodiplomacy. Five respondents were selected in this research. Each of them comes from different background but all are related to gastrodiplomacy activities. All interview sessions were done using face-to-face interview except for Paul Rockower as the interview session was done using Skype video interview.

There were a few instruments being used in this research paper. As it was based on a qualitative format the researcher conducted the interviews by using a set of in-depth questionnaire which are open-ended question whereby there is no specific end to what the interviewees may be expected to say. In-depth interview can be defined as collecting information based on

the individual's personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being discussed. Hence, the personnel who are responsible in this interview session may be giving answers based on their experiences.

The researcher started to construct the questions and approach the targeted respondents. Questions were designed based on the research objectives (RO). Hence, the data collected will be in relation to them. Other than that, questions also were constructed on the basis of having the potential of making a contribution to new knowledge. Questions were selected carefully to match the problem statement.

For the interview questions, 13 questions all together were divided into four themes, which were; (i) the importance of gastrodiplomacy as a soft power tool, (2) actions taken by the Malaysian government, government agencies and non-governmental agencies (NGO) in gastrodiplomacy activities, (iii) the possible impacts of gastrodiplomacy and (iv) guidelines for Malaysian gastrodiplomacy.

The researcher intended to use the in-depth interview as the method of collecting data. Five sessions of interviews were scheduled for five different individuals related to gastrodiplomacy. The interview sessions consisted of face-to-face interview and Skype video interview. Completing an in-depth interview, especially face-to-face interview required the researcher to use the same questionnaire and at the same time record the responses to the questionnaire. Audio recording was utilized to ease the researcher in collecting the data. Each interview session was set up for 15-25 minutes and was held at the respondent's place respectively. This research through question and answer sessions where the respondent was given a set of questions to answer. The benefit of carrying out this procedure is the researcher can get instant and direct answers from the respective respondents.

After the interview sessions, the researcher needed to analyse the data. Thematic analysis had been used to analyse the data. Basically, thematic analysis requires more participation and understanding from the researcher towards the collective responses. This type of analysis focused on recognising both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, which was the theme. The

themes later on will be coded and applied to the data collected for analysis. Thematic analysis is suitable for large data sets and can be used to build theoretical models or even to find solutions to real problems.

Last but not least, in the last phase, the researcher will write the interpretation obtained from the thematic analysis. The research findings will be examined to ascertain whether the research objectives have been achieved. A guideline for Malaysian gastrodiplomacy was then formed.

#### **4.0 FINDINGS**

Five respondents have been selected in this research. Each of them comes from different background, but all of them are related to gastrodiplomacy activities. All interview sessions are done by using a face-to-face interview except for Paul Rockower as the interview session was done using Skype video interview.

**Respondent A:** Amirul Azman Ahmad from MATRADE was interviewed at Menara MATRADE on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2015. He is the Manager of Special Project Unit / Malaysia Kitchen Programme. He has been working with MATRADE since 2006. He also has been involved in Malaysia Kitchen Unit since 2009.

**Respondent B:** Firdaus Abdul Hanan was interviewed at Canseleri Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, Universiti Teknologi MARA on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2015. He is a lecturer and also a chef in culinary and gastronomy management. He is actively promoting Malaysian food via his television broadcast show – *Makan*.

**Respondent C:** Paul Rockower was interviewed via Skype video on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2015. Paul Rockower is the first scholar who coined the term “gastrodiplomacy”. His expertises are public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and gastrodiplomacy.

**Respondent D:** Dato’ Ismail Ahmad or known as Chef Ismail is the owner of Restoran Rebung in Bangsar. He was interviewed on 19<sup>th</sup>

May 2015 in Bangsar. Chef Ismail has been appointed as Malaysia Food Ambassador for few years and had joined many gastronomic activities organized by MATRADE on its tours to the United States, Middle East and Europe.

**Respondent E:** Dr. Nirwan Noh was interviewed on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2015 at the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Putrajaya. Dr. Nirwan is the Secretary for Industry Development Division, Ministry of Tourism and Culture. Previously, he was the Director of Research and Training at the Islamic Tourism Centre of Malaysia (ITC); one of the government agencies.

The data of research studies are collected through in-depth interviews with five personnel from different backgrounds. Below are the data obtained from the respective interviews:

#### *4.1 The Importance of Gastrodiplomacy as a Soft Power Tool*

According to Amirul Azman from MATRADE, it is very essential to associate food and Malaysian culture. Both words cannot be separated. Malaysian food is always combined with culture. MATRADE called that as *'three cultures in a spoonful'*. When people mentioned about Malaysian food, MATRADE will portray all kind of ethnic food. In fact, there are few signature dishes identified for this programme. For example, Malaysian Nasi Lemak, Malaysian Fried Rice, Malaysian Kuey Tiaw, Malaysian Roti Canai and Malaysian Teh Tarik. Signature dishes are very essential because people will regard the food with Malaysia. For example; *"When they see food, they will exclaim, 'This is Malaysia!'"* said Amirul Azman.

Chef Firdaus Hanan from culinary and gastronomy management department described culinary as something that people already know. However, culinary is actually about the skill of how to do it, and how to prepare. Gastronomy is well explained as eating habit, and why certain people choose certain food but not other food. He added that, all kinds of food are edible but the preference is something that is related to particular society. In other words, it is abstract. Furthermore, it is hard to define the taste of the

food. For example; how delicious is delicious? It is very generic. Therefore gastronomy is more about that; about the feeling, how people perceive food rather than to just prepare. In short, gastronomy is all about food and people.

According to him, food related-culture is very important. In fact, the Malaysian Government also has realised the possibility of food and all the places that people can go and people can touch. All these are part of the tourism industry. However, the other part is food and the experience about eating. It is not only about eating, but, the experience, the culture, how Malaysian eats by sitting on the floor, the using of hand rather than fork and spoon, the preparation of the dishes, and the meal presentation. All of these should be part of the promotion in tourism. In fact, when the foreigners visit Malaysia, they do not only go to the shopping mall and urban places. Malaysia's local food is authentic and could be a magnet to attract them. According to Chef Firdaus, authentic food can be described through collective effort and using the same notion, it should become Malaysia's nation branding and national identity.

Paul Rockower, who was interviewed via Skype video, believes that food-related culture and gastrodiplomacy are essential to expose Malaysian culture to potential tourist and world communities. As a middle-power trying to gain global attention, Malaysia must come up with creative ways of raising its nation-branding status. One solid measure of doing so is by creating greater awareness about its unique culinary culture. It is a tangible way to share Malaysia's unique culinary culture with the rest of the world.

Chef Ismail always believes that to become a chef, ones must understand what a body needs and to make a person happy. According to him, many people fly to destinations where food is concerned. Besides, there is a holiday package provided specifically to visit restaurants abroad. Malaysia also has created gastronomy visit to Malaysia. He added that when people travel, the food travel along. They carry the recipe, the taste, including the culture especially all over the world. Moreover, every food is created for a reason. For instance; lunch time, tea-time and dinner time. In local context, people travel to Malaysia because of the heritage food. He is taking popiah as an example:

*“When the food is already here for 30 years, it becomes heritage. In Malaysia, we have Heritage Department that secures the food in terms of intellectual property, name, and ingredients”.* Therefore, food and culture cannot be separated as it comes in a package.

Dr. Nirwan Noh also agreed that food is the most important thing when people travel. People will hunt for food and local food is a must compared to franchise fast food. He added that food is actually symbolizing the identity of a country especially traditional food. Even though Malaysia is neighbouring to certain countries that share same tradition, language and culture; there must be fine distinction from one country to another. According to Dr. Nirwan; *“We might have food similarity. The look of the food might be alike but the taste is different.”* Relating it to the food ownership, he agreed that Malaysia should take a step in having ownership to foods which are originally from Malaysia and among the examples are Yee Sang, Teh Tarik and Roti Canai.

#### *4.2. Actions Taken by the Malaysian Government, Government Agencies and Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs) in Gastrodiplomacy Activities.*

Amirul Azman mentioned that, Malaysia Kitchen Programme (MKP) is a gastrodiplomacy approach introduced by the government. Even right now, Tourism Malaysia is running a programme named Fabulous Food 1 Malaysia. It is a kind of gastrodiplomacy as well. According to Amirul Azman, gastrodiplomacy can be explained as doing diplomacy network through food. Promoting Malaysian food abroad is one of the examples. Anything related to promotion of Malaysian food in overseas is considered as gastrodiplomacy.

There are a lot of government agencies involved in the same effort as MATRADE, for instance, install trade and collaborations with supermarket. Malaysia has taken this effort seriously because no money or budget should be wasted and it is not easy to convince people with Malaysian and to sustain the image of Malaysia. MKP led by MATRADE intended to brand Malaysia and to sustain it. For example, in reference to the quality of food, MATRADE also promotes it together with the culture. In the end, it is the tourists who keep coming to Malaysia. *“We want more people to come to Malaysia. We*

*want more people to know about Malaysia and then more people wants to come to Malaysia”, he added.*

Chef Firdaus agreed that Government has undertaken such efforts especially through MKP. In fact, there are also numerous festivals organised by Tourism Malaysia outside in order to promote Malaysian food. Furthermore, Malaysia is good with trading and so far Malaysia has successfully imported the spices, paste and etc. which can be replicated outside. In terms of local context, there are also few festivals which have the same objective. For example, on 29<sup>th</sup> until 31<sup>st</sup> May 2015, Kuala Lumpur (KL) is going to have KL Big Kitchen. That is another effort done by the local authority to promote local food. KL is the centre of tourist in Malaysia. Having all these festivals, will expose foreigners to what Malaysian food all about. KL Big kitchen is a collective effort by Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL) with Tourism Malaysia. Tourism Malaysia also appointed one Malaysian food ambassador; Chef Norman Musa and this KL Big Kitchen was created by him. Besides, Chef Firdaus also added that; in overseas, Tourism Malaysia is doing a lot of promotion. For instance, they are involved in the international festivals, especially in Europe, America and China. Therefore, Malaysian local foods including fruits, dry fruits are being highlighted there.

According to Paul Rockower, Malaysia has taken serious steps regarding gastrodiplomacy. Furthermore, Malaysia has been one of the countries that has helped to shape best practices in the field of gastrodiplomacy. However, there is always more that can be done to raise Malaysia’s nation-brand status in different niche markets related to cultural and gastronomic industries and audiences.

Chef Ismail explained that, gastrodiplomacy in Malaysian context should be related to religion and cultural aspects. According to him, Malaysian-based food should consider the Halal concept as one of the important aspects when preparing the food. Halal concept is broad; many things should be noted by every food preparer regardless their religion and race. Malaysia as a Muslim country should strengthen the Halal concept and make it a must in every food preparation.

For the cultural aspect, Chef Ismail believed that Malaysia possesses so many unique cultures related to food. He added that:

“When we are preparing food, our culture gets along too. We are Asian and we work in a group. We do gotong royong as our social interactions whether with family or neighbours. We practice Halal concept such as the right way to slaughter animals, and we eat fresh food or organic food rather than canned food”.

Furthermore, he also insisted that Malaysian food has the ‘wow’ factor, fresh, Halal and cooked for reasons or seasons. For instance, during wedding ceremony, different foods are served compared to daily food served. Malaysia also has its own seasonal food. For example, food during rainy days and food during hot and dry season are served differently. In addition, fruit season also affected the menu of that day. Examples of fruit seasonal food are Petai Jeruk and Tempoyak. Besides that, Chef Ismail also mentioned that Malaysia is actually better than Thailand. By now, Malaysia is already enlisted as gastronomy outlet all over the world. The activities such as aggressively promoting Malaysian food throughout embassy and consulting the general local professional chefs have successfully marked Malaysia as one of the best gastrodiplomacy practitioner. In fact, Malaysian Food Ambassador entrusted by Tourism Malaysia also has helped along the way in educating people and gives them awareness about Malaysian cuisine. In the local context, food festivals led by MKP also play their role in promoting Malaysian food to locals. For example, the KL Big Kitchen was launched on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2015 to introduce, to encourage way of eating lifestyle just like London Big Kitchen which is done yearly in Trafalgar Square London.

Dr. Nirwan also has joined the band wagon saying that Malaysia has taken serious steps in enhancing gastrodiplomacy programme. According to him, the government has put a lot of budget to encourage more and more Malaysian restaurants abroad. Besides that, there are dedicated promotions on food for example, food festivals, and food trucks. Furthermore, Dr. Nirwan mentioned that Malaysia is going to have its own TV channel with cooking television programme. The new channel called ‘Go Asean’ channel will be launched at the end of 2015. Through this channel, Malaysian food will have its own establishment in extending Malaysian soft power by using food.



### *4.3 Possible Impacts of Gastrodiplomacy*

According to Amirul Azman, the possible impacts of gastrodiplomacy would be more and more people will know about Malaysia as a consequence of the awareness created. Moreover, now Malaysia is already listed as the top 20 trading nations worldwide. The impacts are more social and related to its exports. This is in line with MATRADE's objective to promote Malaysia as a country and its exports.

He added that, in enhancing nation brand, the time taken will be long-term. Branding is a long term method. The result cannot be obtained in one year or two years. However, MKP needs to stick to its targets and intentions. Basically, it is getting more people to know about Malaysian food, to visit Malaysia, to know about Malaysia's services, foods and also the products. MKP is trying to benchmark through numbers of Malaysian product lines coming to the supermarket in overseas, number of product lines, number of products entered, media coverage and numbers of sells which have been obtained.

For Chef Firdaus, it is claimed that everybody should move by following only one direction. First thing first, everybody must understand what Malaysian food is and this understanding might not be judged by everyone. Let's say when people go to Malacca and they taste the *asam pedas*, the taste of *asam pedas* they had in Malacca might not be the same with the taste of *asam pedas* in Kuala Lumpur. Here, both tastes might be different including the presentation. Thus it will confuse the tourists and they cannot actually put their hands on which is the real *asam pedas* of Malaysia. It is very ambiguous but it has to be understood that tastes are different; however the preparation is still the same. The ingredients and the preparation should be the same, and then only people will not get confused. People would be able to understand if the taste is different, if the saltiness is dissimilar, or the level of spiciness is unlike. But if the preparation is totally incorrect, then people will often get confused. Hence, the notion of nation brand should be standardized and walk as one.

Paul Rockower also mentioned that gastrodiplomacy would impact on raising the nation-brand recognition, creating broader tourism and more

foreign-direct investment. In enhancing nation brand, gastrodiplomacy is ultimately a long-term project. Five years to a decade is required to see the real impact. Malaysia has done a solid job of incorporating other practices of cultural diplomacy with its gastrodiplomacy like the night market programs. Malaysia could do more to empower its citizens to conduct gastrodiplomacy through more people-to-people programs. It takes a bit of educating the public to see their roles as able to contribute in matters of cultural diplomacy and gastrodiplomacy.

Chef Ismail did say that KL Big Kitchen itself is the nation brand including other food festivals too. According to Chef Ismail, rebranding should be done from time to time. For budget, sum of money may turn into triple returns if the strategies went well. If there is no budget, there would be no branding too. He added that; Malaysia is actually doing well and he rates three stars for Malaysia's efforts in promoting gastrodiplomacy.

According to Dr. Nirwan, the number of years in forming a strong nation brand does not matter. He said if the programme is very effective, it would take fewer years to become a professional player. For example, the tagline of 'Malaysia Truly Asia' is very successful in putting Malaysia on the global stage. It has been sustained for 15 years and very well known by others. Strengthening the nation brand actually needs Malaysia to make a lot of collaboration and serious relationship which are inter-agencies.

#### *4.4 Guideline for Malaysia Gastrodiplomacy*

For Malaysian gastrodiplomacy guidelines, Amirul Azman suggested that; first thing first, we must have a foundation. Basically, Malaysian Night in Trafalgar Square is organised every year and the numbers of visitors is increasing. Last year, 43,000 people in one day came to Trafalgar Square just because of the event. In fact, the London Mayor himself calls it as an annual event. It is such a privilege for Malaysia. None of the countries have done this like Malaysia did that is being given the privilege every year. This year will be the sixth year. Compared to Thai Kitchen, it is already been established for a long time. Thailand itself is known as an agriculture country. They are 40 years more advanced than Malaysia. If Malaysia wants to compete with Thailand, it will

take a long time. That is why it is very important to let people know where to source Malaysian products. For example, when doing some kind of promotion, the products promoted must be in market line. As for example, if Andrew wanted to cook *asam pedas* but he does not have the ingredients, then he cannot cook *asam pedas*.

On the other hand, Malaysia could always can the *asam pedas* paste and export it overseas. However, there are certain regulations. In US, products cannot simply be imported in because they have certification like United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Another example is, in Australia, visitors are not allowed to bring in any dairy products. It is forbidden because they are protecting their industry over there. Australia is one of the major producers of food including rice, benefiting from its four seasons. Unfortunately, Malaysia is actually facing low food supplies and that is why years are needed to fix the problem and to penetrate larger market worldwide.

Furthermore, Malaysia's strength is based on penetration of market. Malaysia's strength is based on worldwide perception. The content of the world is looking at Malaysia as a polite society and one of the rising stars. Plus, Malaysia is a top 20 trading country in the world. Being recognized as the top 20, Malaysia should take an advantage on that. People now are aware about Malaysia. Therefore there is an urgency to introduce more Malaysian products to the overseas market. For instance like what MKP and Tourism Malaysia are doing now – through cooking demonstrations.

However, that is not the limit; MATRADE needs to have good collaboration with buyers, supermarkets, hypermarkets which can be utilized by having market penetration. MATRADE with its over 40 offices all over the world is willing to help in terms of getting networking with many important stakeholders so that Malaysian products can break through the particular market. For example, it is a big advantage for Malaysia if it can break through the main four trendsetters markets which are Australia, US, United Kingdom (UK) and China. Things promoted in those markets will become viral in a split second. Even now, China is evolving as a spending market. Because of the trendsetters and spending market, Malaysian *rendang* now is the top three flavors in US.

For Chef Firdaus, he suggested that, first and foremost, Malaysia needs to define what the culture, and the identity of Malaysian food is. In order to promote the food, classification of the food identity must be done first. Then it will be easier for all these government agencies and individuals to promote. As an academician, chef Firdaus insists that everyone must promote the same thing. Before promoting the products, everyone must establish the identity. Later comes the promotion for example, Thailand is very good in establishing their food. When people say *tom yam* people would know what tom yam is, what the ingredients are, and how the preparation is done. People can imagine all that. However, when people say *rendang*, people will have imagined a lot of variation. Some is dry, spicy, some is very gravy. Hence, the identity needs to be established first.

Moreover, from the academician side, they are trying to combine culture and food, so that people will understand food is a part of Malaysian culture. For instance, classification of food either it is Chinese food or Malay food should be avoided. Malaysian food should be known as one. When it comes to food, Malaysia should have one branding and one identity, which is 'Malaysian food'. Paul Rockower in the interview suggested that Malaysia should have more and more night market programs. Last but not least, according to Dr. Nirwan suggested that, restaurants abroad should serve few signature dishes reflecting Malaysia and its culture. Therefore, the food itself can represent Malaysia and becomes the 'little ambassador' for Malaysia.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION**

### *5.1 The Importance of Gastrodiplomacy as a Soft Power Tool*

#### *a. Portraying Multi-ethnicity of Malaysia*

Under this notion, the interview sessions managed to gather findings about the importance of gastrodiplomacy as a soft power tool; which are in line with the literature review. First, according to Respondent A, gastrodiplomacy is significant as Malaysian food is always combined with culture and will portray all kinds of ethnic cultures in Malaysia. From the previous studies, [10] proposes that national cuisine may represent a country's cultural heritage

to the world. This is acceptable because Malaysian food is made up of the food cultures of many of ethnic groups. Each ethnic group contributes different food that later on becomes assimilated with other ethnic groups' food culture.

*b. Food as a Nation Identity*

Dr. Nirwan in the interview suggested that, restaurateurs abroad should serve signature dishes reflecting Malaysia and its multi-ethnic culture. Chef Firdaus too, agreed that Malaysia should establish its own authentic food that represents Malaysia overall. In fact, MATRADE has already listed out a few signature dishes representing Malaysia such as Nasi Lemak, Malaysian Fried Rice, *Malaysian Kuey Tiaw*, *Roti Canai* and *Teh Tarik*. In addition, Chef Ismail insists that, heritage food should be highlighted as signature dishes as well. As a consequence, visitors will associate Malaysia with the signature dishes just like how people relate *Tom Yam* to Thailand. [3] in his article mentioned that, food is able to shape the brand of a nation. Afterwards, the brand will help to form the national emblem and provide a strong image for a country. For instance; Kimchi represents Korea.

According to Dr. Nirwan, food symbolizes the identity of a country; especially traditional food. Dr. Nirwan's citation can be supported by Pampille (2010) in [7]. He said, "*Every grain*" of the special salt that connoisseurs recommend for the *pot-au-feu* "contains a miniature landscape". Meaning, every diner reveals a story, describes the background of the food, and tells what country the food comes from. Thus, these findings are answering the question and are supported by past literatures.

*c. Exposing Malaysian Culture to the World*

In positioning Malaysia as a middle-power country, extending its soft power should be practised. Cultural diplomacy comprised many branches of diplomacy which can be exercised such as through gastrodiplomacy. [21] mentioned that, middle power states practise gastrodiplomacy tactics to form a better brand recognition. Respondent C said gastrodiplomacy is essential to Malaysia as it exposes Malaysian culture to the world.

Therefore, it is clear that, Malaysia has the ability to utilise its national cuisine as a soft power tool to enhance the nation brand.

*d. Food Perception*

Next, Chef Firdaus mentioned that, there is no definite definition of the taste of food. The question of *'How tasty is tasty?'* depends on individual's feelings, and how one perceives the food. This is in line with what [10] has said; food may bring difference towards country's image and perception by the other countries. Besides that, cultural elements are also involved in one's eating experience. For the Malay culture, most of Malays eat with their hands, sitting on the floor rather than using table, fork and spoon. The food actually has played its role – speaking about them at the same time promoting the culture [15].

*e. Nation Branding*

During the interview session, Paul Rockower came up with a proposal; Malaysia must come up with creative ways of raising its nation branding status. It will be great if Malaysia could create greater awareness about its unique culinary culture. These findings are supported by [6], saying "Malaysia has been practicing *'Malaysia Truly Asia'* campaign as part of nation branding". Therefore, Malaysia is actually on the right track in conducting its gastrodiplomacy activities and needs to make extra effort to promote it further.

*f. Travel Factor*

Chef Ismail stated that people fly to destinations where food is concerned. Malaysia itself has created gastronomy visits in order to promote Malaysian food and to attract tourists. By experiencing Malaysian cuisine, the tourists actually travel by carrying the lasting memory of the food they ate; the taste as well as the culture. Referring to statements made by Chef Ismail, Anholt (2014) in [4] articulated that a country's identity strongly affects the people inside and outside the country. Thus, nation branding tries to enhance that identity in order for the foreigners to have a better perspective of a nation. It is clear that food can influence individuals to have a better impression towards a nation and is also able to change one's perception.

## *5.2 Action Taken by Malaysian Government, Government Agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)*

### *a. Gastrodiplomacy Activities*

According to Amirul Azman, MATRADE; Malaysia Kitchen Programme (MKP) is a gastrodiplomacy approach introduced by the government. Under Tourism Malaysia, a programme called Fabulous Food 1 Malaysia has been developed. Other than that, the Malaysia Food Ambassador introduced by the Tourism Malaysia is also aimed at educating people and enhancing the awareness about Malaysian cuisine. MKP and other agencies such as Halal Development Corporation (HDC), embassy, consul general, Malaysian restaurants and Malaysians who live abroad have also helped to promote gastrodiplomacy activities overseas. The most outstanding programme is Malaysia Night in Trafalgar Square, London. In 2014, over 43,000 people went to Trafalgar Square in one day just because of the event. In fact, the London Mayor himself called it an annual event. It is such a privilege for Malaysia.

Another respondent, Dr. Nirwan added that, the Malaysian government has also dedicated a generous budget to encourage more and more Malaysian gastronomy outlets overseas. Furthermore, dedicated promotion on food such as food festivals, Malaysian restaurants, food trucks and upcoming cooking TV channel – ‘Go Asean’ also facilitates the Government’s efforts in strengthening gastrodiplomacy activities as well as extending its soft power abroad.

As a result of these programmes and efforts, Malaysia is listed as one of the countries that have helped to shape best practice among the field of gastrodiplomacy (Rockower, 2015). This statement is supported by [10] who mentioned that, Malaysia has the potential to make its own stand in the eyes of the world through its capacity of using food as a soft power tool.

### *5.3 Possible Impacts of Gastrodiplomacy*

Below are the possible impacts of gastrodiplomacy that could be identified when gastrodiplomacy activities are empowered and running successfully.

*a. Nation Brand Recognition*

By empowering gastrodiplomacy activities, the possible outcomes could be numerous. However, those good results cannot be produced in one or two years. It takes years, or even decades to achieve the status of a global gastrodiplomacy player. Respondent A stressed that gastrodiplomacy may enable Malaysia to be known worldwide through its culinary assets. In line with that, [21] agreed that the use of culinary as a part of cultural diplomacy approach will offer a capacity for middle power countries to fortify their nation brand identification and at the same time, enhance the soft power capability.

Besides, according to Respondent C, gastrodiplomacy will result in raising the nation brand recognition, creating broader tourism and boosting more foreign direct investment. As quoted from [23], the power of food has been proven as it is the oldest type of diplomacy. The unique cuisine of a state will promote the state in the global arena, and in addition, it will become the state's brand and create a unique identity of the state itself. Therefore, it is proven that food is the catalyst which may strengthen a nation's soft power capability and thus, grow a new nation identity that will enhance the nation's brand.

*b. Enhancing in Malaysian Trading*

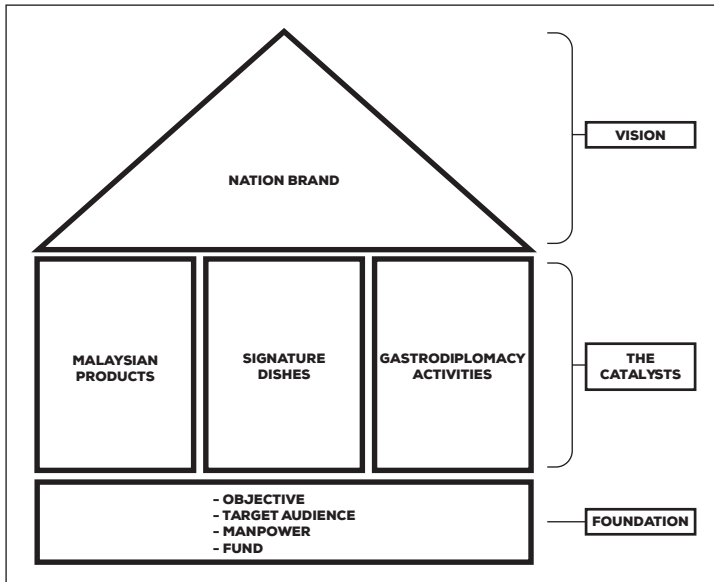
Under this notion, Amirul Azman cited that, branding is actually a long term project. It should be done continuously over time. Right now, MKP is trying to fulfill its objectives by benchmarking through a number of Malaysia-made product lines entering the international market and sustaining good media coverage about Malaysian food. In line with that, [5] stated that, there are three elements that make up a nation brand's vision. They are desired long term future, rationale and its values. He also added that the increase in worldwide competition among the nations compelled the countries to make serious efforts to maintain their position and to improve their country's branding in acknowledgment of the requirement to accomplish three key objectives: to attract the visitors, to fuel internal investment and to increase exports. Therefore, it is a brilliant way to utilise gastrodiplomacy as a tool of Malaysia's soft power.



*c. Strengthen Malaysia's Soft Power*

Respondent E too, agreed that gastrodiplomacy is one of the low-risk ways for Malaysia to strengthen its soft power. Exposing and sharing one's own food will never ever ruin anything. In fact, [22] mentioned that gastrodiplomacy is the use of food to communicate culture in a public diplomacy. [19] as mentioned in [22] also added that in ancient times, food is the factor why a region is conquered, which later spread through trade route thus shaped the world like it is today.

*5.4 Guidelines for Malaysian Gastrodiplomacy*



*a. Foundation*

According to Amirul Azman, MATRADE Malaysia should have the basic foundation first in establishing a guideline for gastrodiplomacy. The root of the problem should be settled first. According to MATRADE, they may have introduced Malaysian food worldwide, organised cooking demonstrations, and published cooking books. However, it is essential to inform people where to source Malaysian products and to overcome the problem of

low food supplies. As a top 20 world trading country, Malaysia should take advantage of that. Therefore, first and foremost, in order to establish a guideline for Malaysia gastrodiplomacy, the foundation must be there. Basically, the foundation should have the objectives, the target, manpower and certainly, the fund; to run all the activities. Afterwards, Malaysia itself through its agencies, NGOs and citizens has to undertake promotions and marketing efforts. Here, there are many ways to advertise Malaysia. However in terms of gastrodiplomacy; the researcher has highlighted three main pillars as the catalyst to enable a nation brand to be established using food as the main tool.

*b. The Catalysts*

The pillars are labeled as Malaysian Products, Signature Dishes and Gastrodiplomacy Activities. Throughout the findings, Respondent A mentioned that Malaysia has already had the food marketed abroad. However, a lack of supply and certain countries which may not allow the entry of certain food (because of their policy) will distort the process of expanding Malaysian products outside. Therefore, to introduce Malaysian food, Malaysian products must have a good and continuous supply throughout the world. Simultaneously, Malaysian signature dishes should also be thoroughly highlighted. This is because, if Malaysia could have thousands of restaurants in foreign countries, then the restaurants have to serve Malaysian food especially the one that is really recognized as Malaysian authentic cuisine or Malaysian heritage food. As mentioned by Respondent E, Respondent D and Respondent B, Malaysian signature foods ought to be sensationalized as they represent Malaysia, thus becoming Malaysia's 'little ambassador'. Respondent B insisted that before Malaysia goes on to promoting, they must first and foremost classify the food and establish the food identity. This statement is supported by Respondent E, following by Respondent D. Both had stated that food identity should be highlighted first to establish them as signature dishes and, heritage food should not be abandoned. As a consequence, the foreigner will get to know Malaysia through the food. Therefore, signature dishes are very important as they symbolize Malaysia and they are also known as one of Malaysia's identity.

Besides that, the two pillars mentioned should also work concurrently with another pillar- the gastrodiplomacy activities. Gastrodiplomacy activities should emphasize the continuous and on-going promotion of gastrodiplomacy programmes. For instance, Malaysia already carries out the most outstanding gastrodiplomacy activity which is the Malaysian Night in Trafalgar Square, London. As mentioned by Respondent A, the event attracted 43,000 visitors in only one night. Even the Mayor of London has already announced that Malaysian Night should be held every year in London. In fact, Respondent C also added that Malaysia should have more night markets to strengthen its soft power capability through its culinary heritage.

*c. The Vision*

Along the way, establishing a good relationship with stakeholders is also very important. So far, Malaysia has good collaboration with buyers, supermarkets and hypermarkets. In fact, the *rendang* flavor is listed as one of the top three flavors in US. After Malaysia establishes the foundation; which are the objectives, the target as well as the fund, then all these three pillars should be taken into account together in order to achieve the vision – to establish Malaysia as a nation brand through the use of its multi-ethnic cuisines.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION**

For the past years, Malaysia Kitchen Programme (MKP) has taken the initiative in extending the nation branding overseas. MKP was first introduced in 2006 by the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and later on, led by Special Unit, Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE). During the Ninth Malaysia Plan, it was entrusted to Tourism Malaysia. So far, MATRADE is concerned with the market of United States, United Kingdom, Australia and China; in promoting its programmes such as food festivals, trade fairs, supermarket promotional activities, advertising and integrated media engagement. MATRADE also sends

Malaysia professional chefs abroad to demonstrate Malaysian food, expand Malaysian eateries and expand food franchises globally.

The key goal of MKP is to brand Malaysia through its national cuisine and at the same time, promote the trading of local products such as food and services. Next, the most significant Malaysia Kitchen Programme is Malaysian Night Markets in Trafalgar Square in London. This programme is held yearly and attracts thousands of visitors. Although MKP does not use the term gastrodiplomacy, however, the concept has been used aggressively by MATRADE in its programmes and also by other government agencies, non-governmental agencies (NGOs), individuals and TV programmes. Therefore, Malaysia has a strong case for a very successful gastrodiplomacy campaign.

A lot of approaches have been taken by the government in ensuring the gastrodiplomacy campaigns are run successfully. One of the initiatives is stated in KL Tourism Master Plan. Under the segment Culture, Heritage, and Places of Interest; KL Tourism Master Plan wanted to position Kuala Lumpur (KL) as the Malaysian cuisine heaven. Overseas, MKP is actively promoting “Bringing Malaysia into Every Home” programme. This programme aims to create understanding and awareness about Malaysia’s authentic cuisine and other product lines. In fact, this programme is also intended to highlight Malaysian food demonstrations and cookery programmes. All these will work towards branding Malaysia’s cuisine as a strong identity for Malaysia.

Based on the best practices by other countries, these countries are definitely enjoying the recognition they obtained after years of working hard in their gastrodiplomacy movement. They have also benefitted from the nation brand in which they are thriving. For Malaysia, it could be the same too. More and more people have acknowledged Malaysia for its unique culinary. As mentioned by Paul Rockower, it will raise the nation’s brand recognition, create broader tourism and boost foreign direct investment. The Tourism Master Plan also intended to place Kuala Lumpur as the gastronomic capital of South East Asia, as cited in World Economic Forum in Davos [1]. To establish food as a nation’s brand may take years, or even decades. Branding is all about continuous effort, constantly sticking to the main objectives, and not to forget; having great media coverage to project the brand worldwide.

In the context of Malaysia's gastrodiplomacy, for Malaysia to demonstrate its power of cuisine, it needs a national cuisine to be established first. Therefore, through gastrodiplomacy, national cuisines are used as tools to conduct public diplomacy and to elevate nation's brand awareness internationally.

All five respondents are in agreement that food related culture is a kind of soft power tool. Middle power countries usually do not practice hard power to position themselves as a powerful country. However, they can utilise soft power to place themselves as advantageously as other powerful countries. Gastrodiplomacy is one of the ways to strengthen a country's soft power as well as to enhance the national brand. From the findings of this research, the researcher is able to propose some guideline for Malaysian gastrodiplomacy strategy abroad.

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