

Understanding Purchase Intention of Ready-to-Eat Food among Malaysian Urbanites: A Proposed Framework

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Abstract

Changes in life style have brought in profound variations in the purchase intentions among people. This change is even prominent among urban residents who are living a stressful life style and heavily depending on external supplies for their living. In view of this, ready-to-eat food has taken central attention among the urban residents and there are many factors driving such intentions. This conceptual paper will discuss about extrinsic factors that drives purchase intentions among urban residents in Malaysia. In order to investigate this phenomenon, several dimensions of extrinsic factors such as perceived price, perceived safety, perceived packaging, brand image and convenience will be discussed. Apart from that, the mediating effect of nutritional information interest will also be reviewed on the relationship between extrinsic factors and purchase intention. Eventually, this article will propose a conceptual framework that links extrinsic factors, purchase intention and nutritional information interest. Supporting literature about all constructs under study is also discussed in order to contextualize this study. Some direction into undertaking empirical study of this conceptual paper is also provided towards the end of the article.

Keywords: Extrinsic Motivation, Nutritional Information Interest, Purchase Intention, Rte Food, Urban Residents

1. Introduction

Ready-to-Eat (RTE) food by definition can be as plant or animal derived food that have to be frozen, cooked and processed before it can be directly consumed or it requiring a very minimal time of preparation such as boiling or reheating before consumption (Howard et al., 2012). In global context, the RTE food industry emerged as an excellent food choice and it is expected to expand with a compound annual growth rate of 7.2% from year 2016 until 2026 with a valued up to US\$195.3 billion (FMI, 2016). In addition, through various criterion of RTE food products especially through it convenience, it became an important food and ideal for

many people especially for those who are living with a busy lifestyle, generally known as urban residents (Nondzor & Tawiah, 2015). In early 1960s, most households prepare their own food by cooking and consuming it at home. The trend has changed due to development of technological innovations that has shifted it from individual's own preparation to manufacturers (Harris & Shiptsova, 2007). Therefore, it has created the demand for RTE food for society especially for urban residents resulting at tremendous increase of RTE food consumption.

Urbanization by definition is a gazette area which is saturated with a population up to 10,000 people and 60 per cent of the population must not involve with agricultural activities (Malaysia Department of Statistic, Population and Housing Census, 2010). In Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur Federal Territory, Selangor, Malacca, Perak, Johor and Penang are the most urbanized and the most developed region. The trend of urbanization has brought changes in lifestyle which is best reflected by the functional and structural development in urban areas. Hence, the tremendous development driven the local authorities to build and provide more facilities such as shopping complexes, restaurants, food premises and services to the public and ultimately access to RTE food has become essential and intention to purchase RTE food to complement their busy life has become not uncommon to urban residents and their life styles.

1.1 Problem Statement

The market of RTE food in Malaysia is growing and has become significant to the contribution of gross domestic product in Malaysia's food industry. This development can be attributed to several factors. It is generally accepted that consumers use both intrinsic and extrinsic factors to build up expectation and opinions before they experience the product (Lee and Lou, 1996). However, the ability of extrinsic factors and perceived health to override consumer's purchase intention has not been specifically tested. Thus, a careful review of the past literature indicated that there is plausible evidence which could explain the relationship between extrinsic factors and purchase intention especially in the context of nutritional information interest about RTE food. Besides, while consumer knowledge and attitude are known to moderate dependence on extrinsic factors, results of previous studies are occasionally conflicting and ambiguous due to inconsistencies in the definition and measurement of these constructs (Yin et al., 2007). Additionally, according to Vijayabaskar and Sundaram (2012), the people's change in lifestyle and corresponding trends toward health consciousness has increased and influenced their purchase intentions. Agreeing to this claim, Selvarajn (2012) further argued and clarified that lack of awareness about the products and its nutritional value has raised health concerns and therefore has influenced RTE food purchase decisions among people aside relatively high prices. There are no previous studies which has attempted to clarify the relationship extrinsic motivations, nutritional information interest and purchase intention of RTE food among Malaysian urban residents. Therefore, it important to investigate the concerns among Malaysian urban residents about their intention to purchase RTE food. More importantly, it is important to identify the significance of nutritional information interest among Malaysian urban residence to understand if it has mediated their RTE food purchase decisions in spite of busy urban life style. Since consumers with lacking of self-confidence is less likely to support their own opinions and frequently making predictive decision on extrinsic factors (Aaron et al., 1994), this study will highlight the truth about consumer's preference before buying RTE foods in Malaysia. This study on

extrinsic factors of purchase intention of RTE foods in Malaysia is expected to shed new insights into consumer research, especially in the RTE food settings.

1.2 Research Objective

The research investigates the relation between extrinsic factors toward consumer purchase intention on RTE foods among urban residents in Malaysia. In this research, extrinsic factor dimensions of perceived price, safety, packaging, brand image and convenience were considered. Additionally, nutritional information interest was incorporated in the study to identify its mediating effect between extrinsic factors (and its dimension) and purchase intention. More specifically, this research aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a) Determine the relationship between extrinsic factors (and its dimensions) and purchase intention.
- b) Determine the mediating effect of nutritional information interest on the relationship between extrinsic factor and purchase intention.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Extrinsic Motivation

In general, when it comes to overall evaluation to purchase intention, consumers are always cautious when initiate their perceptions and insights in term of quality levels (Bredahl, 2003). In Olson's model, the structure of quality perception has been conceptualized into two stage processes to predictive value which is known as intrinsic or extrinsic factors that lead them to have an intention of purchase for the particular products which in this case it is about RTE food. The literature shows that the intrinsic factors are given more credence but it will suffer predictive value when consumers have low confidence in their mind to assess and evaluate the particular product (Srinivasan Jain et al., 2004). On the other hand, the extrinsic factors can be a strong indicator of predictive value which apparently offering high levels of emotional attachment such as brand name, price, convenience and so forth (Kardes et al., 2004). Furthermore, consumers with low levels of understanding to relevant knowledge of the particular product have a greater credence to the extrinsic factors (Yin et al., 2007). Expert consumers with the ability to correctly interpret and perceive the product to its actual value (Siu and Wong, 2002) who are less likely influenced by extrinsic factors due to its ambiguity, lack of clarity and high diagnostic nature (Maheswaran, 1994) differs with consumers who are in hurry or experiencing some form of stress because the latter prefer to use the cognitive shortcut that an extrinsic factor represents as they are not able to evaluate intrinsic factor appropriately (Wilson and Brekke, 1994). Wilson and Brekke posited that these differences are due to variation in cognitive needs and degree of indifference in evaluating a product. Individuals with lesser needs for cognition and/or higher levels of mixed feeling tend to make more use of the cognitive shortcuts provided by extrinsic factors because they are not motivated to understand intrinsic factors and are seeking to make the shortest and quickest decision (Bredahl, 2003). Therefore, a purchase intention of a consumer can be driven by various elements such as instinct, ability to understand, self-effort insufficiency and inability to gain information (Rao and Olson, 1990). A review of literature resulted at five prominent extrinsic factor dimensions to further investigate a consumer's purchase intention They are perceived price, perceived safety, perceived brand image, perceived packaging, and perceived convenience.

2.1.1 Perceived Price

The concept of perceived price has been recognized by many researchers from the past literatures. According to Olson (1977), price is explained through two classifications which are monetary and non-monetary expression. The monetary can be defined when the price is typically related to the expression of money while the non-monetary definition of price refers to the effort of buyers to seek for the information about the product before they intend to purchase something (Li and Green, 2011). From the consumer's perspective, price refers to what a consumer is willing to give up or sacrifices money in order to obtain goods or services (Zeithaml, 1982). It may also vary when perceived price is considered from various demographical perspectives such as marital status, gender, employment status and awareness (Zeithaml, 1988). Defining price as a sacrifice is consistent through conceptualization by most of researches (Monroe and Krishnan, 1985). Previous studies revealed that consumers do not always remember or know the actual prices of the particular products but sees prices in a way that it is meaningful to them (Dickson and Sawyer 1985, Zeithaml 1982). This indicates that price has become a dominant extrinsic factor which has direct association with the consumer's evaluation of product to many other alternatives and it also serves as crucial buying decision of a consumer (Veale and Quester, 2009).

2.1.2 Perceived Safety

Muhammad et al. (2010) argued that there are differences among consumers' attitudes when it comes to food safety. It can also vary due to gender differences (Badrie et al., 2006). Hence, food scandals have made consumers to react differently when it comes to safety of the food they consume depending on their risk perceptions (Henson and Northen, 2000). Perceived safety can be defined in wider or narrow scope (Ritson and Mai, 1998). From a narrowed view, food safety which is also known as a food risk is related to the probability of contracting with a disease as a consequence of consuming certain food types. More specifically, it can also be seen as embracing nutritional qualities of food and it has more significant impacts on unfamiliar foods such as European consumer's discomfort feelings about genetically modified food (Klaus, 2005). On the other hand, the broader definition of food quality can be described as anything that become a desirable feature of a food product among the consumers including safety of the food itself (Klaus, 2005). According to Kindt et al (2008), various factors which reflects perceived safety of a food such as appearance, supplements substance, flavour, microbiological quality and surface has been fundamental to understanding the food development and as well as the need to identify and fulfil it. The development of technology offering multiple substitutes to a product has made the consumers to be very mindful about the food product and its influence towards their wellbeing. These modern technologies have made the consumers to place more enthusiasm and be more mindful about food safety and security (Henderson et al., 2013). A holistic approach towards food safety has further enhanced this claim that food quality to a greater extent has made consumers to strongly believe that safety is valuable and desirable factors in their purchase decisions (Klaus, 2005).

2.1.3 Perceived Packaging

The past decades have seen an increasing attention towards packaging attributes and its sensitive characteristics within a marketing domain as it is found to influence consumers' purchase decision (Rezaei, 2014) making it an essential element to marketers, designers and also food producers. A study conducted by Harsha and Amulya (2017) about ready-to-serve fruit beverages revealed that an element of packaging in the context of ready-to-serve fruit

beverages has been essential in encouraging or discouraging a consumer's choice and buying behaviors by diverging their minds due to the perceived packaging. Apart from that, Connolly and Davidson (1996) found that at least three-quarters of food and beverage purchase decision are made at the point of sale. More interestingly, 90 per cent of consumer make their purchase decision upon examining the front pack labeling and 85 per cent of consumers make their purchase decisions without seeing an alternative product (Urbany, Dickson and Kalapurakal, 1996). Several studies were conducted previously to investigate the influence of perceived packaging among consumers. For instance, Mccracken and Macklin (1998) investigated about the influence of packaging attributes such as color, image, design, size and shape of the particular product in a consumer's purchase intentions and decisions while Simmonds and Spence (2017) investigated about the nutritional information printed on the product as a feature of packaging. This indicates that it is important to understand with more depth about how packing is transmitting its messages and is being perceived among consumers, especially in the RTE food sector and whether packaging really improves product experience among customers, hence translating experience into an intention and ultimately into a purchase decision.

2.1.4 Brand Image

Brand image has been recognized as an essential component to the concept of marketing (Keller, 1998). However, understanding about consumers preferences in buying various type of goods and services including fast-selling products remain a challenge in the literature (Syed Mehmood Shah et al., 2016). Brand tends to be a durable and sustainable asset that retailers use to differentiate their offerings (Aaker, 2000), usually driven by a set of beliefs that influence the users in the selection of the brands (Kotler and Armstrong, 1996). Therefore, a direct association between brand image and brand loyalty is found (Sung et al., 2010) that influences the consumers purchase intention driven by the brand loyalty (Delgado et al., 2005). This argument is consistent with Theory of Planned Behaviour which states that basic determinants of intention formation are usually subjective norms (Syed Mehmood Shah et al., 2016) and that probability of buying a specific brand reflects purchase intention (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, and Geus, 2006). This intention gets enhanced when a consumer have tested and tried a specific brand and prone to repeat similar behavior (Steenkamp, and Dekimpe, 1997). However, in the context of food purchase, Narang (2006) opined that brand loyalty does not exist. This can be due to change in food habits and consumption pattern (Kubendran and Vanniarajan, 2005) and variety seeking behavior and curiosity (Hans and Trijp, 1996) as well as quality (Vincent, 2006).

2.1.5 Convenience

According to Rohm and Swaminathan (2004), convenience is defined as the advantage to the efforts and time saving that consumers gain from purchasing goods. It indicates shorter time and lesser energy required in attaining a desired outcome apart from reduction in time consumption (Costa et al., 2007). The perceived benefits of convenience which includes reduction or elimination of meal preparation stress, especially among urban residents who are occupied with busy life style and faster preparation possibilities has been viewed as unique value proposition of RTE food. Propagation of time-scarcity has made convenient access to food as an essential element in daily life (Celnik et al, 2012). Convenience also can be attributed to the texture, nutrient, taste as well as price. Such characteristics of convenience are found to be prominent in the RTE food category whereby it offers easy access

to the product, requires lesser preparation time, and requires very limited skills in the preparation process, making it a favorable food choice among people generally and urban residents in particular. Hence, people acknowledge the convenience in obtaining and preparing RTE food and they believe that these products could save time for them (Costa et al. 2007). However, convenience does not come without cost or risk. Celnik et al (2012) indicated that although convenience of RTE food is favored by most people, it has also created concerns about its healthiness and long-term health effects and chronic diseases such as cardiac, diabetes and cancer.

2.2 Nutritional Information Interest

Nutritional attributes can be defined as a mechanism that has the ability to gain the trust for consumers (Balasubramanian, 2002) but can be transformed into search attributes once nutritional information is provided which it requires some effort (Caswell, 1999). Nutritional labels assist consumers to identify the exact nutritional content of a food or beverage. Food labeling provides a cost-effective tool and information for helping consumers identify healthy food choices (Kelly et al., 2009). However, in the context of RTE food, whether consumers read the nutritional information to check for its healthy nature is still unclear although there is increasing awareness among the people about their health (Vijayabaskar and Sundaram, 2012; Selvaraj, 2012). However, consumers tend to consume a particular food only when they perceive the food to be healthy (Haws et al., 2017). Sacks (2009) provided some clarity to this issue informing that although nutritional information can influence purchase intentions, only a small portion of consumers read the nutritional information available at the back of pack of the product and that even fewer consumers really understand it. This can be attributed to the findings by Wandel (1997) who states that some individuals find interpreting nutritional labels could be very complicated. In response to these findings, packaging innovation was undertaken by the product manufacturers who tackled the issue by introducing front-of-pack food labels for greater visibility and awareness. In tandem with this innovation in packaging, Kelly et al. (2004) found that the addition of simplified nutrition information on the front of food packages, known as front-of-pack food labeling, helps to assist consumers in gaining more information of the particular food for purchases. Such front-of-pack food labeling does not only provides visible information about a food or drink product but also has become simple and easy to interpret and to compare with other product (AMA, 2011). When the front-of-pack nutritional labeling is provided, the consumers found to have better awareness about the nutritional value of the product, especially when the labeling are made clear, simple and consistent enabling the consumers to choose healthy food (Hersey, 2013). This claim concurs with Zhen and Zheng (2017) who found out that nutritional information provision effect has promoted the demand for healthier products. Nevertheless, Hersey further iterated that doing front-of-pack food labeling hand-in-hand with government as one of governmental strategy to combat food related diseases (e.g. obesity and diet-related) will ensure healthy life style among the consumers of RTE food. Therefore, nutritional labeling has a role to spark an interest to relevant parties including academia, policy makers and consumers. Furthermore, all parties including food processors, consumers and third-party entities are all have an important role in determining the extrinsic factors of food and it can be described through food labels (Golan et al., 2001).

2.3 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is a planned behavior of evaluation that a consumer willing to buy certain goods or services (Ajzen, 1991). Purchase intention is one of the principal concepts studied in the marketing literature. The interest of marketing scholars on purchase intentions explained that it is also associated to a buying behavior. According to Morwitz (1996), a few studies have reported a positive correlation between purchase intentions and purchase behavior. Therefore, purchase intention is a strong instinct of customers in their repeated purchase of the product whenever they are interested to obtain goods in the market (Nabil, 2010). It has a considerable importance because the business entities want to increase the sales of the particular product for the purpose which to maximize their profit. Purchase intention presents a form of customer retention and it is reflected as a function of the extrinsic factors, which has a strong influence and contribute on the purchase intention of the consumers (Hawa et al., 2014). Among others, it includes brand image, product quality and so forth. Various studies were conducted in the past to gain in depth insight about purchase intentions. For instance, Swinyard (1993) and McQuitty et al., (2000) investigated indirect effect of values and direct effect of involvement in consumer satisfaction on purchase intention. On the other hand, Sweeny et al. (1999) explored the mediating effect of customer satisfaction on purchase intentions while Parasuraman et al (1996) conducted an empirical study to understand the relationship between purchase intention and perceived quality. In spite of many research in the past literature, there are no conclusive findings whether to support or refute the claims and more importantly, influence of nutritional information interest rather vague. Continuing debate on this area invites more prudent research to further clarify these mixed findings and to offer some direction into future research.

Base on this discussion, the following propositions are formulated:

- Proposition 1: There is significant relationship between extrinsic motivation and purchase intention.
- Proposition 1a: There is significant relationship between perceived price and purchase intention.
- Proposition 1b: There is significant relationship between perceived safety and purchase intention.
- Proposition 1c: There is significant relationship between perceived packaging and purchase intention.
- Proposition 1d: There is significant relationship between brand image and purchase intention.
- Proposition 1e: There is significant relationship between convenience and purchase intention.
- Proposition 2: There is mediating effect of nutritional information interest on the relationship between extrinsic motivation and purchase intention.

Drawing on this discussion, the following conceptual framework as illustrated in Figure 1 is proposed. It depicts a significant relationship between extrinsic motivation and purchase intention. The conceptual framework also posits the mediating effect of nutritional information interest on the relationship between perceived price, safety, packaging, brand image and convenience on purchase intention.

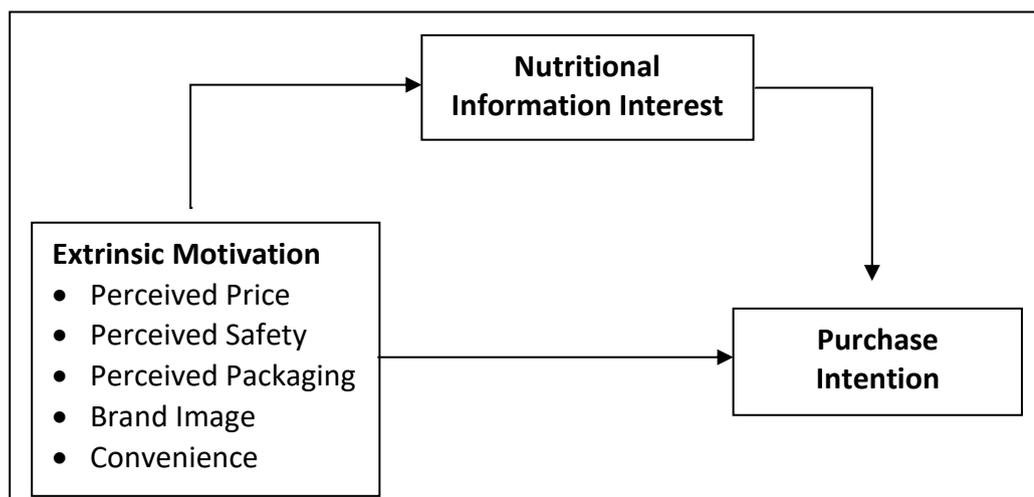


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Conclusion

Hawa et al. (2014) explained that food which is an integral part in a society has witnessed a tremendous change in consumption pattern, that is from cooking at home to RTE food. Additionally, the outlook towards RTE food is very positive especially among young consumers driven by planned decisions and strong demand due to relative convenience against home cook preparation, time saving opportunities and decline in traditional food eating habits (Priyadarshini, 2015). Generally, various decision such as where to buy, how to buy, when to buy and what to buy are made by the customers to purchase essential goods that they consume on a daily basis (Bulsara and Trivedi, 2016). These changes are mainly prominent in urban and metropolitan cities as a result of increasing population and other factors including time and energy which has created the need towards RTE food (Hawa et al., 2014, Selvaraj, 2012). In contradictory, several factors such as higher RTE food prices, convenience access to RTE food, taste differences between home cook and RTE food, and RTE food non-preference are also found to discourage the consumption of RTE food (Karuppusamy and Arjunan, 2012). Against these discouraging factors, Selvaraj (2012) argued that non-consumption of RTE food can be primarily due to lack of awareness about the food as well as health concerns among the consumers. Therefore, if the consumers are aware of availability of RTE food, they are prone to consume it (Lampila and Lahteenmäki, 2007) which can be made better off with convenient access of the same (Prasad and Aryasri, 2008). These mixed findings highlight that the RTE food consumers are always in dilemma resulting at complex and unpredictable purchase decisions (Bulsara and Trivedi, 2016). Consumer psychology literature is still experiencing mixed findings in spite of continuous effort to understand consumer behavior. This is more prominent in the RTE food consumption while considering a general desire to remain healthy against consumption of these food products. This is because change in lifestyle has impact towards health consciousness, hence has further influenced purchase intentions (Vijayabaskar & Sundaram, 2012). In particular, it has raised health concerns, making the nutritional information to have significant value (Selvaraj, 2012) and has become an important element in purchase decisions. However, Onozaka et al (2014) indicated that gaps continue to exist in understanding consumers behaviors in obtaining, understanding and utilizing nutritional information in their purchase intentions and also decisions.

Since there are still no conclusive findings about purchase intentions of RTE food among consumers, it is essential to study fundamental factors that shape dynamics of purchase intention of RTE food. Therefore, the proposed conceptual framework is expected to shed some light into future empirical investigation to clarify and provide more insights into consumer research in general and nutritional information interest in RTE food purchase intentions and decisions in particular. Additionally, contextualization of this conceptual framework is expected to provide insights to regulators in regulating policy making processes towards individuals' perception about RTE food consumption and its motivating factors and the significance of nutritional information in their purchase decisions. Obviously, this conceptual research suffers from empirical investigation, however it still offers a theoretical rationale to unlock unknown insights as well as to clarify mixed findings in understanding nutritional information interest that influences RTE food purchase intentions in the context of urban residents. Validating the proposed framework with an empirical study will be the most important future direction for this research.

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