

Consumer Perceptions of Ready-To-Eat Foods as a Threat to Authenticity or a Means of Preserving Malaysian Local Cuisine

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ABSTRACT

The rising demand for convenience in modern lifestyles has rapidly expanded Ready-to-Eat (RTE) foods in Malaysia. While these products offer practical solutions for busy consumers, their growing prevalence raises concerns about traditional culinary heritage's survival, preservation, and sustainability. This study examines whether RTE foods act as a means of preserving Malaysian local cuisine or contribute to its dilution, focusing on consumer perceptions, culinary authenticity, and the evolving role of convenience foods. Using a mixed-method approach, the research incorporates quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with Malaysian consumers. Findings indicate that while RTE foods provide accessibility and time-saving benefits, they also contribute to the erosion of traditional cooking practices and the homogenization of flavors, raising concerns about the loss of authentic preparation methods. Despite this, some consumers appreciate RTE foods as a modern adaptation of local cuisine, highlighting their role in maintaining accessibility amid fast-paced lifestyles. The study underscores the tension between globalization and cultural preservation, calling for a sustainable approach that safeguards culinary identity while accommodating evolving consumer needs. These insights offer valuable implications for policymakers, food producers, and cultural advocates, emphasizing the importance of ensuring the long-term sustainability of Malaysian local cuisine in an era dominated by convenience-driven food consumption.

Keywords: Ready-to-Eat Foods, Culinary Authenticity, Consumer Perceptions, Malaysian Local Cuisine, Food Globalization.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Malaysian cuisine is a source of daily sustenance in the country, but it is also a colorful form of expressions concerning cultural heritage and national identity. Dishes such as nasi lemak, rendang, and asam pedas speak centuries of identity through ethnic fusion, community values, and ancestral wisdom (Kadir et al., 2022). However, there are many forces at work today that have pressured modern-day people-from urbanization to family structure changes, increased participation in the working universe, and sped-up lifestyles-all of which have brought changes in some food preferences, especially from the young and urban populations.

One major change this has included is the advancement in modern food technologies in the form of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) foods, which produce convenience, time economy, and shelf life. The COVID-19 pandemic hastening the progress stimulated it further, making packaged meals with a big selling point on safety and convenience outlets (Wijaya et al., 2023; Rizki et al., 2024). Notably, while RTE products can be seen to meet the needs of today's consumers, their emergence has initiated critical discussions regarding the authenticity and sustainability of traditional cuisine.

Some researchers consider RTE traditional food products to be an avenue of cultural preservation, allowing heritage cuisine to find broader audiences and survive in modern formats (Zulkifli et al., 2023). Opposing

viewpoints, however, are those who believe these products do destroy authenticity because mass production involves sacrificing methods of preparation, ingredients, and even the symbolic meaning (Satrya et al., 2023; Indrianto et al., 2024). Such a divergent perception raises the increasing tension between convenience and cultural integrity concerning current and present-day food consumption.

Despite the expansion of the RTE food market and an increasing interest in food heritage, relatively few studies have investigated Malaysian consumer perceptions of authenticity in RTE traditional foods. Most importantly, the gap in understanding whether these products are seen as threats to culinary authenticity, or adaptive tools for heritage preservation, and the factors influencing such perceptions is notable. Past studies have, for the most part, focused on the functional or commercial aspects of RTE products, while the cultural and emotional ties between the consumer and traditional food were largely ignored (Kamaruddin et al., 2022; Ariffin & Shaarani, 2023).

The increasing presence of RTE foods in the Malaysian market raises cultural and identity-related concerns that have not received much attention. How consumers see the authenticity of these modern adaptations of traditional dishes-and if they see them as preserving or compromising Malaysia's culinary heritage-has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature. Such understanding thus implies a failure to leverage opportunities for culturally sensitive innovation in the food industry and for comprehending the traditional adaptations that the modern consumer is drawing. This study aims to investigate how Malaysian consumers perceive Ready-to-Eat traditional foods in relation to culinary authenticity and cultural preservation.

Research Objectives:

- To explore consumer perceptions of RTE foods in Malaysia, particularly in relation to cultural and culinary authenticity.
- To examine whether RTE foods are perceived as preserving traditional Malaysian cuisine.
- To identify consumer expectations regarding the balance between convenience and cultural heritage in food products.

By elucidating these objectives, the study will contribute valuable insights into the relationship between recent food innovations and cultural heritage preservation, within both academic and Malaysian food industry contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

RTE Foods and Malaysian Local Cuisine

Customers driven by the fast-paced nature of present-day life have increased market demand for Ready-To-Eat (RTE) foods. The food industry produces these products through pre-preparation steps to deliver convenience for time-crunched customers (Khalid et al., 2024). The RTE food sector in Malaysia has gained momentum, as it both supports traditional cultural identity and raises concerns about its impact on Malaysian cuisine.

The diverse cultural heritage of Malaysia weaves local eating traditions together from its four ethno-cultural groups, consisting of Malay communities, Chinese communities, Indian communities, and local Indigenous people. When such cooking methods and recipes endure from one generation to the next, they serve as sources of nourishment while preserving their cultural value (Ismail & Abdul Latip, 2023). Managers in the food industry transform traditional dishes into ready-to-eat (RTE) versions because modern consumers want new food products.

The conversion of local dishes into ready-to-eat (RTE) versions raises two essential aspects regarding the preservation of traditional culinary heritage and its subsequent alteration from authentic definitions. The dual role of RTE foods poses challenges because they offer a speedy alternative to traditional dining. However, several users perceive them as damaging the authentic tastes and cultural values of Malaysian cuisine. A thorough understanding of how consumers perceive the situation becomes necessary. Research studies the product attributes together with consumer attitudes that determine what drives consumers to purchase ready-to-eat foods. This study examines RTE foods from both intrinsic and extrinsic viewpoints as well as consumer attitudes to determine how these products affect authenticity maintenance in the Malaysian market.

Intrinsic Factors

Ingredients from ready-to-eat (RTE) products influence consumer evaluations when they directly impact quality levels, safety compliance, and price-to-value relationships. Consumers build trust and develop buying intentions towards products based on their perceived quality assessment, particularly in the food industry. Lim et al. (2021) demonstrate that Malaysian consumers perceive taste, freshness, and aroma as the primary qualities that signal authentic products. RTE products maintain their traditional values, which lead consumers to perceive them as authentic ethnic foods. Research conducted by Tan and Amin (2019) reveals that many RTE consumers harbor doubts about product quality, mainly when products are produced in large quantities or stored as frozen items. Based on their research, Ali and Othman (2020) found that contemporary working professionals in urban areas view quality through different factors, such as cleanliness and reliability, than traditional freshness standards.

Numerous health and moral factors, as well as concerns about authenticity and sanitation, comprise the perceived risks associated with food. Shahrin and Shahrin (2024) demonstrate that Malaysian older consumers experience cultural risk when processed foods alter traditional recipes and cultural meanings. The classification of perceived risks into physical, social, psychological, and financial domains conforms to research conducted globally by Mitchell (1999). The perception of risk becomes minimal when reputable local brands support products or provide halal certification, according to research by Said et al (2022) and Hasan and Thurga (2024, 2025). A consumer evaluates the exchange between their investments of money and time versus the experiences of taste quality and convenience they receive, along with cultural fulfillment. The researchers at Azman and Mazlan (2023) establish that value perception exists as both economic and emotional, but specifically in RTE products when heritage branding with local sourcing displays cultural value.

Perceived value is noted to increase according to Omar et al. (2021) when RTE products incorporate storytelling elements on their packaging, as well as QR code connections to their cultural dish origins.

Extrinsic Factors

These are extrinsic factors that involve external product attributes, such as product price cues, packaging, and promotional efforts. It is these elements, as they relate to current values and modern presentation, that enable how RTE products are perceived. Pricing has been used as a heuristic for quality. Chong and Eze (2018) state that Malaysian consumers typically perceive higher prices as being due to the higher authenticity and premium readiness-to-eat (RTE) meals that are labeled as traditional or heritage-inspired. Affordability remains a concern for middle-income consumers who purchase ready-to-eat (RTE) products as a substitute for hawker food or cooking at home (Mohamad Ibrahim, H. et al, 2021; Yusof and Khalid, 2021). Their RTE local foods study on Klang Valley consumers showed that while moderately priced RTE foods outperformed the budget, they also demonstrated a higher perceived authenticity and trust in RTE local foods.

Advertising plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perception. Ali et al. (2019) found that consumers form emotional connections with RTE products through visuals, narratives, and slogans that emphasize traditional elements. Such storytelling helps to bridge the gap between the new convenience and the thing of cultural authenticity. Lim and Teh (2020) asserted that overly commercialized or even Western-type advertisements could alienate older consumers who believe that these advertisements represent globalization and destroy their local identity. This contradiction highlights the fact that this generational divide exists when it comes to how ads affect perception of authenticity. Kamarulzaman and Rahim (2017) have interestingly pointed out that there is a significant increase in the perception of authenticity and purchase intention for packaged products when the packaging features traditional motifs, such as batik patterns, old fonts, and native dish names. Thien and Low (2020) claim that working adults and students also need practical features such as reseal ability, microwave friendliness and clear labeling. They conclude that for the packaging to suit the use of consumers from different age groups, the design should be in harmony with its function. This is consistent with Underwood and Klein's (2002) view that packaging serves as both a marketing tool and a trust builder, particularly in food products where transparency and safety are crucial.

Consumer Attitudes

Consumer Attitudes are the expression of one's predisposition towards a product or action, which may be due to

their beliefs, values, and past experiences. Attitude serves to mediate the effects of RTE local cuisine on product perception and purchase behavior in the context of RTE local cuisine. This section then examines the three core sub-dimensions that comprise it: trust, familiarity, and perceived benefits to their economy.

More than anything else, food choice is primarily determined by trust, particularly when it comes to processed and factory-made items. Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán (2005) emphasize that the perceived risk of purchase is positively associated with repurchase directed at the brand, although brand trust serves as a mediating factor. In Malaysia, trust involves more than just brand identity; it also ensures religious assurance (halal certification), hygiene standards, and sourcing locally, among other factors. According to Said et al. (2022), consumers tend to be more inclined towards purchasing ready-to-eat (RTE) products with halal and locally sourced certifications, as they believe these labels are more authentic and align with traditional values. However, Nor and Ismail (2021) found that while older consumers place significant weight on institutional trust, the trust of younger generations is more deeply rooted in peer reviews and social proof, such as food reviewers and YouTube videos. On other hand, Consumers with familiarity are able to recognize and have experience with a product or brand. According to van den Heuvel et al. (2023), familiarity reduces both perceived risk and decision-making confidence. Rahmat et al (2021) reported that urbanization, and digital media, leading to a higher acceptance of RTE dishes from other ethnic cuisines, such as Malaysian Chinese purchasing RTE Nasi Kerabu.

Economic benefit is that which is perceived by the consumers as yielding or redeeming them a financial or practical value, in exchange for their cost. As Sweeney and Soutar (2001) pointed out, many economic values are intertwined with emotional and social values when people choose food. Malaysia's low- to middle-income consumers, as reported by Yusof and Khalid (2021), typically choose ready-to-eat (RTE) products because they serve as substitutes for dining out or are more affordable than expensive ingredients. Ling and Ooi (2022) found that, unlike economic consumers, customers of premium products do not just perceive economic value, as these products are often priced at higher costs. Although the premium is worth paying for artisanal, small-batch or organic ready-to-eat (RTE) local dishes, they are prepared to pay more for them. Mahmud and Zainal (2020) further found that the sociocultural layer substantially enriches the economic value construction. Specifically, women who work as their product found that they view RTE products as a time-saving solution for meeting family meal responsibilities.

Perception of Purchasing RTE Foods

When local, the perception of Ready-To-Eat (RTE) foods involves a complex interplay of cultural expectations, convenience, product cues, and personal values. It extends beyond purchasing behaviour, as consumers may see RTE products as practical shortcuts, nostalgic experiences, or threats to tradition. Cultural erosion is a key concern. Abdullah and Azam (2021) argue that older generations view commercialized RTE local dishes as fast food lacking the communal and soulful aspects of traditional cooking. Similarly, Che Ahmat et al. (2024) found that mass-produced rendang or asam pedas are seen by some as lacking depth and ritual, reducing their authenticity.

However, Omar et al. (2021) suggested that RTE ethnic dishes can preserve culinary heritage, especially for diaspora or urban consumers disconnected from traditional practices. With thoughtful use of traditional ingredients, cultural labeling, and storytelling, RTE products may even become modern heritage items. This duality underscores your study: balancing cultural-emotional costs with functional benefits and understanding how consumers navigate these tensions.

Time pressures, dual-income households, and urbanisation influence RTE acceptance. Lim and Teh (2020) report that over 70% of Klang Valley working adults accept RTE local dishes as necessary compromises, valuing convenience, hygiene, and consistency despite some loss of tradition. Mahmud and Zainal (2020) note that RTE options support evolving gender roles, enabling women to manage both work and household duties while maintaining cultural expectations. Rashid and Hassan (2020) observed a hierarchy of acceptance—consumers are more open to RTE versions of snacks or festive foods (e.g., dodol, kuih raya) than to core dishes served during religious or family gatherings.

Packaging, price, branding, and labeling also shape perceptions. Consumers interpret visual and verbal cues as either authentic or commercial (Rahmat et al, 2021). Products made by local SMEs or family businesses are often viewed as culturally legitimate, whereas Western-styled branding may be seen as commodification. Ali et al. (2019) found that ethnic names, origin stories, and kampung-inspired visuals enhance authenticity and purchase intent. Perception, therefore, involves both product and narrative. Demographics also play a role. Rosli and Sahak (2024) found Gen Z and millennials in urban areas are more receptive to RTE local foods, especially those marketed as modern, healthy, or sustainable. They favor fusion products and digital elements like QR codes linking to heritage or sustainability stories. In contrast, older and rural consumers remain cautious, trusting RTE products endorsed by reputable brands, public figures, or religious authorities such as JAKIM (Salleh et al., 2020). This reflects a generational shift—older consumers view RTE as shortcuts, while younger ones may see them as modern expressions of identity.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The survey utilized a standardized questionnaire, and the respondents consisted of potential or current customers of RTE products. The data was gathered in person, resulting in the return of 185 complete questionnaires. The data was considered enough for the final analysis, exceeding five times the total number of items necessary (Hair et al., 2014).

Questionnaire

This study employed a descriptive survey utilizing a structured questionnaire to examine the influence of purchasers' perceptions of RTE goods on their purchasing intentions. The questionnaire was segmented into two main portions. Section 1 has statements that delineate the variables analyzed in this study. Section 2 contained enquiries pertaining to the demographic information of the respondents. Established scales from seminal research were utilized to develop the questionnaire. All items were assessed via a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing Strongly Disagree and 5 denoting Strongly.

Interview

To gather more detailed information from the participants, a qualitative methodology involving interviews was used to collect in-depth insights into and interpretations of consumer perceptions, culinary authenticity, and the evolving role of convenience foods as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Interview guide

1	In your opinion, how does the rise of ready-to-eat (RTE) Malaysian food impact the authenticity of traditional local cuisine?
2	What are the key factors that influence your perception of whether RTE Malaysian food preserves or threatens local culinary traditions?
3	Can you describe any personal experiences where you felt that RTE Malaysian food either maintained or lost the essence of traditional flavors and cooking methods?
4	What improvements or changes would you suggest ensuring that RTE Malaysian food remains authentic while still being convenient?
5	How do you think the younger generation perceives RTE Malaysian food compared to traditional home-cooked meals, and what effect might this have on the future of local cuisine?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents Profile

The survey provides insights into demographic characteristics and food consumption habits. Most participants fall within the 26–35 age group (32%), followed by 18–25 (28%), with the least representation from those below

18 and above 56 (each 4%). More females (52%) participated than males (44%), with a small percentage (4%) preferring not to disclose their gender. Most respondents are working professionals (44%), followed by students (24%), while business owners, homemakers, and retirees make up smaller portions. Malaysian local cuisine remains a staple, with 36% consuming it 3–5 times a week and 32% eating it daily, whereas only 4% never eat it. Additionally, 68% of respondents have tried ready-to-eat (RTE) Malaysian food products, while 32% have not. This indicates a significant awareness and acceptance of RTE Malaysian food among consumers. The high frequency of local cuisine consumption suggests strong cultural ties to traditional food, and the relatively high RTE consumption rate indicates a growing market for convenient, ready-made Malaysian dishes. These findings highlight the continued relevance of Malaysian cuisine in daily diets and suggest potential for further expansion of RTE Malaysian food products to cater to various consumer segments.

Quantitative Analysis

Measurement Model

According to Hair et al. (2017), using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in this study eliminates the need for data to follow a normal distribution, hence qualifying it as a suitable approach for managing non-normal datasets. Describing validity as the extent to which a notion is correctly represented, Ramayah et al. (2018) cover content, construct (which encompasses convergent, discriminant, and criterion validity), and criterion validity. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess the consistency among items; all values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.70, suggesting the constructs are dependable. While values above 0.8 and 0.7 are considered good and acceptable, respectively, a Cronbach's alpha above 0.9 is considered outstanding (Hair et al., 2017). Using factor loadings, CR, and average variance extracted (AVE), convergent validity was assessed; all item loadings were over 0.70, CR varied from 0.823 to 0.915, and AVE was between 0.556 and 0.768, therefore verifying that the constructs meet convergent validity requirements.

Structural Model Analysis

Partial Least Squares (PLS) was employed to derive the route coefficients for the relationships modelled among the components. The importance of these coefficients was evaluated using the bootstrap approach, which produced the t-values for each path estimate. The R² value and predictive relevance were utilized to assess the model's predictive power (Hair et al., 2014). According to Chin (1998), R-Square values of 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19 are classified as substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively. The R-Squared score for the endogenous latent variable is 70.3%, indicating a moderate degree of model fit based on the specified criteria. Table 2 displays the path estimates and t-values obtained from the PLS analysis of the structural model. The polarity (positive or negative) of the route coefficients and the significance of the t-values can be utilized to evaluate support for the study hypotheses.

Table 2 summarizes the results of three hypotheses tested regarding their influence on purchase intention. H1 shows that intrinsic motivation significantly affects purchase intention ($\beta = 0.302$, $t = 5.246$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that internal factors like personal satisfaction or enjoyment positively influence buying decisions. H2 indicates that extrinsic motivation has the strongest positive effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.436$, $t = 7.028$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that external rewards or benefits are major drivers of consumer behavior. H3 reveals that consumer attitude also significantly influences purchase intention ($\beta = 0.203$, $t = 3.817$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the role of positive perceptions in driving intent.

Table 2 Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficient(β)	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
H1	Intrinsic --> Purchase Intention	0.302	5.246**	0.000	Supported
H2	Extrinsic --> Purchase Intention	0.436	7.028**	0.000	Supported
H3	Consumer Attitude --> Purchase Intention	0.203	3.817**	0.000	Supported

**t-values: 2.58 (1%)

Qualitative Findings of the Study

Q1. How does the rise of ready-to-eat (RTE) Malaysian food impact the authenticity of traditional local cuisine?

Table 3 shows that participants observed that ready-to-eat (RTE) products make traditional Malaysian dishes more accessible, particularly for those with busy lifestyles or living overseas. While this convenience allows for greater exposure to local flavors, it often comes at the cost of authenticity. Many consumers believe that RTE versions fall short in terms of taste, texture, and traditional cooking methods compared to homemade meals. The theme of "Loss of Traditional Quality" highlights concerns about how mass production can impact the original culinary essence. Although some RTE options successfully replicate authentic flavors, others are perceived as overly commercialized. These observations underscore the importance for RTE manufacturers to find a balance between convenience and maintaining traditional taste and quality.

Table 3 RTE Malaysian food impact the authenticity of traditional local cuisine

Themes	Narratives (verbatim quotes)
Accessibility vs. Authenticity	"It makes traditional dishes more accessible, but the flavors sometimes feel artificial compared to home-cooked meals." "While it makes Malaysian cuisine available worldwide, the cooking techniques and ingredients used might not be the same as homemade versions." "I think it's a positive thing because people can still experience Malaysian flavors even if they don't have time to cook from scratch."
Loss of Traditional Quality	"RTE food helps keep traditional cuisine alive, especially for busy individuals, but some dishes lose their original texture and taste." "I believe it threatens authenticity because mass production can't replicate the same quality as slow-cooked traditional food." "Some RTE options are very close to authentic flavors, but others taste too commercial and don't represent real Malaysian cuisine."

Q2. Key factors that influence your perception of whether RTE Malaysian food preserves or threatens local culinary traditions

Participants highlighted that the genuineness of ready-to-eat (RTE) dishes is largely influenced by the choice of ingredients and the cooking techniques employed as shown in table 4. Replacing fresh herbs with synthetic flavorings or opting for industrial processes over traditional slow cooking often leads to a deterioration in taste and texture. There was also concern about the cultural implications, as participants debated whether RTE foods promote cultural appreciation or encourage reliance on processed meals. Some saw RTE food to preserve local cuisine, particularly if producers work alongside local chefs and communities. Additionally, storage and packaging were noted to impact flavor and aroma, especially in frozen or canned products. Although RTE items provide convenience and accessibility, these observations highlight the need to uphold culinary authenticity and cultural integrity in product development.

Table 4 Key factors that influence your perception

Themes	Narratives (verbatim quotes)
Ingredients & Cooking Methods	"The ingredients used—if they substitute fresh herbs and spices with artificial flavorings, it feels less authentic." "The cooking method is important. Traditional slow-cooked rendang, for example, tastes different from a factory-prepared version." "How closely the taste and texture match home-cooked versions."
Cultural and Consumer Behavior	"Whether RTE food encourages people to still value local cuisine or just makes them rely on processed meals." "If the food manufacturers work with local chefs and communities to ensure traditional recipes are followed."

	"The affordability and availability—if it makes traditional food more accessible, it helps preserve the culture."
Storage and Packaging Impact	"The packaging and storage methods—frozen or canned food tends to lose some of the original taste and aroma." "If RTE food still uses authentic local ingredients instead of mass-produced substitutes."

Q3. Can you describe any personal experiences where you felt that RTE Malaysian food either maintained or lost the essence of traditional flavors and cooking methods?

Table 5 displays that numerous participants voiced their dissatisfaction with the flavor and texture of ready-to-eat (RTE) meals, pointing out that aspects such as the aroma of nasi lemak rice, the sourness of asam laksa, or the lightness of roti canai were often lacking or reduced compared to homemade or freshly cooked versions. Nonetheless, some consumers admitted that certain RTE products do manage to retain authenticity, especially in the case of rendang, canned curries, or traditional kuih-muih, which were occasionally commended for closely mimicking home-cooked tastes. However, there were frequent concerns about over-processing, with dishes like satay being criticized for tasting excessively sweet, artificial, or lacking complexity. These observations underscore the challenge for RTE manufacturers to find a balance between convenience and providing genuine culinary experiences that align with consumer expectations.

Table 5 Personal Experiences

Themes	Narratives (verbatim quotes)
Loss of Authentic Taste and texture	"I tried an RTE nasi lemak, and while the sambal was quite good, the rice lacked the usual coconut fragrance." "I once had an RTE asam laksa, and the broth didn't have the strong fishy and tangy taste—it was too mild compared to homemade versions." "Frozen roti canai is convenient, but it lacks the fluffiness and crispiness of fresh ones from the mamak stalls." "Instant lontong was disappointing, the coconut gravy was too thin and lacked the richness I expected."
Maintain Authenticity	"Some RTE rendang brands do a great job, but others taste too watery and lack the richness of homemade rendang." "I've had a good experience with some canned curries; they actually tasted quite close to what my grandmother used to make." "Some frozen kuih-muih taste surprisingly good and authentic, but others feel too processed and artificial."
Overly Processed	"I tried an RTE satay that was pre-cooked and just needed heating, but the peanut sauce tasted too sweet and lacked depth."

Q4. What improvements or changes would you suggest ensuring that RTE Malaysian food remains authentic while still being convenient?

Participants highlighted the significance of incorporating natural ingredients, encouraging brands to minimize the use of artificial flavorings, preservatives, and excessive amounts of sugar or salt, which often detract from both taste and health benefits as presented in table 6. They also suggested embracing traditional cooking methods and improving packaging techniques to better maintain freshness and texture, especially for rice-based dishes that frequently lose quality during storage. Furthermore, there was a strong appeal for collaboration with local chefs and culinary experts to ensure the authenticity of recipes. Consumers also advised offering cooking tips to enhance flavors at home and stressed the importance of affordability to make genuine RTE meals more accessible. These insights indicate a rising demand for RTE foods that harmonize tradition, quality, and convenience without compromising cultural authenticity.

Table 6 Improvements or changes

Themes	Narratives (verbatim quotes)
Use of High-Quality, Natural Ingredients	<i>"Use more natural ingredients instead of artificial flavorings and preservatives."</i> <i>"Reduce the use of excessive sugar and salt in RTE meals, some brands make them too sweet or too salty."</i>
Better Cooking & Packaging Methods	<i>"Ensure cooking techniques stay true to tradition, even in mass production."</i> <i>"Better packaging methods that preserve the freshness of the ingredients."</i> <i>"Improve the texture of RTE food, especially rice-based dishes, so they feel more like freshly cooked meals."</i>
Collaboration With Experts	<i>"Brands should work with local chefs to maintain authentic recipes."</i> <i>"Include cooking instructions that allow consumers to enhance the flavor, like adding fresh garnishes."</i> <i>"Make RTE food affordable while maintaining authenticity, so more people can enjoy real Malaysian cuisine."</i>

Q5. How do you think the younger generation perceives RTE Malaysian food compared to traditional home-cooked meals, and what effect might this have on the future of local cuisine?

As shown in table 7, participants noted that while ready-to-eat (RTE) meals provide convenience, particularly for students, young professionals, or those residing abroad, they might also deter younger generations from acquiring traditional cooking skills. Nonetheless, some individuals view RTE food as a beneficial means for young people to maintain a connection to their cultural heritage. Social media and modernization were identified as influential factors in shaping food trends, with the potential for RTE brands to keep traditional dishes relevant through effective digital marketing and the creation of fusion-style meals. There is a concern that dependence on convenience foods could diminish culinary knowledge over time, yet others believe that high-quality RTE products can spark an interest in traditional cuisine. Ultimately, RTE food can act as a conduit for cultural preservation if authenticity is upheld.

Table 7 Younger generation perceives RTE

Themes	Narratives (verbatim quotes)
Convenience Over Cooking Skills	<i>"Younger people are used to convenience, so they might prefer RTE meals over cooking, which could lead to fewer people learning traditional recipes."</i> <i>"Some young people appreciate RTE food as a way to stay connected to their heritage, especially if they live abroad."</i> <i>"RTE food is popular among students and busy workers, but it may make them less interested in cooking from scratch."</i>
Influence of social media & Modernization	<i>"Social media influences how young people view food, so if RTE brands market themselves well, they can keep traditional dishes relevant."</i> <i>"It might change the way local cuisine evolves, perhaps fusion and modernized versions of traditional dishes will become more common."</i>
Risk of Losing Traditional Cuisine Knowledge	<i>"If RTE food continues to improve in quality, it might encourage young people to explore traditional dishes rather than fast food."</i> <i>"There's a risk that traditional cooking skills will be lost if young people rely too much on instant food."</i>
Bridge to Cultural Preservation	<i>"As long as RTE food still tastes close to home-cooked meals, younger generations will continue to enjoy Malaysian cuisine."</i>

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study reveals that while Ready-to-Eat (RTE) Malaysian foods offer convenience and accessibility, especially for urban and younger consumers, they also raise concerns about the erosion of culinary authenticity.

In fact, many consumers enjoy the practicalities of RTE meals but feel that this somehow compromises taste-and-texture value as well as the authentic cooking method involved in the preparation process. However, these products have the potential of being cultural preservation tools-even in authenticity-with regard to this complex balance between the modern and the heritage. RTE foods can best support rather than undermine the Malaysian culinary heritage if they are developed with the choice of natural ingredients, traditional recipe methods, and branding that connects to culture. Collaborating with local chefs and communities, combined with attractive packaging and a good story, will go a long way in appealing across generations to different aspects of culture.

Theoretical And Contextual Contributions

This study contributes theoretically to the growing body of literature on Ready-to-Eat (RTE) foods, consumer behavior, and culinary authenticity by extending current understanding of how consumers perceive the relationship between convenience foods and traditional food heritage. While previous studies have primarily focused on functional attributes such as convenience, quality, and purchase intention, this study broadens the discussion by incorporating cultural authenticity and heritage preservation into the analysis of RTE food consumption. The findings demonstrate that consumer perceptions of RTE Malaysian foods are shaped not only by convenience and accessibility but also by emotional attachment, cultural identity, and concerns regarding the preservation of traditional cooking methods. The study therefore contributes to existing knowledge by highlighting the dual role of RTE foods as both modern convenience products and potential cultural preservation tools.

Contextually, this study provides important insights within the Malaysian setting, where food serves as a significant representation of multicultural identity and national heritage. The findings reveal that Malaysian consumers increasingly accept RTE local foods due to urbanization, busy lifestyles, and changing consumption patterns; however, concerns regarding authenticity, traditional taste, and cultural sustainability remain significant. These insights are valuable for food manufacturers, policymakers, and cultural agencies in developing strategies that balance commercial innovation with heritage preservation. The study also highlights the importance of maintaining authentic ingredients, traditional preparation methods, and culturally meaningful branding in ensuring the long-term sustainability of Malaysian local cuisine in an increasingly convenience-driven food environment.

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