Research Article

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A Study of the Factors Towards Consumer's Perception on High-Priced Foods in Malaysia

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Abstract

In Malaysia, the country is currently facing with a situation where basic essential foods groups have become the price of more than RM100 per shopping spree. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that affect Malaysians' perceptions of high-priced foods. This study employed quantitative techniques and issued an online self-administered questionnaire that was distributed in March until June 2023 through WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram. Descriptive and regression analysis was performed to analyse the data using SPSS version 21. According to the result, only inflation and middlemen was contributed to the consumer perception on high-priced foods. In conclusion, it showed that Malaysians were conscious of rising food prices and worried about the harm they would do in the future.

Keywords:

Consumer Perception, High-Priced Foods, Inflation, Consumer Demand, Middlemen

1   Introduction

Many countries are struggling to recover back their economy because of pandemic that been hit many countries. As for Malaysia, after long period of implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO), Malaysia are trying to boost the economy back but at the same time many of economic issue arise in this recovery phase. Food price is one of the serious issues that arise in the midst where the society are trying to stand on their feet again after some of them are losing their job while pandemic outbreak. With the current situation happen it might be affected the society that in the B40 group meanwhile in the pandemic phase, people who are comingfromM40 group have shift to B40 due to the decreasing in their income (Amra & Abu Sufian, 2022).

Following Amra and Abu Bakar (2022), below 40 and Middle 40 group are the group in the society that could be the most affected group in the society to cope with the high cost of living in Malaysia nowadays. Even though there are increment in the minimum wage, which is from RM1,200 to RM1,500, but still with the increasing in price for some goods such as for raw material like chicken, egg and vegetable are going to burden the society who are struggling with financial. Other than that, nowadays the price of cooking oil is rising because of the government abolished the subsidies and the prices for 5 kilogram of cooking oil could reach up to RM42 which it is very expensive.

The significance of this study will add to understanding of the variables influencing the rise in food prices that affects Malaysians' ability to feed themselves. Most of the research on food costs and poverty focuses solely on a few background factors, such as inflation, consumer demand, and middlemen (Amra & Abu Bakar, 2022).

1.1 Research Problem

Gombkoto (2019) has stated that food would always be an essential consumption goods which will lead to increase in demand as the population grows. The author also mentions that some of the factors that caused less food production include limited agricultural land, climate change and widespread biofuel production. In an article from Indonesia, with rice paddies being a source of rice, the price increases to compete against other competition due to high demand (Makbul, et al., 2019). This issue of price increase has enhanced poverty, malnutrition, and exposed to external shocks in every country known to man (Gombkoto, 2019)

According to Mohajan (2019) most of the poor of the world are living in the still developing countries while they spend buying their daily meals with half of their income or more everyday. The aftermath turned into unable to purchase other necessary household essentials due to their limited income. Besides that, corruption always occur from higher class people which primarily includes the middlemen. Based on Hembe (2021), in course of organizing trade between the producers and the buyers, the middlemen involve themselves in every corrupt practices lately. In return, as a result, the actions of the middlemen, both the producer and buyer were shortchanged.

There is currently a great deal of concern regarding food production, processing, distribution, and demand considering recent issues in the food supply chain. COVID-19 had a negative impact on the food supply chain financially and by restricting labour movement, altering consumer demand, closing food manufacturing facilities, and restricting food trade laws (Aday S. and Aday, K., 2020). Food prices are one of the severe issues that have arisen during the society's attempt to re-establish itself after some members have lost their jobs because of the pandemic breakout (Atina & Sufian, 2022). With the current circumstances, it is possible that persons from the M40 group have shifted to the B40 group because of the decrease in their income during the pandemic phase. Based on their current income, some Malaysians would never have known how to buy basic commodities at a supermarket. Thus, this study focuses on the consumer perceptions on the causes of high-priced foods in Malaysia, which lead to poverty and bad outcomes.

1.2 Research Objective

The purpose of this study was to understand about the factors towards consumer's perception towards high-priced foods in Malaysia. The objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the factors which affected consumer's perception towards high-priced foods in Malaysia.

1.3 Research Question

Based on the given objectives, the questions are stated below:

1. What are the factors that affected consumer's perception towards high-priced food in Malaysia?

1.4 Research Framework

Independent Variable   Dependent Variable

Inflation

Consumer Demand → Consumer Perceptions on High – Priced Foods
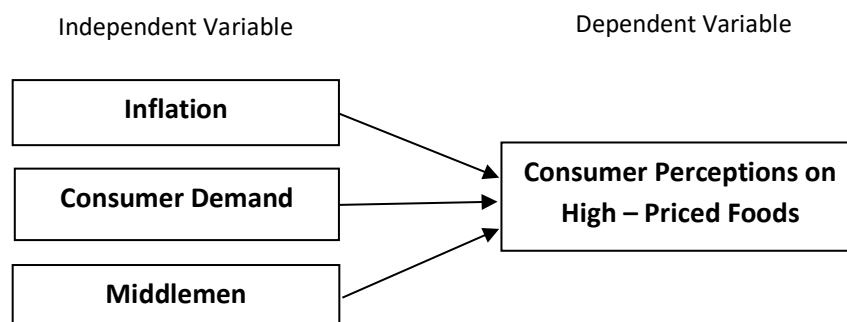
Middlemen

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework (Adapated from Gombkoto (2019), Khalid et al. (2018), Amra et al. (2022) and Geri and Hembe (2016)

2   Literature Review

2.1   Consumer Perception on High-Priced Foods

The causes of the rapid growth in food prices include the large increase in global food prices, agricultural products, and the reduction of declines in food supply, increases in food expenses, and the spread of stock market speculation in agricultural products. In this study, several difficulties were assumed, and several elements that contributed to global food price increase and general problems were determined. These issues were divided into causes and consequences, and they were structured and ordered hierarchically. As a result, possible direct and indirect causes of food price increases, as well as some of their implications, were identified man, (Gombkoto, 2019).

According to the Malaysia Economic Monitor Report published by the World Bank in 2019, it was reported that 30 percent of Malaysians felt that they did not have enough money for food. Further, the number of Malaysians who felt that they did not have enough money for food had doubled since 2012. Low earnings and high prices are hurting consumers. Not because they decide to eat expensive food or employ expensive services to satisfy their wants. We continue to underinvest in food production despite Federation of Malaysian's Consumer Association's (FOMCA) constant lobbying for food security, which means that our self-sufficiency is insufficient to meet demand for essential goods. More than RM50 billion is spent on importing food, which leads to considerable price volatility, as is the case right now when our ringgit depreciates in relation to other currencies, (Raj, 2023).

2.2   Inflation

Inflation in the price of food is one of the severe economic problems that requires the government's attention to be resolved. Although food inflation is not a concern in Malaysia, it is a problem in many other nations where the cost of food is quite high. Poverty is a severe socioeconomic issue that will be exacerbated by the fluctuating price of food. High food costs could result in extreme poverty, and this is the worldwide dilemma. The countries that will be impacted are the developing nations, and the underdeveloped nations will be the most severely impacted since, as we all know, these are the nations with the lowest income levels (Amra, et al., 2022).

According to Samal et al., (2022), researchers and policymakers are increasingly concerned about the high food price inflation as they try to identify what is causing it to rise. Due to factors such as rising minimum support prices, rapid regional economic growth, rising costs of fertilizers and other inputs, rising oil prices, and rising demand for different diets among newly prosperous populations relative to the production of such foodstuffs, high food prices have been an issue in recent years.

2.3 Consumer Demand

Food quality and safety have become important issues in Malaysia because of the country's heavy reliance on imported food. Consumers have become increasingly picky about the food they want to buy and consume in terms of quality and safety. By identifying and comprehending the implicit, intrinsic, extrinsic, and credence quality cues for the purchase of fresh meat and fresh fruits and vegetables, this study aims to better understand how consumers assess food quality (Batt & Chamchuri, 2015).

When food prices rise, the poor are more at risk than the wealthy. 180 countries' delegates, many of whom were heads of state, gathered in Rome in June 2008 to share their belief that "the international community must act urgently and cooperatively to fight the detrimental repercussions of skyrocketing food prices on the world's most vulnerable countries and populations."

Continuing the research from Mohajan (2013), another reason for the sharp rise in food prices is the rapid increase in global population. Low harvests, natural disasters, and the global supply and demand of food commodities are some more factors driving up food prices. Global anxiety about challenges to food security has been sparked by rising food costs, upending the contentment brought on by years of relatively cheap commodity prices. Every state citizen has the fundamental right to food, but sadly, this right is denied to people in most nations. To reduce hunger and improve the nutrition of the poor, many developing nations adopt food price subsidies or price controls, although this is not a long-term solution to limit food price increases.

2.4 Middlemen

Middlemen are people or organizations that serve as the link in the supply chain between producers and consumers, with the retailer serving as the final consumer. In other terms, a middleman is a trader, whereas a trader acts as a go-between for producers and consumers. A middleman, in a more technical sense, is a person with the ability to purchase items from local producers and resell them to either merchants or actual consumers at a profit. People who belong to this group engage in this service in most market centres. Its operations have grown to the point where they are now associated with monopolies in charge of trade or exchange of goods within market centres (Geri & Hembe, 2016).

According to Geri and Hembe (2016), due to the negative consequences it can have, corruption is universally disliked everywhere. On the other hand, because of these fraudulent practices by the buyers in establishing the costs of the items. It is an effort to further the fight against corruption, expose everyone who engages in it, and try to put policies in place that would lessen the prevalence of corruption in society.

The middlemen engage in some corrupt actions while facilitating commerce between producers and customers. Because of the negative consequences it produces, corruption is highly despised everywhere. And because of the middlemen's dishonest behaviour, both the producers and the purchasers suffer injustice. On the other hand, it prevents the free interaction of market forces between producers and purchasers in

deciding the prices of commodities. There are also the corrupt actions carried out by middlemen in commerce as a means of furthering the fight against corruption, exposing those who engage in it without exception, and attempting to take action to reduce its prevalence in society at large (Geri & Hembe, 2016).

3   Methodology

3.1   Research Design and Sample

This study is carried out using quantitative research to explain what is observed. Since the population is too large to examine and consider the entire population, convenience sampling was used for this study to identify the respondents for this study. Power analysis was used by the researcher to decide on the number of samples to approach. Based on the power analysis calculation a minimum sample size to yield a statistical power of at least .95 with an alpha of .05 and a medium effect size (d = 0.5) is 43.

3.2   Instrumentation and Data Collection

The instrumentation is adopted from previous research papers by Gombkoto (2019), Khalid et. al, (2018) and Geri and Hembe (2016). This study will be using self-administered questionnaires. A five-point Likert Scale range from (1) strongly disagree till (5) strongly agree was used in the questionnaires to avoid misinterpretation and confusion. The questionnaires were distributed all over Malaysia via online mediums such as email, telegram, Facebook, and WhatsApp from March until June 2023.

3.3   Data Analysis

To compensate for this issue, the data was collected using an online medium which was Google Form. For future data mining and analysis, the web-based survey's data will be automatically stored in a database. Because respondents can respond to the questionnaire at any time and from anywhere, online surveys are seen as flexible and convenient. The questionnaire was distributed through social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Google Form was used as an online survey with a target of 138 respondents.

Starting in early March and continuing until the end of June 2023, the questionnaire was delivered to relatives and friends who have had experience buying food goods for a family household or the food sector. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.0 was used to analyse and generate all the data that was obtained from the questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential analysis was performed. It examined the demographic profile of the questionnaire for descriptive analysis. Meanwhile, multiple regression was used to examine the factors which caused high-priced foods in Malaysia.

4 Findings

4.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1: Frequency result of respondents' profile

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	86	61.9
Female	53	38.1
Race		
Malay	104	74.8
Chinese	26	18.7
Indian	9	6.5
Age		
18-21	19	13.7
22-39	98	70.5
40-51	21	15.1
52-69	1	7
Working Status		
Employed	16	11.5
Unemployed	67	48.2
Student	56	40.3
Martial Status		
Married	27	19.4
Single	112	80.6
Monthly Income		
<1,500	72	51.8
1,500 – 3,000	40	28.8
3,000 – 5,000	11	7.9
5,000 – 10,000	11	7.9
>10,000	5	3.6
Would you consider yourself manageable when spending on daily essentials?	89	64.0
Yes	17	12.2
No	33	23.7
Maybe		

Table 1 has described the respondent's profile according to their gender, race, age, working status, martial status, monthly income, and consideration question in the questionnaire. According to this table, from 139 of respondent's majority of respondents are male with 86 respondents with percentage of 61.9%. Meanwhile, with percentage of 38.1% (53 respondents) are female. The result also showed that age ranged 22-39 years old are the majority with 70.5% (98 respondents) while the others were 18-21 years old with 13.7% (19 respondents), 40-51 years old with 15.1% (21 respondents) and lastly 52- 69 years old with 7.0% (1 respondents).

4.2 Reliability Test for Actual Study

Cronbach's alpha has been used to determine the internal consistency of an instrument in this research. Reliability scores that acceptable for research is 0.5 and higher. Although the standards for what makes a good α coefficient are entirely arbitrary and depend on researcher theoretical concept of the scale in question, many researchers recommend a minimum α coefficient between 0.65 and 0.8 (or higher) and α coefficients that are less than 0.5 are generally not acceptable (Singh, 2017).

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of items
Inflation	0.786	7
Consumer Demand	0.815	7
Middlemen	0.888	7
Consumer Perception on High-Priced Foods	0.842	6

According to the data collected, it was shown that the variables are at the score higher than 0.5 which is excellent. For the variables of middlemen, consumer perceptions of high-priced foods and consumer demand are at the score of 0.888, 0.842 and 0.815 while for inflation is 0.786

4.3 Descriptive Statistic

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis

Inflation	Mean	St. Deviation
Food Inflation has affected our ability to purchase food with minimal amount.	4.32	.713
Malaysians are becoming more concern due to unable to purchase food because of the inflation.	4.30	.719
In 10 years, time, food inflation will become the biggest issue worldwide.	4.49	.652
Malaysians are spending more than the salary the gained.	4.44	.693
Prices of food will go back down to lower prices before inflation started.	3.49	1.072
The government has not been helping in reducing the food prices.	4.06	.934
Food inflation will impact household's basic salary due to the large price tags.	4.54	.640
Consumer Demand		
High demand for food has also increase the price of food.	4.43	.671
Food producers are struggling to produce quality food with such limited time.	4.24	.848
Hari Raya and Chinese New Year are some festivities when the food price increase rapidly.	4.43	.752
Limitation of food product in mass markets has led to high prices.	4.37	.651
Agricultural difficulties have resulted in reduction in food production.	4.24	.769
Modern food production technology can help to reduce food prices.	4.20	.791
The food supply in Malaysia will depend on imported products in years to come instead of local products.	4.01	1.004
Middlemen		
Middlemen are responsible for high-food prices in Malaysia	4.17	.804
Government has not taken notice of middlemen's actions toward the price increase of food.	4.06	.861

Middlemen have corrupted the food prices for their own profit from the food producers.	4.18	.754
Supermarkets and online markets should be careful when allowing someone to sell their product.	4.30	.688
The actions of middlemen have cause people to spend money than usual on a daily basis.	4.27	.757
The middlemen have decided to raise the price without notifying consumers and producers in advance.	4.18	.828
High food prices are contributed by illegal and irresponsible people who decide to gain selfish profit through helping sell other's products.	4.31	.721

Consumer Perception On High-Priced Foods

Prices of food have become too expensive	4.45	.651
Food prices will continue to become higher by short year's time.	4.48	.663
The government's role should decrease the prices of local and international foods	4.44	.743
Due to drop in currency, Malaysians are spending more for small yield.	4.53	.641
Malaysians have to save up to more than RM100 for daily purchasing basic food items, which can exceed their basic salary by the end of the month.	4.39	.794
Reducing the prices of food will make the country more developed and easier to live in	4.36	.771

4.4 Normality Test

Table 4: Normality Test

Variables		Statistic	Standard Error
Inflation	Skewness	-.496	.206
	Kurtosis	.361	.408
Consumer Demand	Skewness	-.499	.206
	Kurtosis	.031	.408
Middlemen	Skewness	-.494	.206
	Kurtosis	.031	.408
Consumer's	Skewness	-.496	.206

Perception on High-Priced Foods	Kurtosis	.361	.408

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. To ensure that the distribution of data is normal, skewness and kurtosis were referred to. The values of skewness and kurtosis should be within +/-3. Based on the above table, all variables have the values of skewness and kurtosis within the range

4.5 Multiple Regression

Table 5: Multiple Regression Analysis

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients
Model		B	Std. error	Beta
1 (Constant)		1.137	.302	
INFLATION		.314	.092	.307
CONSUMER DEMAND		.129	.083	.132
MIDDLEMEN		.338	.066	.381
R square = .485 (p > .50)				

Standard multiple regression was used to assess the ability of 3 control measures (inflation, consumer demand and middlemen) to predict consumer perceptions of high- priced foods. The total variance explained by the model was 48.5%, $F_{(4, 421)}$ = 94.78, $p > .50$. R squared used was 0.485 due to the large scale, $p > .50$. In the final model, only two control measures were statistically significant, with the middlemen recording a higher beta value (beta = .381, $p > .50$) than the inflation Scale (beta = .307, $p > .50$). Based on the result there are another 51.5% factors contribute to consumer perception on high-priced foods

5   Discussion

Based on the findings, middlemen were ranked as the best independent variable as the questionnaire targeted them as the main cause of the price increase of food globally. Inflation was second to middlemen because the issue was not as supported for the cause of the price hike in Malaysia. Middlemen was targeted as the main reason for the cause of inflation throughout the years. The least influenced

independent variable was consumer demand. Most of the requested items on the market were either gone viral or popularized by other countries, which lead to increase in demand by consumers. Consumer demand was the least influenced because this study was more focused on essential food instead of imported or international foods. Rising food prices increase income for food producers, in this case, farmers, but reduce the purchasing power of food consumers, on the other hand. For consumers, the food prices increase directly rise household spending on food (Farahuddin, et al., 2023).

5.1 Relationship between inflation towards the consumer perception on high-priced foods in Malaysia

H1 (+) There is a positive relationship between inflation and the consumer perception on high-priced foods in Malaysia.

The relationship between inflation and food price increase is connected in the case of increase of price for food in general. According to Table 4, there was a positive linear relationship due to the pa value >.50. with a beta value of .307, the perception towards inflation was widely accepted and became one of the causes of high-priced foods in Malaysia, only second to middlemen. Inflation came from a variety of factors which result in most of the item's price tags. As happened at the height of the outbreak, they could cause more M40 people to cross over into the B40 group. 12.8% of T20 families and 20% of M40 households have entered the low-income group, according to the government's Household Income Estimates and Incidence of Poverty Report Malaysia, 2020.

5.2 Relationship between consumer demand towards the consumer perception on high-priced foods in Malaysia

H2 (-) There is no significant relationship between consumer demand and the consumer perception on high-priced foods in Malaysia.

Based on Table 5, there was a less influenced relationship between consumer demand and food price increase. With the p value of > .50, the beta value became .132 which is the lowest amongst the 3 independent variables. The DOSM claimed that in line with the recent Hari Raya Puasa festival, the government imposed the maximum price system for commodities between April 26, 2022, and May 10, 2022. Customers now pay more to satiate their stomachs. According to statistics from Malaysia, 89.1% of all food items are priced higher than average. Implementing the maximum pricing scheme during the Hari Raya celebrations from April 26 to May 10 as a measure to stabilize prices and ensure supply in the market could lower the inflation rate in May, particularly for the food group.

5.3 Relationship between inflation towards the consumer perception on high-priced foods in Malaysia

H3 (+) There is a positive relationship between middlemen and the consumer perception on high-priced foods in Malaysia.

According to Table 5, there is a positive relationship between middlemen was positive with a beta value of .381, which makes it the most significant independent variable with the p value of > .50. The administration has vowed to wage a full-scale war against the cartels and intermediaries that are to blame for inflation and the increase in the cost of necessities. The manipulation of the agriculture industry and the food supply chain by "middle people" and "cartels," which is to blame for the rise in product prices and inflation, is being addressed by the government.

6   Conclusion

There are several factors that can contribute to high-priced foods. This study aimed to explore and analyse the factors behind the high prices of food in Malaysia. Through an extensive study, it has become evident that several crucial factors contribute to this issue, including inflation, and middlemen. It is important to note that these factors can interact with one another, resulting in complex dynamics that influence food pricing. A general rise in the cost of goods and services over time that reduces the purchasing power of money is referred to as inflation. Food prices typically increase when inflation occurs because of rising production, transportation, and raw material costs. Middlemen are people or companies involved in the supply chain between producers and consumers and the distribution of food products. They exercise excessive control or unfair tactics, which can raise costs for consumers. Middlemen's impact on food prices can be lessened through efforts to improve supply chain efficiency, cut waste, and increase transparency. Additionally, the reliance on imported goods and the influence of global factors such as climate change and currency fluctuations have a considerable impact on food prices.

It is hoped that this manuscript serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and those concerned with the escalating issue of high-priced foods in Malaysia. By understanding the multifaceted factors contributing to this problem, it is possible to develop comprehensive strategies that foster a more affordable and sustainable food system for the nation, thereby improving the well-being of its citizens and promoting economic growth in the long run.

Future study could put states in demographic profiles and researcher can compare the impact of cost of living in different states as one of the variables that could influence consumer perceptions of high-priced foods.

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