

# Food Purchasing Behaviour of Metropolitan Consumers

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## Abstract

*The objectives of the study reported in this paper were to identify (1) profile of consumer based on market outlet, (2) food purchasing behaviour, and (3) preferences of metropolitan consumers. A total of 400 respondents from each metropolitan cities of Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, George Town, Johor Bharu and Kuantan were interviewed. The respondents represent type of marketing channel and weekend vs. weekday shoppers. The findings of the study revealed that the retail shop was preferred by the dual earner, the night market by the single earner and the supermarket by the no-earner households. Interestingly the hypermarket and supermarket were preferred by all types of family. The figures did not show much difference in the frequency of food purchase between male and female respondents. When places of shopping for different food groups were compared with household income groups, the higher income group tended to shop in the supermarket. Most of the respondents gave very important priorities to local brands while choosing food products.*

## Introduction

Malaysia is a developing country, aiming at reaching developed country status by the year 2020 through the vision 2020 strategy.

Much has been achieved under the economic policy implemented through five year plan. To date Malaysia is implementing its Eight Malaysian Plan and the challenges of the globalisation era are integrated into the plan to prepare the Malaysian economy to face global competition. Development efforts have been undertaken and will continue in all aspects of human life especially in the development of educational infrastructures, transport system and housing development.

Rapid development has resulted in increased income of the population. Increase household income has resulted in increased purchasing power of households. The mean household income of the rural population increased from RM1327.00 in 1995 to RM1718.00 in 1999. On the other hand the mean income of urban households declined from RM2589.00 to RM2472.00 during the same period (Eight Malaysia Plan 2000). With changing family life from single earner to dual earners households, food purchasing patterns have tended to change. It can be expected that demand for instant, fast and frozen food will increase. The household expenditure survey 1998/99 revealed that the mean expenditure on food was RM368.00 per month compared to RM259.78 in 1993/4 (Department of Statistics, 2000). Expenditure on eating out also increased from RM125.16 in 1993/4 to RM178.00 in 1998/9. This opens up opportunity for local food producers such as

women's producers to cater for the changing market.

This paper highlights research findings on the food purchasing behaviour of metropolitan consumers. Data reported is part of a bigger study on consumer preferences for processed food produced by KPW funded by the Japan International Corporation Agency. The specific objectives of the research were to identify profile of consumer based on market outlet, food purchasing behaviour and preferences of metropolitan consumers.

## Literature Review

Consumer food purchasing behaviours are influenced by various factors. Arthey (1989) categorized these factors as economic and non-economic. For the economic factor, food price and personal income become the dominant indicators. Specific to income, a decrease in income is associated with a decrease in food eaten out of the home, pre-prepared meals and increased home cooking (Anderson and Morris 2000).

Various researchers have to examined non-economic factors influential in food purchase, such as health concerns, convenience factors related to purchasing and preparation, demographic characteristic such as life cycle of the households, and the commercial environment. McKenzie (1985) reported that heightened awareness of the relationship between eating and physical well being increased individual desire for improved health, thus, food choice.

McKenzie (1985) reported that there has been a consistent increase for convenience food. According to Darien and Cohen (1995), the dimension of convenience includes the relative weight that consumers attach to time and energy use throughout the consumption process, that is acquisition, consumption and

disposal (e.g. clearing and cleaning up after a meal). Regarding increase in demand for convenience food, McKenzie (1985) explained that growth is due to increase in women labor force participation, especially among married women. This trend is also associated to other trends such as increase in the number of families living in two-income household and increasing price of wives' and husband's time (Chiang 1993). As a consequence, additional income earned in the family can be spent on more expensive convenience food such as semi-prepared cooking ingredients and ready-to-eat food that requires only heating.

In addition, Darien and Cohen (1995) found that those who are time-poor are more likely to purchase convenience food as a strategy to 'save time'. Therefore, working women who have to juggle between market work and household chores (thus, time shortage) were found to have purchased more meals prepared away from home than non-working women (Bellante and Foster 1984).

Goldsmith, Freiden and Henderson (1995) have added that demographic differences do influence food attitudes and food buying behavior. Specifically, favorable snacking attitudes are associated with a lower level of education and income, and being single. On the other hand, higher level of education and income are associated with purchase of nutritious food. Also, the presence of children is associated with higher purchase of junk food.

In terms of food acceptance, choice and preferences Kuznesof et al. (1997), suggest that they are driven by a number of inter-related factors. Externally, the decision to purchase one food product over another is influenced by various factors such as socio-economic factors. Inwardly, consumers vary according to their personalities, values, beliefs and experience, which in turn influence their

attitudes, perception and purchasing behaviours.

Specific to perception, it is a process of knowing or a subjective assessment based upon an individual's beliefs and attitudes, which have been shaped by the sum of their life experiences. Perception is therefore a personal interpretation regarding the information about a specific stimulus or product, which has successfully attained a level of significance in the mind of consumers (Kuznesof et al. 1997). For example, in examining consumers' attitude and perception of fresh milk, Skiadas (1994) found that good packaging influences consumers' decision in their choice of brand and that they trust branded milk as it provides them with feelings of safety and being 'more healthy.' Thus, understanding consumer perception of locally produced food products will therefore assist the marketing of such products.

As far as perception of quality is concerned, various studies have concluded that consumers use extrinsic cues such as price, brand name and store name to impute product quality perception. Quality is conceptualised in terms of the superiority or excellence of product of which higher quality can be achieved through inclusion of product specific attributes or ingredients (Agarwal and Teas 2002). Food quality it may include attributes such as safety, sensory, functional, nutritional and compositional quality, convenience and added value. In addition, factors such as place or country of origin also play a significant role in influencing perceived quality among consumers (Kuznesof et al., 1997)

Skiadas (1994), explained that food purchasing behaviors are influenced by both economic factor such as price and income, and non economic factors such as convenience and safety. Research indicates that consumers use price not only as an indicator

of quality, but also as an indicator of cost (Agarwal and Teas 2002). This is because, consumers have to sacrifice or give up a certain quantity of money (i.e. equivalent to price) in exchange for the products. Because most consumers operate under budget constraints, the higher the price of a product, the higher the perceived monetary sacrifice associated with purchasing the product.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Population and Sampling**

Five of the metropolitan cities in Peninsular Malaysia were chosen for this research. They were Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, George Town, Johor Bahru and Kuantan. A total of 400 respondents conveniently selected from each city were interviewed for market survey. One hundred respondents were interviewed from each type of marketing channel: night market, retail shop, supermarket and hypermarket. For each market outlets, half of the respondents (50) were obtained during weekday and the other half were interviewed during the weekend

### **Instrument**

Questionnaire that was developed consisted of two parts, the demographic information of respondents, and consumer purchasing behaviour. The first section of the food purchasing behaviour focussed on food buying behaviour of the respondents and their preferences for brand group (international, national and local brand). Respondents were also asked to indicate their perceptions on processed food products in general and perception towards locally process food products.

A total of 34 products, representing the most common food products produced by KPW members were listed. These products

were also identified as products with good potential. In order to analyse consumer purchasing pattern, respondents were asked to indicate whether they ever bought the products, where they buy and frequency of buying the products. In addition the respondents were also asked the frequency of buying dry, fresh, snack and frozen food products and the place of purchase. Lastly respondents were asked to provide input on types of services they need in preparing food for the family.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected using ten trained enumerators through personal interviews. The data were collected within one month from 29<sup>th</sup> of June, 2002 to 28<sup>th</sup> of July 2002. The enumerators were divided into two groups with five people and a group leader was appointed. The data collection team spent four days in each city to collect the data. Data collected were coded and analysed using the SPSS package and its descriptive statistics.

Data were collected in five locations, i.e. Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bharu, Kuantan, Ipoh and Georgetown. The respondents were identified by convenient sampling and interviewed at 4 market outlets in each location. The market outlets comprised retail shop, hypermarket, night market and supermarket. Different market outlets and days were chosen for data collection to ensure the respondents represented consumers from all walks of life.

### **Findings of the Study**

Table 1 shows the background of the respondents interviewed. More than 90% of the respondents were Malays. As most of the enumerators were Malays, it was likely for them

to approach the Malay respondents.

The percentages of male and female respondents interviewed were 47% and 53% respectively. From the occupation data of respondents and spouses, the respondents were categorized based on the number of income earners in the family. The data showed that 48% of the respondents were from dual-earner family, 46% from single-earner family, and only 6% of the respondents from the no-earner family. The respondents from the no-earner family included students, pensioners and housewives whose spouses were not working. The data also indicated that 48.5% respondents were single, while 51.5% were married.

The findings of the study indicated that 40.1% of families has an average of one pre-school age child or younger, 55.8% had an average of three school age children, and 22.8% had two working children. The mean age of the eldest child in the family was 15, while the mean age of the youngest child nine. From the age of the eldest and the youngest child, it can be assumed that the families were expanding at the time of the study.

Three important socio-economic variables that are likely to be related to the purchasing decision and behavior were analysed in detail. The variables are education level, occupation and income.

### **Education Background of Respondents**

For both respondents and spouses, the data revealed that higher percentage have education level of SPM or higher, i.e., 84.8% and 78.7% respectively. In fact, 35.7% respondents and 23.1% spouses have tertiary education. With high education, more than 70% of both respondents and spouses have secured a job in the market.



**Table 1**  
**Background of the Respondents**

Background		n	%
Ethnic	Malay	1811	91.0
	Chinese	87	4.4
	Indian	66	3.3
	Other	26	1.3
Sex	Male	940	47.0
	Female	1059	53.0
Types of family	Dual earner	523	48.3
	Single earner	500	46.2
	No earner	60	5.5
Marital status	Single	969	48.5
	Married	1030	51.5

**Table 2**  
**Education Level of the Respondents and the Spouses**

Education	Respondent		Spouse	
	n	%	n	%
No formal schooling	28	1.4	14	1.6
Primary school/ UPSR	87	4.4	66	7.3
SRP/PMR	158	8.0	105	11.7
SPM	799	40.4	392	43.5
STPM	173	8.7	109	12.1
Diploma/Bachelor	668	33.7	184	20.4
Advanced Degree	39	2.0	24	2.7
Other	28	1.4	7	0.8

Table 3 showed that 75.3% respondents and 73.6% spouses were employed, while 17.2% respondents were students and 24.1% spouses were housewives. The employed respondents were concentrated in jobs such as clerical (16.1%), production (12.1%), and own business (12.3%). On the other hand, the spouses were working in professional and technical (13.9%), administrative and managerial (13.1%), clerical (12.4%), and own business (14.6%).

Forty percent respondents earned monthly income of less than RM1000, 29.4%

**Table 3**  
**Occupation of the Respondents and Spouses**

Occupation	Respondent		Spouse	
	n	%	n	%
Professional, technical & related workers	219	11.4	121	13.9
Administrative & managerial workers	163	8.5	114	13.1
Clerical & related workers	322	16.7	108	12.4
Sales workers	114	5.9	25	2.9
Service workers	143	7.4	59	6.8
Production & related workers, transport, equipment operators & Laborers	241	12.5	86	9.9
Self employed & business	241	12.8	127	14.6
Students	331	17.2	3	0.3
Pensioner	21	1.1	18	2.1
Housewife	124	6.4	210	24.1
Total	1924	100	871	100

earn RM1001-2000, and 22.5% earn more than RM5000. On the other hand, 69.5% spouses earn monthly income of more than RM5000. Only 13.6% and 11.8% spouses earn monthly income of RM1001-2000 and less than RM1000 respectively. This pattern was consistent with the education level and occupation of the spouses. Accordingly, the mean income of the spouses was higher (RM1646) than the respondent (RM1332).

When the income of respondents and spouses were added to estimate household income, the findings of the study indicated that 71.7% respondents has household income of RM2000 or higher. When compared to the average Malaysian household (mean income=RM2472 in 1999), the income received by the households studied is higher (RM3238). There are at least two reasons for

Table 4  
Income of the Respondents Spouses  
and Households

Inc Cat (RM)	Respondent		Spouse		Total household	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
< 1000	791	39.6	234	11.7	10	2.3
1001 – 2000	587	29.4	271	13.6	115	26.0
2001 – 3000	130	6.5	70	3.5	130	29.3
3001 – 4000	28	1.4	22	1.1	101	22.8
4001 – 5000	14	0.7	13	0.7	33	7.4
5001>	449	22.5	1390	69.5	54	12.2
Mean (RM)	1559	1332	621	1646	443	3238

the household income of the respondents studied is higher. First, the study was done in the urban areas, where urban households usually have higher income compared to the rural households. Second, the income computed is probably for the dual earner families.

The percentage of household income contributed by males and females were computed by dividing the income received by the males and female for both respondents and spouses with the total household income. In this analysis, the males and females could be the respondent or the spouse. As the result, total percentage contributed by the males and females is not total up to 100%. The results shown in Table 3.6 indicated the males contributed an average of 81.4% to the household income while females contributed an average of 69.8%.

The data were further analysed based on number of earner in the family. In the dual earner families, 61% husbands contributed more than fifty percent of the household income, while only 22% wives contributed more than fifty percent of the household income. For the single earner family, the figure showed that 98% husbands contributed more than fifty percent of the household income,

while 74% wives contributed more than fifty percent of the household income. In general the findings of the study indicated that more husbands contribute higher percentage of household income compared to the wives.

### Market Outlets

The profile of the respondents was further analysed to identify the types of market outlets they go shopping. As the respondents were chosen conveniently, the profile of the respondents presented here, should be generalized with caution.

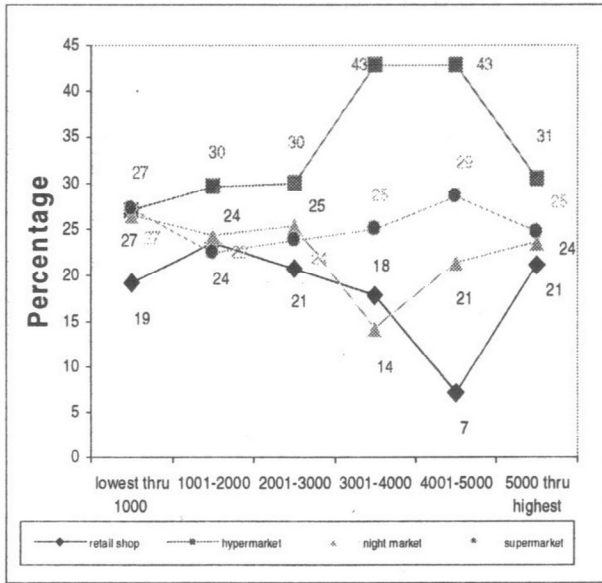
Figure 1 showed that the respondents go to all types of market outlets to do shopping especially for the lower and the higher income respondents. However the types of market outlets visited by respondents were different for the income category of RM3000 - RM5000, where higher percentage will go to hypermarket and lower percentage will go to retail shop.

When the types of market outlets were analysed based on spouse income, the same trend except that more respondents whose spouse have monthly income of RM3000-4000 go to retail shop, while more respondents whose spouses have an income of RM4000 - RM5000 go to night market.

Hypermarket is the most popular market outlets for all level of household income. As hypermarket provides more facilities and almost all products are available at reasonable price, the respondents prefer to do shopping at hypermarket.

The types of outlet visited by the respondents categorized by number of earner indicated that retail shop was preferable by the dual earner, the night market by the single earner and the supermarket by the no-earner households. Interestingly the hypermarket and supermarket were preferable by all types of family.

**Figure 1**  
Types of Market Outlet by Respondents' Income



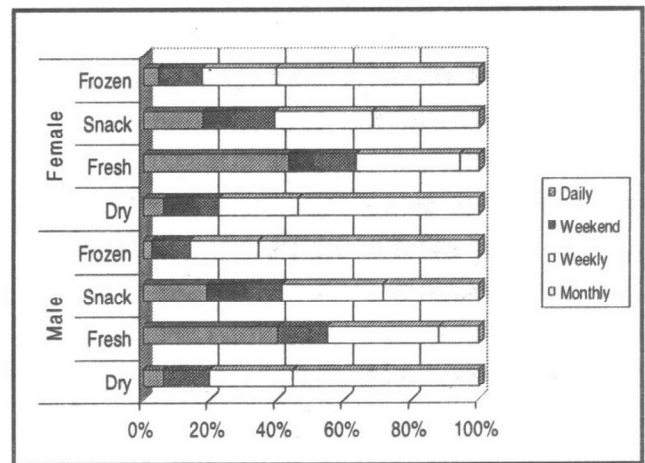
### Food Purchasing Behaviour

Respondents were asked to indicate how often respondents shop for food products (fresh, dry, snack and frozen) and where they purchased these products. Figure 2 shows the frequency of food purchase by sex. The figure did not show much difference in the frequency of food purchase between male and female respondents. When the types of food were compared, more than half of the respondents shop for fresh food daily or during weekend. Frozen food was purchased on a monthly basis by more than half of male as well as female respondents. Majority of the respondents shopped weekly or monthly except for fresh food. There were about 40% males and females shop for fresh food on weekly and monthly basis. As mentioned earlier, changing living patterns as well as availability of technology enable families to adapt to the new demand for their time.

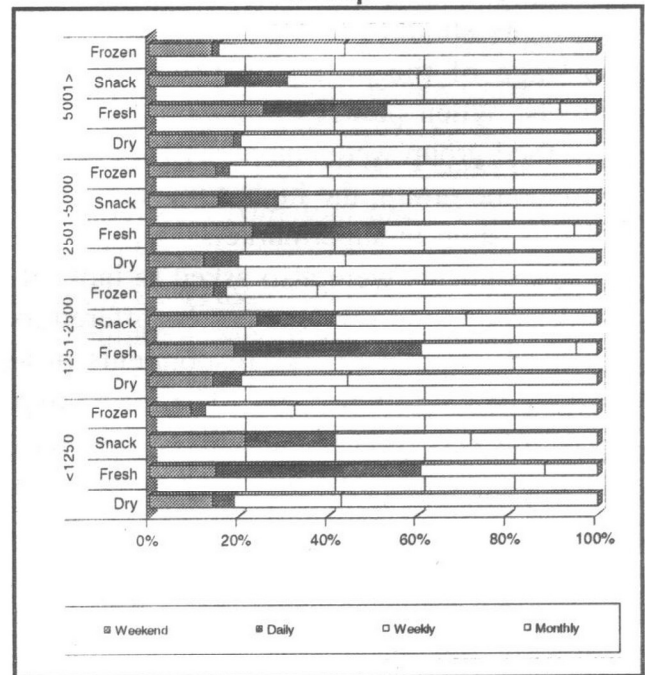
Frequency of shopping was analysed by the income group to determine if there is a difference in the pattern by income group. Sixty percent respondents in the income

group of less than RM2500 shop for fresh food daily or on weekends. Lower percentage of higher income groups shop for fresh food daily or weekends. Higher proportion of all income groups shopped for dry food less frequent. On the other hand, higher proportion of lower income group purchase snack food more frequently (daily or weekends).

**Figure 2**  
Number of Respondent by Frequency of Food Purchase by Sex



**Figure 3**  
Percentage of Respondents by Frequency of Product Purchase by Household Income Group



Looking at the percentage of respondents by frequency of purchasing four types of food products by sex revealed that both by male and female respondents purchased frozen foods from the supermarket. Since frozen foods require refrigeration, it is natural for consumer to be able to purchase from this channel. Retail store often had no such facilities and this limit the ability of the shop-keeper to supply the frozen products. The availability of frozen food is limited since products have to be sold on the same day since there was no refrigeration.

With regard to snack foods, majority respondents indicated that they bought the food either form the supermarket or retail store. Higher proportions of female respondents shop for snack foods from supermarket while higher percentage of male respondents shops for snack food from retail outlet. Market is still the main place consumer buy fresh food. Smaller percentage respondents shop for fresh food form supermarket. Snack food producers may need to penetrate the supermarket channel to increase the market of their products. With government's policy of making mandatory for mega store to sell 30% of locally produced good in the shop, local entrepreneurs should make an attempt to take advantage of the policy to promote their products. When places of shopping for different food group were compared with household income group, the higher income group tended to shop in supermarket.

Respondents were also asked to indicate what kind of food services can be offered to help them. A total of 932 respondents provided some kind of answers. The most often suggestion was food home delivery services (501 respondents) followed by making food items easily available to consumer and availability of freshly cooked food for the family. Small percentage of consumers were also proposing that producers should increase

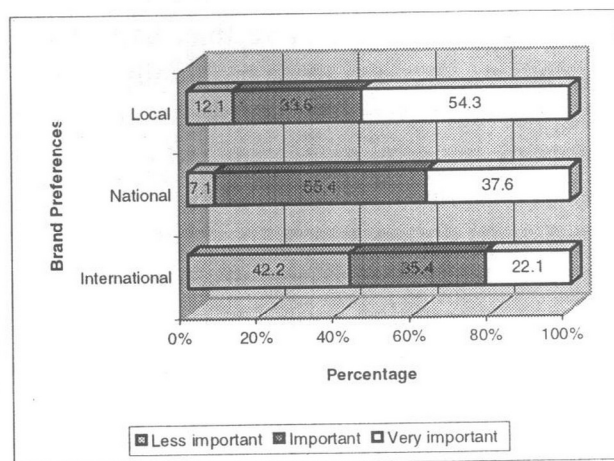
varieties of food, having door to door sale and have catalogue to facilitate orders.

### Brand Preferences

In this study, consumer brand preferences were examined. Respondents were asked which brand they prefer while choosing food products. The brand divided into three: international, national and local brand.

The findings of the study indicated that 42.2% of respondents felt that international brand less important for them in making selection of food products, which majority of them were female respondents (24.7%) compared to males (17.4%). About 22.4% respondents like to choose international brand. More than 50.0% of the respondents reported they gave important priorities to national brand while 37.6% respondents felt very important priorities to national brand in choosing food products. Higher percentage of married respondents (23.2%) compared to single respondents (14.3%) gave very important priorities to national brand (Figure 4).

Figure 4  
Consumers' Brand Preferences



Data shows that 54.3% of respondents gave very important priorities to local brand in selection of food products. Female respondent



(30.9%) most likely gave local brand as a very important priorities compared to males (23.4%). About 29.7% respondents with dual earners family gave very important priorities to national brand. In conclusion, most of the respondents gave very important priorities to local brand while choosing food products.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The frequency of purchase of the products depended on the types of products. Majority of the respondents were buying products listed either weekly or occasionally. Since the products were not basic food ingredients, they were purchased on special occasion or at certain interval. In fact certain products were purchased and expected to last for certain period of time. As such there is a need for the producers to ensure the shelf life of the products is longer than the use period. The packaging size also needs to be taken into consideration to meet the need of consumers.

Dual earner households were the potential buyers of instant ingredients and instant food products. The data showed that female consumers tended to purchase most of the products listed in the study. Consumers regardless of income levels were purchasing the products listed in the study though the percentage who purchased the products were rather low, the increase availability in the market can increase the proportion of consumers buying the products.

Place of purchase depend on the type of products. Frozen products mostly available in the supermarket that have refrigeration facilities. Marketing strategies employed have to consider the characteristics of the products and targeting the specific group of consumers.

KPW products have the potential to penetrate the market locally as well as inter-

nationally. In the local market scenario, the market can be expanded into supermarkets and hypermarkets. With the government policy requiring hypermarkets to have 30% locally produced products, KPW products have potential to enter the hypermarkets. In addition to the local market, there is also potential for KPW products to penetrate the international market especially as part of Malaysia's efforts to become the centre for halal food production. To reach such target concerted effort are needed at various levels to help the enterprises scale up to meet international standard.

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