CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR: READY-TO-EAT FOOD IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA BASED ON FOOD-RELATED LIFESTYLE

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Abstract: Demand for ready-to-eat (RTE) food is on the rise in Malaysian cities as a result of shifting lifestyles. The purpose of this research is to determine what motivates Peninsular Malaysians to buy and consume RTE foods, as well as what factors have the greatest influence on these consumers. A quantitative methodology was used, and a descriptive research design informed data collection and analysis. Because of this, the study's goals could be met. Data from 385 Peninsular Malaysian clients was gathered through the use of convenience sampling and online distributed, closed-ended structured questionnaires. This research focuses on the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur and the five other states of Selangor, Malacca, Perak, Johor, and Penang, which represent the six most economically developed states in Malaysia. Significant changes to urban lifestyle have occurred in these areas as urbanisation has progressed. The impact of ready-to-eat food on customers' eating habits was investigated by looking at four factors: health, flavour, convenience, and tradition. This research found that among the six states of Peninsular Malaysia under consideration, the convenience of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods was the primary factor influencing consumer behaviour. Hence, the researcher believes that knowing how customers feel about RTE food and the results reported in this paper can aid RTE food makers in formulating effective marketing strategies.

Keywords: Consumer Behaviours, Consumer Purchase, Food-Related Lifestyle, Ready-To-Eat Food
Introduction
Foods that can be purchased and eaten soon after purchase fall under the category known as "ready-to-eat" (RTE) (Wei, 2021). Ready-to-eat meals, such as convenience foods, quick-serve meals, frozen meals, instant products, preserved foods, and dry foods, are sold in grocery stores under the premise of convenience because they do not require any additional preparation on the part of the consumer. (Laguna, E., et al. Factors such as taste, texture, appearance, advertising, declining interest in home cooking, and splintered family structures all play a role in shaping consumers' tastes for ready-to-eat (RTE) foods (Anusha et al., 2020).

Due to the increased competition, the foodservice sectors now have new information about the fiercely competitive prepared and ready-to-eat food market. In response to the time constraints of modern life, there is a growing demand for quick and easy meals (Durai, 2019). However, homes with working parents are just some of the ones who consume ready-to-eat meals today. The option between creating a meal from scratch or consuming one that is ready to eat depends on the product's level of convenience, its sensory qualities, and how healthy it is regarded to be, according to Laguna et al. (2020).

The demand for prepared meals is constantly rising on a global scale. Evidence shows that eating habits have changed from freshly prepared meals to ready-to-eat meals. Sgroi et al. (2018) assumed that ready-to-eat products' past and current popularity could be attributed to their inbuilt practicality in reacting to the significant trends in food consumption, where it is the packaged foods that are ready to be used. This trend is due to its convenience for a new family model characterised by working women, which offered them time savings in meal preparations. RTE foods are trendy because they are designed for immediate consumption. Some examples of RTE foods are cooked meats and poultry, cold vegetable dishes in a sauce, and fried rice (Yu et al., 2020).

In recent years, this type of product has become increasingly common worldwide. According to information provided by Eastern Daylight Time (2022), the global market for ready-to-eat meals is expected to reach USD 219.43 billion by the year 2030. On the other hand, it is anticipated that the Ready-to-Eat Meals industry in Malaysia will expand by 6.90% between 2023 and 2027, leading to a market volume of $2.59 billion in 2027, as reported by Statista (2022). In Western societies, ready-to-eat meals have become and will continue to be an inseparable part of consumers' lives.

The RTE food products met several criteria, but their convenience, in particular, made them popular with many individuals, especially those who live in cities. Basurra et al. (2021) state that the expanding urban population must also be considered when estimating the rise in demand for RTE products associated with a fast-paced city lifestyle. Malaysia's most urbanised and developed regions include Selangor, the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Melaka, Perak, and Pulau Pinang (Baskaran et al., 2017). These urban areas have experienced the most functional and structural expansion due to the trend toward urbanisation, which has brought lifestyle changes.

In addition, Laguna et al. (2020) concurred that consumers' lack of time to cook and the low prices of ready-to-eat meals had contributed to the growth of this industry. According to Gürce and Friedman (2020), a person's occupation, money, perceived time restrictions, attitude towards convenience, and food-related lifestyle patterns may all have a part in their preference
for ready-to-eat (RTE) meals. Furthermore, this shows that there is a huge interest in ready-to-eat foods.

A person's personal, cultural, and religious values and aspirations are only few of the many factors that might impact their food-related consumer lifestyle beyond simple hunger or dietary needs (Kokkoris & Stavrova, 2021). Research into ready-to-eat (RTE) foods has often centred on two key topics: food safety and consumer tastes. Yet, there is limited research into the impact of a consumer's food-related lifestyle on their attitudes and actions regarding ready-to-eat (RTE) food. This research added to the current literature by using a food-related lifestyle tool to categorise the Malaysian RTE food market. In order to fill this knowledge void, this study analysed the purchasing habits of RTE food among Peninsular Malaysians. The purpose of this research is to determine what makes Peninsular Malaysians choose one RTE food option over another.

Consumers' willingness to include RTE food consumption in their regular routines will reflect the findings of the study. Peninsular Malaysians tend to have unique tastes as a result of their spending habits. Therefore, the study will benefit greatly from correlating the factors influencing their behaviour with relation to RTE food with the determinants of their food-related lifestyle. So, in the future, the work of social scientists studying the reception of RTE foods in Malaysia will serve as a reference. The body of this work is divided into five parts. The first two parts of this report include the literature survey and research methods, respectively. Following this, the findings of the data analysis are shown. The rest of the article delves into the study's findings and conclusions, as well as its limits and additional suggestions.

Literature Review

Research on consumer behaviour focuses on how people select, use, and eventually abandon the many means by which they satisfy their wants and needs (Chaurasiya et al., 2020). The consumer's mindset towards and propensity for a given purchase behaviour is known as "purchasing intention" (Zhang et al., 2020). Anusha et al. (2020) state that consumers are driven to buy RTE food by convenience in 47.3% of all situations. Also, 40.7% of respondents said they regularly buy RTE meals, and 36.8% said they regularly eat RTE cuisine at restaurants and cafes. Popularly known as a dish that can be prepared quickly and easily in a microwave by following specific directions, RTE has gained widespread recognition (Halim, 2020). This suggests that factors such as socioeconomic status, time constraints, a preference for convenience, and dietary preferences all play a role in determining whether or not consumers opt for ready-to-eat meals.

The primary objective of a food-related lifestyle is to describe consumers based on how they use food and eating to gain life values (Boer et al., 2008; Brunsø & Grunert, 1995). Correspondingly, Rexiti and Cobanoglu (2017) segmented food buyers in Istanbul using the food-related lifestyle (FRL) in order to recognise consumer groupings and food consumption behaviour. The FRL is one of the most sophisticated food segmentation technologies available and has relevance across cultural contexts. Therefore, four lifestyle factors related to food are explored in this study of customer behaviour toward RTE meals: health, taste, convenience, and traditional orientation. According to the statements about the pursuit of health, while buying any RTE food, health orientation is acknowledged as one of the variables relating to the food and drink sectors (Bae et al., 2010). Food may be transformed into ready-to-eat products that preserve the food's freshness while also being practical in terms of time savings. This evolution could increase consumers' utility and increase the consumption of RTE food (Stiletto et al.,
2020). Since taste is one of the most significant factors in food purchasing and consumption, according to Laguna et al. (2020), the taste is the hedonic quality dimension typically defined only after consumption. Likewise, Hidayat et al. (2020) also stated that the flavour of the food is a significant factor in determining the attitudes and behaviours of customers regarding their food preferences.

Next, according to Laguna et al., convenience is associated with time and effort savings across the food life cycle, from planning and purchasing to preparation to consumption to cleaning and disposal of leftovers (2020). For city dwellers whose hectic schedules are in part owing to the rapid pace of life, this means eliminating or drastically lowering the stress that comes with preparing meals. Lifestyle shifts have resulted in a shift in consumer preferences towards ready-to-eat foods rather than homemade fare. Customers that require more time to shop, prepare, and eat meals often choose ready-to-eat (RTE) options from grocery shops because of their busy schedules and increased workloads (Mandelkar, 2018). Finally, one's traditional orientation, which considers one's typical eating patterns, affects consumer behaviour while purchasing RTE food. Customers that value cultural and ethnic authenticity in their food purchases are connected to this custom (Bhuyan & Govindsamy, 2020). A separate study by Aviles et al. (2020) likewise linked eating habits to nostalgia for familiar foods. Thus, it is important to learn what influences people to buy ready-to-eat (RTE) food.

Conceptual Framework
This study's conceptual framework was derived from an earlier study conducted by Bae et al. (2010). It provides a synopsis of the objectives of the study, which are to investigate the attitudes of Peninsular Malaysian consumers towards RTE foods in light of their food-related lifestyles, particularly in Malaysia's most developed states. The association between lifestyle factors affecting food and consumer purchase intention regarding RTE meals is illustrated in Figure 1.

![Conceptual Framework](image)

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

Source: Authors

Methodology
This study’s research objectives are met using a quantitative research approach. Data collection and measurement of various elements influencing customers' behaviour toward ready-to-eat food on food-related lifestyle are conducted through descriptive research design. As stated by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) in 2022, the population of Malaysia is predicted to reach 32.7 million in 2022, with an annual growth rate of 0.2%. This research focused on the six states in Peninsular Malaysia, with the highest population composition is Selangor (7.0m), followed by Johor (4.0m), Perak (2.5m), Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur (1.9m), Pulau Pinang (1.7m) and Melaka (1.0m). The population of this study is these states, known as the most urbanised and developed parts of Malaysia, and estimated to be 18.1 million. Purposive
sampling is used in this study to select the respondents who met the sampling criteria. Two criteria were considered: (1) the consumers of RTE food and (2) respondents from the six selected states. According to the sample size formula by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size representative of RTE consumers is 385 samples.

This investigation used a closed-ended structured survey questionnaire distributed using Google Forms as the administration platform. Before the main research, a preliminary test is administered to twenty expert panels, consisting of food service operators and educators, to obtain feedback on the questionnaires and assess the study's applicability before the major study. The closed-ended questionnaire was then distributed through the conventional method and by approaching available consumers from the selected focus group using Google Forms. Respondents were required to complete the self-administered questionnaire at their convenience without the researchers’ interference. The distribution of the questionnaire, sorting of the completed questionnaires, and analysis of the collected data took place for around a month. The questionnaire constructed in the previous study by Bae et al. (2010) was modified to suit this study setting. The questionnaire is divided into four sections. Section A covers the respondents' demographic profile, whereas Section B focuses on their RTE food consumption habits. Tradition, convenience, taste, and lifestyle factors that affect health are the four divisions of Section C. Finally, Section D addressed customer attitudes toward RTE food.

Data Analysis and Findings

Demographic Profile
On the basis of the numerical values that were derived from the SPSS analysis, each and every outcome has been determined and analysed. The data frequencies were gathered from 400 respondents who participated in the study. Nevertheless, 385 responses were reliable for this study. The respondents varied in age, most of whom were young adults from 20 – 29 years old, with 63.1% (n=243), while Malays make up 94.0% of the respondents (n=362). Selangor respondents participated the most in this study (52.2%; n=201), followed by those from Johor (21.8%; n=84), W.P. Kuala Lumpur (8.1%; n=31), Perak (6.2%; n=24), Melaka (6.0%; n=23), and Pulau Pinang (5.7%; n=22). Selangor is the most populated state in Malaysia, according to statistics provided by Hirschmann (2020), with a population of roughly 6.57 million.

Next, female respondents make up 68.3% (n=263) of the total respondents, while male respondents appear to make up between 31.7% (n=122) and 63.4% (n=244) of the total respondents. Most respondents (n=223) had a tertiary education, with 57.9% having a degree. When it comes to family structure, the results indicate that two generations of families make up the majority (64.7%; n = 249), and as for the employment status, the results showed that students are the group with the highest frequency (43.3%; n = 167). Regarding household income, most respondents had an income of RM 4,000 or more, and the majority —26.8%, or 103 people—spent between RM 50 and RM 100 monthly.

Determinants of Food-Related Lifestyle
All of the research instruments in this section demonstrate that most respondents agree with the aforementioned instruments about their decision to consume RTE meals, as the derived mean value ranged from 2.74 to 4.30. This study sought to identify the influences of food-related lifestyles on Peninsular Malaysian consumers' attitudes towards RTE foods. This objective is relevant to all independent variables used in the study. The outcome corresponds with the findings of the descriptive analysis. The exploratory factor analysis revealed four factors—
health orientation, taste orientation, convenience orientation, and tradition orientation—to help the researcher better comprehend the lifestyles associated with ready-to-eat foods in this study.

First, assertions relating to the pursuit of health in food purchases made up the findings of the first factor, which is health-oriented. The survey's participants were highly accepted for the survey's overall health orientation attributes. Most respondents agreed they would prefer to spend more money on wholesome meals. Additionally, this demonstrates that the respondents are more concerned about the calibre of the food they eat, even RTE meals. The second factor, taste-oriented, was comprised of consumers' preferences, behaviour, and perception of food prices when dining out. Most respondents stated that flavour is a crucial factor to consider when consuming RTE food, and they are likely to be regarded as outstanding food tasters.

The third factor is convenience-oriented, which involves picking RTE foods or convenience foods and deciding when to consume RTE foods. Participants also agreed that they chose to spend their money on eating meals. With the general attributes in the convenience orientation, there are two levels of acceptance which are low and high, since most respondents dislike including instant food in their diets at specific times. The final factor has a tradition-oriented focus and concerns people's regular mealtime eating habits. Only a small percentage of the respondents are known to value tradition. Most respondents also concur that they must include rice in every meal because it is still a staple dish in Malaysia. The adherents of tradition have set dietary habits. The researchers agreed that Malaysians rely on rice as their main daily food source.

Regression Analysis
Multiple linear regression was used in this study to identify the most influential food-related lifestyle factors that influence consumer behaviour regarding RTE food intake. The multiple regression analysis's summary findings, utilised to interpret the study's research objectives, are displayed in Table 1.

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<th>β</th>
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Note: p < .05

Source: Authors

Discussion
According to the investigation, convenience orientation emerges as the most significant factor influencing customer behaviour toward RTE food because of the substantial scale in the Multiple Regression Analysis. According to a prior study by Bae et al. (2010), convenience was the primary driving factor for about 50.7% of their respondents to buy RTE foods. The most significant beta coefficient is 0.492, which is for convenience orientation, according to the Multi Regression Analysis results in Table 1. This variable has the most significant and distinct effect on explaining the dependent variable since the variance explained by all other variable components is controlled.
Due to their hectic schedules, people in urban areas frequently pick ready-to-eat (RTE) foods. Customers are keen to pay more for decent food because of the meal's health advantages and nutritional value when convenience overtakes other factors as the primary driver of RTE food consumption. This finding is in line with Basurra et al. (2020), who discovered that RTE food products have developed into essential food and are perfect for many people, particularly for those who lead busy lives and are typically urban populations due to their convenience. In addition, because respondents are more likely to buy pre-cooked and RTE foods, the market's availability may also impact consumer behaviour.

According to the findings, in contrast to the other variables, the respondents mostly seek convenience and health when eating. In addition, the majority of respondents are inclined to pay for their meals and spend money on them. Commonly, these convenience addicts consumed RTE as regular meals to keep themselves manageable. It demonstrates that most respondents value food convenience, making convenience orientation the most crucial criterion. Baskaran et al. (2017) stated that stressed people frequently eat RTE since it is convenient. Customers seek convenience in their busy lives since they often work longer hours, spend more in traffic, and want to make the most of their free time, according to Basurra et al. (2021). They, therefore, require products and services that facilitate and support their hectic lives.

According to the findings, health orientation, the second most significant factor, influences consumer behaviour towards RTE foods. It is acknowledged that food preferences affect general health and Malaysia's rapid socioeconomic development, impacting Malaysians' lifestyles. Due to the rapid shift in consumer attitudes towards changes in food tastes, lifestyles, and consumption patterns, Malaysians recognise that eating healthily is one of the best ways to promote health and reduce the risk of various diseases. (Kasim et al., 2018).

Even though the respondents often consume RTE food, they are nonetheless conscious of the value of health, particularly food's advantages and nutrient levels. The awareness of food quality demonstrates that Malaysians need to be more dubious about the value and efficacy of food goods. Additionally, a study by Bolek (2020) discovered that food safety concerns had grown general awareness of diet and health among consumers and their intention to choose healthy food. It is consistent with the findings, which showed that lifestyle changes impact consumer consumption behaviours in their daily routine.

Conclusion
Ready-to-eat (RTE) food is one of the food trends that has garnered the most appeal among consumers. The outcomes complement clients' lives in Peninsular Malaysia's most urbanised regions, including Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Melaka, Perak, Johor, and Pulau Pinang. As said previously, clients in the United States require more time to search for comfort food during working hours; therefore, it is easier for them to acquire RTE food, which is readily available in every store. The second most crucial element influencing consumer behaviour concerning RTE food is health consciousness, which lifestyle changes have significantly impacted.

The findings from this study suggest that convenience orientation is the most important aspect and has the most substantial impact on how consumers behave regarding their intake of RTE food. Therefore, it has become crucial to recognise and comprehend consumer wants and expectations about their food purchasing behaviour. The obvious extension of this research would be to evaluate the sensitivity of the findings to evolving lifestyles and cultural norms.
The research has shown a significant chance and opportunity for ready-to-eat (RTE) food to expand in the market. This study offers the chance to speak with RTE customers and gather their opinions on consumption habits and factors influencing food-related lives. However, the study focuses only on those living in Peninsular Malaysia's six most urbanised states—Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Malacca, Perak, Johor, and Pulau Pinang—with a sample size of 385 respondents. Therefore, this study might expand by enlarging the research area to obtain more transparent points of view and trustworthy outcomes from all Malaysian consumers. The target demographic could be investigated based on the range of ages, the work level or by examining a particular gender to gain a deeper and better understanding of how customers behave toward RTE food.

Since only a few variables in the logit model were shown to be statistically significant, a small sample size was used for the investigation. Only six of Peninsular Malaysia's thirteen states were considered for this analysis. Because of this, it's likely that states with varying populations will need to be effectively represented. Such studies could benefit from a larger geographic and participant pool. Because of this shift in focus from items to consumer behaviour alone, producers now have less sway over buyer habits. A key component of contemporary marketing is an appreciation for the importance of, and effort put into gaining insight into, consumer behaviour. Consumer behaviour is a key factor in determining the success of marketing strategies and initiatives. According to the research, Peninsular Malaysians' actual food-related behaviours reveal their true opinions on RTE foods. As a result, it will hopefully provide some clarity and add to the body of knowledge concerning consumer research, especially as it relates to ready-to-eat (RTE) food.

References


