

Understanding Malaysian Preference for Local Beef

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, the demand for beef outsprints its supply. This issue has led to an unsustainable over-reliance on imports and consequently has brought to the issues of steep prices to end consumers. Part of the problem is a poor understanding of the beef buying preferences of consumers and the factors that shape the preferences. This study sought to determine the key factors influencing consumer buying preferences for beef among Malaysian, particularly examining the effects of price and quality. A cross-sectional survey of 384 beef consumers drawn from social media platforms was undertaken. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS. All factors were found to have a significant positive effect on beef buying preferences among consumers in Malaysia. It is recommended that firms in the beef industry consider these factors in their beef production and marketing..

INTRODUCTION

Pork, poultry, and beef are the third most consumed meat product globally, and beef alone accounts for a quarter of the world's meat consumption (Li et al., 2018). Beef represents the culinary name for the meat of cattle (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). It also refers to specific skeletal muscle meat from cattle to excluding meat from organs such as the intestines, liver, heart, and brain. Undeniably, beef is recognized as one of the essential sources of protein for the human diet (Li et al., 2018).

Beef is Malaysia's third most widely consumed meat after poultry and pork (Smith et al., 2018). In Malaysia as of 2018, 752,500 heads of cattle were produced for consumption in Malaysia (Hirschmann, 2020). However, Malaysia has a significant problem concerning the production of beef. The demand for beef is greater than the supply. Consequently, the country has to import as much as 70% of the beef annually (Buda & Mohamed, 2021). Despite this problem, beef production in Malaysia has declined over the past few years (Hirschmann, 2020). This situation has forced the government to intervene in the production of beef. In 2020, the Malaysian government intended to increase beef production in the country by 2025 (Nasir et al., 2021). The government expects to convert some palm oil plantations into grazing lands or use the land for beef production.

When beef demand outstrips supply, beef prices tend to rise steeply. The price of beef is a significant concern for consumers in the country. It appears critical for the government to keep the price of beef down. Nevertheless, it is not known in the literature if the price of beef is an essential factor in the preferences to purchase beef and beef-related products. Interestingly, it is assumed that when beef production increases, the price of beef is likely to decline. This scenario will likely be welcomed by the general population and regular meat consumers in Malaysia. Despite the fact there has been a lot of effort to increase beef production in the country, there has been little emphasis on understanding if consumers prefer this locally produced beef over imported beef and the factors that influence such preferences. Other factors beyond prices may also be at play. Without this knowledge, the increase may be counterproductive as consumers may still shun locally produced beef.

It is necessary to explore beef buying preferences among Malaysians. Even though the demand for beef remains high, beef production within Malaysia has been declining over the past five years (Hirschmann, 2020). This issue has caused an overdependence on beef imports which is not ideal for a country striving for food security across the board (Hirschmann, 2020). Additionally, this has resulted in steep prices for local beef in the country. Steep prices are undesirable for regular beef consumers. Generally, price is an essential consideration for Malaysians when making purchases, and it is likely to be an important factor in beef buying preferences. Local beef prices are higher than those of imported beef.

Malaysians still prefer local beef because it is always halal and fresher than imported meat. However, there is little focus on local beef in the literature (Zainalabidin et al., n.d). Over the last decade, most studies on the beef industry have focused on the production site due to underproduction. However, only a few studies have explored consumers' preferences for local beef. There is an urgent need to understand and close this gap. This step ensures that the government's efforts to increase beef production align with consumers' needs. Since prices are an essential consideration for purchase intention for many products, price is likely to be one of the most critical factors determining buying preferences for beef. It is, therefore, essential to examine how price affects the buying preferences for beef in Malaysia.

Notably, other aspects of beef production that influence consumer buying preferences have also not been studied in the Malaysian context. These aspects include meat quality (Smith et al., 2018). Assessing these critical factors can help the government to understand how local beef production matches the local consumers' needs and preferences. In short, this study will investigate how the price and meat quality will affect the buying preferences for local beef.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Buying Preference

Buying preference can be defined as the process by which consumers determine what specific product they will purchase from some alternatives (Zhang & Gupta, 2018). When an individual decides to buy anything, they essentially decide that the product is beneficial to him and requires it. According to Ratasuk (2019), what buyers think about the products, whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied, and even the company's reputation are all determined by Post-Purchase behavior. Consumer behavior encompasses all of a customer's activities, from searching for suitable services and products to using those services or products and disposing of them (Zhang & Gupta, 2018). Companies depend on this knowledge and experience to identify the most effective entry points to influence the decisions and choices of several customers to their advantage. Because it is common knowledge that customer buying is a series of steps that constitute the entire process, understanding what each of the stages entails, as provided by the various models, is critical for any marketing company seeking to be productive in marketing either services or products (Ratasuk, 2019).

Price

Price is defined as the amount of money that consumers must pay for a product or service. In other words, a price is an offer to sell something for a specific amount. Besides, the price can be defined as the market's cost (Maslowska & Viswanathan, 2017). Pricing products and services are critical from the firm's standpoint and the standpoint of customers and society. It determines success in business, customer satisfaction, and the proper distribution of economic resources. It is a crucial component of a company's marketing mix, directly affecting earnings and generating sales revenue. Moreover, pricing is essential to a small corporation's marketing strategy (Suhaily & Darmoyo, 2017).

Several studies have found that the customer's deal defines the value of results. Specifically, it describes the perceived value as the customer's general evaluation of the utility of products centered on perceptions of what is received plus what is given out (Khan & Muhammad, 2020). Besides, the perceived value has been chiefly seen as a good match between price and quality.

In Malaysia, the goodness of beef products remains critical to a customer's buying decision. In addition, pricing remains essential in enhancing consumers' loyalty and satisfaction with beef

products in Malaysia. In addition, appropriate beef pricing enhances an organization's success, such as sales volume plus profit margins (Uys, 2016). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H1: A positive relationship exists between pricing and consumer buying preferences toward local beef products among Malaysian

Quality Meat

The concept of quality products is critical in the services and manufacturing sectors and has long played a significant role in ensuring customer safety. Today, quality is considered a vital aspect of life, and it has become essential for businesses to remain competitive effectively in the market. In general, the quality of the product has a direct impact on consumer loyalty as well as company profitability (Ghezelbash & Khodadadi, 2017). Meat quality is typically defined by its composition and healthfulness factors, including visual appearance, taste, firmness, juiciness, tenderness, and flavor. Besides, the nutritional quality of the meat is objective, but the consumer's perception of eating quality is hugely subjective (Wantara & Tambrin, 2019). Furthermore, the quality of a product and service is frequently defined as suitability for purpose.

Quality determines the sum of a product's or service's features bears on its ability to meet the consumer's requirements. For any business sector or organization to be successful and effectively achieve its specific objectives, it must be able to supply goods of excellent quality at a low cost and with a short waiting time for the consumer (Ghezelbash & Khodadadi, 2017). Furthermore, the quality of products, including meat products, is solely responsible for satisfying both perceived and actual needs. Meat quality is vital to both the supplier and the customer. If meat products are grossly unavailable, it regularly incurs extra costs for inspection, screening, scrap, rework, as well as the handling of multiple complaints, and this frequently heaps many allegations on the distributor's part (Wantara & Tambrin, 2019).

Furthermore, product quality can influence customers' purchase behavior in the marketplace. Customers' perceptions of a particular brand, its value plus services, and its products may dramatically affect customer purchase behavior in the market (Chamhuri & Batt, 2015). If a business can foster positive perceptions aimed at the aspect of quality, it is likely to remain sustainable, loyal, and grow in consumer base. Moreover, a good quality product may increase the buying decision of consumers on veteran products and services (Uys & Bisschoff, 2016). For instance, the quality factor in the customer decision-making process may affect the beef industry in Malaysia. If beef quality is high, customers will likely make more orders daily. Besides, if the beef quality is low, customers can shift to other products within the market.

Similarly, when there is heavy demand within the livestock industry for livestock products such as beef, there remains an increase in competition with other industries. Therefore, this pushes the organizations towards becoming more effective in management, sightsee the marketplace, and innovation within current beef products to meet and satisfy the wants and needs of all customers (Khan & Muhammad, 2020). As an outcome of these pressures, the livestock production industry within Malaysia will be viewed competitively by customers. However, an appropriate marketing strategy remains closely linked to dissimilar marketed channel selections and affordable pricing allocations. Within the Malaysian marketplace, two marketing channels are indirect and direct (Nawi & Shamsudin, 2018). Therefore, this study measures the indirect channel that includes the intermediate and middle agencies before beef products reach the market's customers. This includes large format stores and hypermarkets within Malaysia. These are direct channels or, more precisely, providing an extensive assortment of beef and general merchandise at discounted prices, besides providing a choice for customers to indulge in bulk purchases (Uys & Bisschoff, 2016). Customers frequently prefer only a one-stop center in most developed nations, as demonstrated by shopping behaviors. Besides, regarding Malaysian beef, customers obtain higher disposable income plus improved living standards. Therefore, customers demand beef and other products in quantities and qualities that can effectively fulfill their wants and needs (Uys, 2016). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H2: A positive relationship exists between beef quality and customer buying preferences in Malaysia.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a descriptive survey design with a quantitative research approach and a cross-sectional time horizon. The present study intends to make inferences that apply to the beef consumer population, and the quantitative approach is the best in this regard. Overall, this study performed an online survey of regular beef consumers in Malaysia. An online survey was selected because it allows the researcher to reach a large portion of the population quickly. Consecutive sampling was used to assemble the sample for this study. A structured questionnaire was used to collect the research data. Statistical analysis using the Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software version 26.0 was undertaken for the study's statistical analysis.

The population of interest for this study was 1.8 million beef consumers in Malaysia. The appropriate sample size for a population of 1.8 million populations is 384. Prospective participants had to be self-identified consumers in Malaysia, residents of Malaysia, and over 18 years of age. Data collection for this research study commenced after an ethical clearance had been granted for the study. The first step was recruiting the prospective participants of this study. This step was done on Facebook, where consumer groups were accessed, and messages asking for participants were posted. Those who showed interest were included in the study as long as they confirmed they were beef consumers, residents of Malaysia, and over 18 years until the appropriate sample size was attained. The participants were each asked to give their emails, and the questionnaire was emailed to each person. The participants were required to confirm receipt of the questionnaire on Facebook messenger, and a second attempt was made to send the questionnaire if the first was unsuccessful. The participants must complete the questionnaire within a week and send it back to the researcher via email. The respondents were thanked after sending back the questionnaire. All questionnaires had been sent back by the end of the seven days, and data collection commenced after this.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic analysis

Table 1. Ethnicity

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Chinese	34	8.9	8.9	8.9
	Indian	33	8.6	8.6	17.4
	Malay	286	74.5	74.5	91.9
	Others	31	8.1	8.1	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

The participation of the respondents shows that 286 are Malays (74.5%), 34 are Chinese (8.9%), 33 are Indian (8.6%), and 31 are other ethnicities not specified (8.1%). Males comprised 32.8% of the responses, while females contributed 67.2%. The females contributed to the higher population. The largest group of respondents (64.1%) were aged between 18 and 25. 28.4 percent of respondents said they were between 26 and 35. 7.6% stated to be aged 35 years old and below. Of those polled, 67.4% claimed to earn RM 3,001 - RM 7,000 monthly. 12.2 percent of those surveyed were earning RM 8,001 - 10,000. 10.9 percent of those polled were earning below RM 3,000, and 9.4 percent of those surveyed earned RM 10,001 and above. According to the above table, the vast majority of those surveyed have a Bachelor's Degree, accounting for 69.3%, 19.3% have a Diploma, and 11.5% have a Master's Degree.

Table 2. Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	258	67.2	67.2	67.2
	Male	126	32.8	32.8	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. Age

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-25 years	246	64.1	64.1	64.1
	26-35 years	109	28.4	28.4	92.4
	Above 35 years	29	7.6	7.6	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Income

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Below RM 3,000	42	10.9	10.9	10.9
	RM 10,001 And Above	36	9.4	9.4	20.3
	RM 3,001 - RM 7,000	259	67.4	67.4	87.8
	RM 8,001 - 10,000	47	12.2	12.2	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

Table 5. Education level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Degree	266	69.3	69.3	69.3
	Diploma	74	19.3	19.3	88.5
	Masters	44	11.5	11.5	100.0
	Total	384	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive Statistics

Table 6. Price

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I consider the cost structure of meat services and products and how it compares to other contenders' pricing strategies	384	1	5	4.03	.895
I think I am sensitive to product prices in the market and related to my consumer expectations	384	1	5	4.05	.928
I frequently check the price as the first thing I notice about a good or service	384	1	5	3.88	.919
When purchasing meat and meat products, I compare prices with the value of a product to assess it	384	1	5	3.91	.970
As a consumer, I try to learn more about product attributes after studying the price when making an order.	384	2	5	3.90	.885

Two items for the price of meat have scores above 4.0 (Agree). First, the vast majority of surveyed respondents agreed that they are sensitive to market product prices and consumer expectations, with a mean value of 4.05. Second, quite a number of them agreed (M=4.03) on the cost structure of meat services and products and how it compares to other contenders' pricing strategies. The remaining items for the price variable have scores between 3.88 and 3.91. These responses were considered good when the respondents tended to agree with the statements for this variable. They agreed (M=3.88) that the price was checked frequently as the first thing they noticed about a good or service. Most of those surveyed agreed that when purchasing meat and meat products, they compare prices with the product's value to assess it with a mean value of 3.91. The respondents in this study also agreed that they try to learn more about product attributes after studying the price when making an order, with a mean value of 3.90.

Quality

Table 7. Quality of beef

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I consider the visual appearance, firmness, and taste of the meat and eat products	384	1	5	4.02	1.176
I consider the juiciness, tenderness, as well as flavor of the meat before purchasing	384	2	5	4.37	.928
The perception of eating meat quality is hugely subjective	384	1	5	3.44	1.068
I consider the supplied meat of excellent quality at an affordable cost	384	1	5	4.11	1.047
I aim to work with verified meat distributors with minimal complaints, and allegations about the quality effects	384	2	5	4.00	.935

Most respondents in this study have agreed that quality is essential when four out of five items for this variable have scores between 4.0 and 4.37. The highest mean value (M=4.37) is for the item "they consider the juiciness, tenderness, and flavor of the meat before purchasing. This score illustrates the importance of beef quality, its tenderness, and its flavor to most consumers. Importantly, this item also has the highest score for all questions in the study. The lowest mean score for the quality is the item assessing the perception of eating quality is exceptionally subjective, with a mean value of 3.44. To conclude, most consumers in this study perceive the quality of local beef, especially its appearance and tenderness are extremely important when the meat is at an affordable price.

Consumer buying preferences for beef

Table 8. Consumer buying preferences

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I can do a thorough search for suitable quality beef services and products	384	1	5	3.89	.858
I have the knowledge and experience to identify the highest quality beef	384	1	5	3.92	.951
The decisions and choices as a customer, to my advantage, are based on the packaging of the meat	384	1	5	3.81	.966
I consider the convenience in the supply of meat orders when making an order.	384	1	5	3.88	.880
It takes affordable beef pricing to win my loyalty and satisfaction with the firm.	384	2	5	3.78	.847

All five items for this variable have scores between 3.78 and 3.92. The scores indicate most beef consumers in Malaysia have a moderate perception regarding this variable. Most consumers perceive that they can thoroughly search for high-quality beef services and products (M=3.89) and have the knowledge and experience to identify the highest-quality beef (M=3.92). They also agreed their decisions and choices are based on the meat packaging, with a mean value of 3.81. Most of those surveyed agreed (M=3.88) that they consider the convenience of the meat supply when making an order. Most meat consumers agreed that it takes affordable beef pricing to win their loyalty and satisfaction with the firm, with a mean of 3.78.

Pearson correlation analysis was used in this research to examine the connection between the study variables. The hypotheses H1 through H4 have been tested and confirmed.

Table 9

		Price of meat	Quality	Consumer buying preferences of beef
Price of meat	Pearson Correlation	1	.397**	.846**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000
	N	384	384	384
Quality	Pearson Correlation	.397**	1	.481**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	384	384	384
Consumer buying preferences of beef	Pearson Correlation	.846**	.481**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	384	384	384
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).				

The research examined the impact of prices on consumer buying preferences for beef in Malaysia. Most Malaysian consumers agree that price influences their preferences when purchasing beef meat. The data analysis shows that price and consumer beef purchasing preferences are highly significant. Merlino et al., (2018) point out that consumers are willing to pay higher prices for beef if it has a higher quality. A high price on values often meat that they meet is of a high value. Thus, consumers who are looking for beef that is highly priced are like to purchase it.

Conversely, lower prices can determine whether to buy beef or not. The Malaysian government's imposition of the movement order causes the price of consumables like beef to increase. Many families could not purchase or consume meat because of the increased prices, especially those in the lower economic bracket. Therefore, indicating that the adjustment of beef prices negatively impacted the purchasing preferences of low-income households in Malaysia.

This study examines the quality of beef impact on consumer buying preferences. The study showed that beef quality and consumer buying preference are significant. Mwashuiya, Manyele & Mwaluko (2018) conducted a study on "Assessment of Beef Quality Determinants Based on Consumer Preferences." The researchers deduced that the quality of the beef was vital in predicting the preference of consumers to purchase. Like any other meat, beef is a delicacy that needs to be enjoyed by consumers. It is desirability stems from its quality. Even if beef prices are low, but the quality is not optimal to standard, consumers would not purchase it. The descriptive analysis indicates that most of the respondents agreed with the importance of quality meat as a factor that influences their preference to purchase beef. The respondents agreed that the meat and meat products' visual appearance, firmness, and taste are essential quality checks that must be considered before making a purchase. The term "beef quality" can mean different things to different consumers. Mwashuiya, Manyele & Mwaluko, (2018) notes that researchers must determine "what" or "how" quality beef is defined in their context. This definition is because people from other cultures and societies quantify "beef quality" based on its texture, cleanliness, color, and cut, among other traits.

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