



## Are Malaysians ready for Rabbit Meat? An exploratory to assess readiness of Malaysians to accept rabbit meat as an alternative protein source

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### Abstract

This study explores the readiness of Malaysians to accept rabbit meat as an alternative protein source. As meat prices rise, identifying alternative options like rabbit meat becomes crucial. Rabbit meat offers nutritional value and is easy to breed, making it a potential substitute. Through a quantitative survey, the study reveals that many Malaysians acknowledge rabbit meat's health benefits and consider it a viable food source. However, concerns related to empathy for animals and the association of rabbits with pets influence resistance to its consumption. With these challenges, future interventions and education campaigns can promote wider acceptance of rabbit meat as an alternative protein source in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Food security; sustainable food systems; nutritional value; rabbit meat

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### 1.0 Introduction

In recent years, Malaysia has experienced a significant increase in raw materials prices, including essential food items such as meat. Floods, extreme heat, uneven rainfall, and other climatic uncertainties have resulted in supply chain disruptions, leading to price hikes. Notably, animal feed prices, namely soybean meal and corn, had increased tremendously, with the average cost of soybean meal and corn rising 27.7% and 9.2% year on year, respectively (Lee Weng Khuen (2023, Mar 13). Accordingly, the rising cost of production has directly led to higher prices for meat products, thus adding more burden to consumers. Therefore, there is an urgent need to identify possible alternative foods that can ease the burden and lessen the reliance on traditional meat sources such as chicken, beef, and duck meat. One potential option that has gained attention is rabbit meat. Rabbit meat is recognized for its high nutritional value, ease of breeding, and adaptability to various environmental conditions (Siddiqui et al., 2023). Moreover, it is known for its low-fat content and high protein value, thus making it a potentially healthier choice for individuals who are conscious about their diet. Furthermore, it can be raised in relatively small spaces and have a short reproduction cycle, enabling efficient breeding practices and a consistent supply of meat (Saxmose Nielsen et al., 2020). All the mentioned attributes make rabbit meat become a capable candidate as an alternate protein source in Malaysia.

Despite its benefits, however, several questions came across in mind. Are Malaysians ready for rabbit meat? Does this meat can become of the main dishes in the household meal, like chicken and beef? What are the perceptions and acceptability of Malaysians towards rabbit meat? In answering these questions, therefore, this study was conducted to explore the perceptions and acceptance of rabbit meat consumption among Malaysians. By understanding their perspectives and acceptance level, we can assess its possibility as an alternative option to the conventional meat. This investigation will shed light on the potential hurdles, motivations, and considerations that influence Malaysians' acceptance of rabbit meat. The insights gained from this study have the potential to shape strategies that challenge the difficulties posed by escalating meat prices and further strengthen food security in Malaysia. Overall, this research endeavours to shed light on the readiness of Malaysians to embrace rabbit meat as a potential substitute for conventional

meats. By examining perceptions, attitudes, and awareness, this investigation aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on sustainable food systems and provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders in the food industry.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

The poultry industry in Malaysia, which has long played a vital role in providing meat sources for Malaysians, encountered various challenges that have impacted the accessibility and affordability of poultry products. One of the critical challenges is the surge in prices of essential raw materials, mainly animal feed, resulting in escalated production costs. Consequently, these increased costs have transformed into higher retail prices for conventional meat, which is chicken, a widely consumed protein source deeply ingrained in the Malaysian diet (Para et al., 2015). The significant increase in poultry-related expenses has prompted researchers and policymakers to actively explore alternative protein sources to address the country's nutritional requirements and alleviate the strain on traditional poultry production systems (Li et al., 2018). This imperative drive to seek alternative solutions aims to ensure a sustainable and secure food supply while mitigating the adverse effects of rising costs on consumers and the poultry industry.

Rabbit meat has emerged as a promising alternative due to its distinctive nutritional profile, making it a relevant addition to promoting alongside current healthy lifestyle practices (Bodnar & Skobrak, 2014). Its chemical composition distinguished it from other meats, offering a range of advantages. Rabbit meat is renowned for its high protein content, at the same time being low in cholesterol, fat, and sodium (Priyanti & Raharjo, 2012). In particular, rabbit fat boasts a notably low proportion of cholesterol and a high proportion of unsaturated fatty acids, further contributing to its nutritional appeal (Hermida et al., 2006). In addition, rabbit meat is easy to digest and is known for its rich flavour.

Moreover, its remarkably low uric acid content renders it suitable even for individuals with gout, and its purine levels are comparatively low (Hernández, 2008). However, the perception that rabbit is a cute animal and a 'bunny syndrome' make the perception that it cannot be eaten become a resistance and challenge for promoting rabbit meat consumption in Malaysia (Leroy & Petracci, 2021). Such as in United States, Whole Foods announced that it would terminate its experiment in selling rabbit meat after only after a year of selling it, due to the yearlong campaign waged by animal rights activists and rabbit, public pressure and protests held before stores across the country (Felix Behr, 2021). Nonetheless, the benefits and nutritional value of rabbits' meat had beyond the 'pet' syndrome.

As such, rabbit meat is highly regarded for its exceptional nutritional and dietary properties, making it a suitable candidate for inclusion in the Functional Food category. It is globally recognized for its superior nutritional profile, characterized by lower fat content, reduced saturated fatty acids, and lower cholesterol levels than other meats (Dalle Zotte & Szendro, 2011). Nutritionists recommend rabbit meat due to its lean nature, high-quality protein, abundant minerals and vitamins, and low concentrations of saturated fats, cholesterol, and sodium (Gabriela et al., 2014). The nutritional superiority of rabbit meat stems from its lipid composition, which is rich in monounsaturated fatty acids and polyunsaturated fatty acids. These components are essential in preventing vascular diseases and positively impact human health (Abd-Allah & Abdelaziz, 2018). Furthermore, the appeal of rabbit meat extends to health-conscious consumers due to its lower levels of cholesterol and saturated fat compared to other meat sources (Szendró et al., 2020). The unique combination of nutritional benefits and palatability makes rabbit meat an enticing option for individuals seeking a wholesome and flavorful dietary option.

Regardless of the growing interest in alternative protein sources, there is a notable gap in the existing literature regarding rabbit meat consumption in Malaysia specifically. Although research on the benefits and consumption trends of meat alternative exists, studies explicitly focusing on rabbit meat acceptance and consumer perceptions are limited. This knowledge gap highlights the need for further investigation to understand Malaysians' readiness and willingness to incorporate rabbit meat into their diets. Addressing this gap in the literature is essential for several reasons. Lastly, it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the acceptance or resistance towards rabbit meat consumption in the Malaysian context. Secondly, it provides valuable insights for policymakers and industry stakeholders seeking to diversify protein sources and enhance food security. Lastly, it contributes to the broader discourse on sustainable food systems and the promotion of alternative protein sources, in line with global efforts to address environmental concerns and foster sustainable dietary practices.

## **3.0 Research Methodology**

This research employs a quantitative study approach to identify the acceptance of rabbit meat among the Malaysian community. The quantitative methodology allows for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data, providing a clear understanding of the perception and acceptance levels of Malaysians toward rabbit meat consumption. The sample size of respondents was determined based on the population size of adult Malaysians and the desired confidence level. According to the Raosoft Calculator Software, Malaysia has an estimated adult population of 22.73 million. In order to ensure a representative sample, a confidence level of 95% was chosen, and a minimum of 385 is required for the sampling in this study. Considering nonresponse bias, or other factors that will affect the achievement of the 385 targeted samples, we distributed the questionnaires to 447 respondents, and it was deemed appropriate to achieve a reliable representation of the Malaysian population's acceptance of rabbit meat. As for the data collection method, this study employed snowball sampling under non-probability sampling. Audemard (2020) defined the snowball sampling technique as an interrogating and sampling method related to the social environment of one or several individuals through sociometric relationship tests or questions. Though it is not representative, it enables data collection in a short period of time for a variety of complex information (McCullough, 1998). In this case, the initial 15 Malaysian university students who shared social characteristics were chosen because of the researcher's close contact and resources, as suggested (Woodley & Lockard, 2016). Then, the instrument was directly sent to all

15 students via the Internet and social media, and they were asked to share their inclusion until the number of samples reached the acceptable limit. This sampling technique allows for sufficient samples from each demographic category for better insights into rabbit meat consumption perception since few past references of demographic studies were available. The survey questionnaire included sections covering various aspects of rabbit meat acceptance, such as health benefits, concerns, cultural factors, and awareness. The questionnaire used in this study was drawn from the work of (Petrescu & Petrescu-Mag, 2018), with slight modifications made to facilitate the categorization of respondents' answers into "agree," "moderate," or "disagree." Six questions were asked regarding the perception of individual acceptance of eating rabbit meat, including the perception of individual acceptance of eating rabbit meat; it is a food that can improve health that other types of meat/chicken/duck do not have; the benefits of rabbit meat are almost the same as other meat; rabbit meat is also one of the food sources for humans and its existence can also be eaten; some of the reasons why rabbits should not be eaten include empathy with living creatures who have lost their freedom; rabbits are cute animals, friends, pets, so they can't be eaten and; rabbit meat is easier to cook.

The survey instrument was administered between June 2021 to December 2021, employing email and social media platforms, such as Facebook, as distribution channels. To ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data, several measures were implemented. Firstly, respondents were guaranteed anonymity to encourage honest and unbiased responses. Secondly, clear and concise instructions were provided to minimize confusion or misinterpretation. Lastly, the order of the questions was randomized to avoid any response bias. These methodological considerations aimed to enhance the quality and accuracy of the data obtained. Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and data protection, were also ensured throughout the data collection process. Data protection measures were implemented to secure the privacy and anonymity of the participants, including secure storage and limited access to the collected information. Once the data collection phase was completed, the collected responses were compiled and analyzed using SPSS for descriptive analysis. Detailed results are presented in the next section.

#### 4.0 Research Findings

##### *Respondents profile:*

A total of 500 respondents participated in this study, representing a diverse sample. However, after undergoing a data screening process, 53 samples were excluded due to high missing values. Consequently, the final dataset consisted of 443 valid samples for analysis. Holding the demographic profile of the respondents, the majority fell within the age range of 21 to 30 years, accounting for 48.4% of the sample. The next largest age group was 41 to 50 years, comprising 21.4% of the respondents, followed by 31 to 40 years with 20.8%. Only 9.5% of the participants were aged 51 years and above. Meanwhile, gender distribution showed that 35.2% of the respondents were male, while the majority, accounting for 64.8%, were female. In terms of monthly income, 30% of the respondents earned less than RM2500 per month, 24.4% earned RM2501 to RM4500, 13.3% had an income of RM4501 to RM6500, and the remaining 32.2% earned RM6501 and above per month. Regarding employment status, the largest group, representing 52% of the respondents, were fully employed. Students accounted for 28%, followed by self-employed individuals at 13% and full-time housewives at 7%. Educational attainment showed that 45% of the respondents held a first degree, while 29% had completed the Malaysian Higher School Certificate (STPM) or a diploma. Additionally, 14% had achieved the Malaysian School Certificate (SPM) or below. In addition, the study's sample mainly consisted of Malays (98%), with Chinese and Indians each representing 1% of the respondents. Regarding religious affiliation, 98% identified as Muslims, while 1% identified as Buddhist and Hindu, respectively. Household size varied, with 44% of the respondents belonging to households with 3-5 members, 28% with 1-2 members, and 24% with 6-8 members. In terms of location, geographically, respondents were distributed across different states in Malaysia. The highest representation was from Selangor (27.3%), followed by Pahang (15.3%), Melaka (13.8%), Negeri Sembilan (10.8%), Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur (7.7%), and Putrajaya (7.75%). The remaining states had smaller proportions: Johor (10.2%), Perak (3.2%), Kedah (3.4%), Terengganu (2%), Kelantan (2%), Perlis (0.7%), Pulau Pinang (0.7%), Sabah (0.2%), and Sarawak (0.5%).

Table 1: Respondent's demographic profile

Demographic Variable	Percentage of Respondents
Age	21 to 30 years
	48.4%
	41 to 50 years
	21.4%
Gender	31 to 40 years
	20.8%
	51 years and above
	9.5%
Monthly income	Male
	35.2%
	Female
	64.8%
Employment Status	Less than RM2500/month
	30%
	RM2501 to RM4500/month
	24.4%
Educational Attainment	RM4501 to RM6500/month
	13.3%
	RM6501 and above/month
	32.2%
	Fully Employed
	52%
	Students
	28%
	Self-employed
	13%
	Full-time Housewives
	7%
	First Degree
	45%
	STPM/Diploma
	29%
	SPM or below
	14%

Ethnicity	Malays	97%
	Chinese	1%
	Indians	1%
Religious Affiliation	Muslims	98%
	Buddhists	1%
	Hindus	1%

A summary of the respondent's profile is presented in Table 1, and summary of the findings is presented in Table 2. The summary finding providing a concise overview of the key results obtained from the study. The table highlights the main findings and provides a snapshot of the data collected. Further details and explanations regarding these findings are elaborated below. The analysis of the collected data revealed significant insights into various aspects related to the research objectives.

## 5.0 Findings

As presented in Table 2, the survey showed that 45.23% of respondents agreed that rabbit meat is a food that can improve health in ways that other types of meat, such as chicken or duck, do not possess. This suggests a positive perception of rabbit meat's potential health benefits. However, 48.13% of respondents remained neutral, indicating a need for further education and awareness about the specific advantages of rabbit meat in comparison to other meats. Only 6.64% of respondents disagreed, implying a minority who may have reservations or lack knowledge regarding rabbit meat's health benefits.

Table 2: Perceptions of rabbit meat

Perception of individual acceptance of eating rabbit meat	Agree	Moderate	Disagree
It is a food that can improve health that other types of meat/chicken/duck do not have.	45.23%	48.13%	6.64%
The benefits of rabbit meat are almost the same as other meat.	51.04%	38.17%	10.79%
Rabbit meat is also one of the food sources for humans and its existence can also be eaten.	79.25%	18.26%	2.49%
Some of the reasons why rabbits should not be eaten include empathy with living creatures who have lost their freedom	21.58%	34.85%	43.57%
Rabbits are cute animals, friends, pets, so they can't be eaten.	23.65%	29.46%	46.89%
Rabbit meat is easier to cook	51.45%	44.40%	4.15%

(Source: Presented for the current study)

In considering the benefits of rabbit meat in comparison to other meats, 51.04% of respondents agreed that rabbit meat offers similar advantages. This suggests that Malaysians consider rabbit meat a viable alternative protein source. However, it is worth noting that 10.79% of respondents disagreed, indicating a subset of individuals who may hold different beliefs or have reservations about the benefits of rabbit meat. Approximately 38.17% remained neutral, suggesting a need for further exploration and clarification of the specific advantages that differentiate rabbit meat from other meat types.

Meanwhile, in exploring the perceptions of whether rabbit meat can be considered as one of the food sources for humans and is suitable for consumption, the results reveal that a significant majority, 79.25% of respondents, agreed with the statement. This suggests a widespread acceptance of rabbit meat as a viable food option among Malaysians. However, a small portion of 2.49% expressed disagreement, representing a minority with contrasting views. Besides, around 18.26% of respondents remained neutral, indicating the need for further exploration or possible indecision.

When considering ethical concerns related to empathy for rabbits and their freedom, the survey findings revealed diverse perspectives. Approximately 43.57% of respondents disagreed with the notion that rabbits should not be consumed due to empathy for creatures deprived of their freedom. This indicates that many respondents do not view ethical concerns as a major hindrance to consuming rabbit meat. Conversely, approximately 34.85% remained neutral, suggesting the necessity for a deeper examination of various ethical viewpoints. Furthermore, 21.58% of respondents agreed, highlighting a segment of the population that genuinely values the freedom of living creatures.

As for the belief that rabbits should not be eaten due to their association with being cute animals, friends, and pets, the survey revealed diverse opinions. Around 46.89% of respondents disagreed, indicating that many Malaysians do not solely perceive rabbits as pets, thus differentiating their role as companions from their potential as a food source. In contrast, approximately 29.46% of respondents remained neutral, signifying the need for further investigation into people's emotional and cultural attachment towards rabbits as pets. Furthermore, approximately 23.65% of respondents agreed that rabbits should not be consumed due to their association with cuteness, friendship, and being pets. Regarding the practical aspects of rabbit meat consumption, respondents generally expressed agreement with the advantages presented. A majority of approximately 51.45% agreed that rabbit meat is easier to cook, highlighting the convenience it offers in culinary preparations.

## 6.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was conducted mainly to assess readiness of Malaysians to accept rabbit meat as an alternative protein source. The results from this exploratory study offer valuable insights into how Malaysians perceive and embrace the view of including rabbit meat in their dietary choices. Due to limited past studies in this scope, this study primarily relies on descriptive analysis, which provides only

foundation in understanding Malaysian consumers understanding towards accepting rabbit meat as a protein alternative food source. The results display a range of responses, indicating diverse viewpoints and attitudes towards various aspects of rabbit meat acceptance. At the same time, there is generally a positive outlook on the health benefits and advantages associated with rabbit meat, but certain socio-cultural factors, such as empathy towards animals and the association of rabbits with pets, present challenges to its widespread adoption. It is evident that most respondents recognize and appreciate the potential health benefits and advantages rabbit meat offers. They acknowledge its low-fat content, high protein value, and overall nutritional value, signifying an increasing awareness and acceptance of rabbit meat as a viable protein source among Malaysians. Nonetheless, there is still a need for further educational initiatives and awareness campaigns to bridge the knowledge gap among individuals who remain uncertain or express reservations. By emphasizing rabbit meat's specific advantages and dispelling misconceptions, we can empower individuals to make informed choices and foster a greater acceptance of this alternative protein source.

Ethical considerations pertaining to empathy for animals and the perception of rabbits as beloved pets have emerged as significant factors that influence resistance towards rabbit meat consumption. It is vital to address these concerns by promoting a better understanding of the difference between rabbits as a pet and their potential as a sustainable food source. Further research is warranted to investigate deeper into the ethical perspectives and values of individuals who express reservations or neutrality. This knowledge can inform the development of strategies that respect and address their concerns while encouraging an open dialogue about alternative protein sources. Besides, in breaking the taboo on emotional, sympathy and cultural attachment to rabbits as a pet, heavy promotion should be conducted such as collaborating with celebrity chefs, food influencers, and culinary experts can help showcase innovative and appetizing rabbit meat recipes, making them more accessible and appealing to a broader audience. By implementing the abovementioned recommendations, policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders can work together to foster a more informed and receptive environment for rabbit meat consumption in Malaysia. This exploration of acceptance and perception will contribute to diversifying protein sources, reducing dependence on traditional meat types, and addressing the challenges faced by the poultry industry. In conclusion, Malaysians are aware but not fully ready to accept rabbit meat as an alternative protein source. While there is acceptance and awareness of rabbit meat's benefits among Malaysians, addressing ethical concerns, navigating cultural and emotional contexts, and promoting its culinary versatility are key strategies to enhance its acceptance and readiness as a viable alternative protein source in Malaysia. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can contribute to developing a sustainable food system and ensure the availability of food security in the face of rising meat prices and environmental challenges. The current study only considers on consumers attitudes and preferences that limits the depth of consumer's perception and consumption. Thus, further future studies should consider a quantitative adopting wider sample size to have a better results and insight regarding the readiness of rabbit meat among Malaysians. With this limitation, we open for the future researcher to dwell and investigate further for the better insight in our food industry.

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## Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study explores the perception and acceptance of rabbit meat as a substitute for other meat and a protein source among Malaysians. It reveals that while awareness of its nutritional value exists, socio-cultural factors challenge widespread consumption. Interventions and education campaigns are recommended to promote its acceptance as an alternative protein source in Malaysia.

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