

## **Factors Influencing University Students' Intention to Purchase International Food Brands in Sabah**

**Kong Weng Yan<sup>1</sup>, Joan Cheok Ling Lee<sup>1</sup>, Fatin Nur Irdina<sup>1</sup>, Liu Yi Jiun<sup>1</sup>, Tan Xin Yen<sup>1</sup>,  
Darshinie Saravanan<sup>1</sup>, Nursyahadah Yeng Yeng Marmuki<sup>1</sup>, Nizhamuddin AB<sup>2\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business, Economics and Accountancy, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Borneo Tarakan, Indonesia

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\*Corresponding author: [nizhamuddinab@borneo.ac.id](mailto:nizhamuddinab@borneo.ac.id)

### **Abstract**

This study examines the factors influencing university students' intention to purchase international food brands in Sabah using the Theory of Planned Behavior. The study focuses on attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control as predictors of purchase intention. A quantitative cross-sectional design was applied, and data were collected through an online questionnaire from 87 university students in Sabah. The data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling through SmartPLS 3.0. The findings show that attitude has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention, followed by subjective norms. Perceived behavioral control does not show a significant effect. These results suggest that emotional evaluation, brand perception, peer influence, and social approval are more important than access or affordability in shaping students' intention to buy international food brands. The study contributes to consumer behavior research by extending the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to young consumers in East Malaysia. It also offers practical guidance for international food brands that seek to build stronger engagement with university students through lifestyle-based positioning, peer-driven campaigns, and student-focused digital marketing.

**Keywords:** international food brands, purchase intention, Theory of Planned Behavior, attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, university students in Sabah

## **1. Introduction**

International food brands have become more visible in Malaysia as globalisation, digital media, urban lifestyles, and changing food preferences reshape consumer choice (Solomon, 2018; Yang et al., 2025). Products such as international fast food, packaged food, confectionery, cereals, and imported snacks are now part of the everyday consumption environment for many young consumers. University students form an important segment because they are exposed to global trends, interact actively on digital platforms, and often adopt new products earlier than older consumers (Yang et al., 2025).

Despite the growing presence of international food brands, the factors that shape purchase intention among students in East Malaysia remain underexplored. Most consumer studies focus on broader consumer groups or metropolitan markets. This creates a research gap because university students in Sabah operate within a distinct social, cultural, and economic setting. Their purchase decisions may be shaped by multicultural exposure, peer culture, digital influence, product availability, price sensitivity, and perceptions of modern lifestyles.

This study addresses that gap by examining the intention of university students in Sabah to purchase international food brands. The study adopts the Theory of Planned Behavior, which explains behavioral intention through attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This framework is suitable because food purchase decisions involve personal evaluation, social approval, and perceived ease or difficulty of buying the product (Ajzen, 1991). The study answers three research questions: how attitude affects purchase intention, how subjective norms influence purchase intention, and how perceived behavioral control shapes purchase intention.

The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence from a student market in Sabah. It also provides practical insights for international food companies, local retailers, and policymakers who want to understand how young consumers respond to global food brands in a regional Malaysian context.

## **2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development**

### **2.1 Theory of Planned Behavior**

The Theory of Planned Behavior explains that behavioral intention is formed by three main factors: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Attitude refers to a person's positive or negative evaluation of performing a behavior. Subjective norms refer to perceived social pressure from important others. Perceived behavioral control refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior (Ajzen, 2002). In consumer behavior research, the theory has been used to explain food purchase decisions, including fast food, halal food, functional food, and sustainable food choices (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

## **2.2 Purchase Intention Toward International Food Brands**

Purchase intention refers to a consumer's willingness or plan to buy a product (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of international food brands, purchase intention may arise from brand image, perceived quality, taste, safety, convenience, lifestyle fit, social influence, and previous consumption experience (Solomon, 2018; Zhao et al., 2024). Among university students, purchase intention can also be shaped by peer recommendations, digital content, affordability, and accessibility (Yang et al., 2025).

## **2.3 Attitude and Purchase Intention**

Attitude reflects students' evaluation of international food brands (Ajzen, 1991). A positive attitude may emerge when students associate international food brands with quality, safety, taste variety, attractive packaging, convenience, and a modern lifestyle (Zhao et al., 2024). When students believe that international food brands offer desirable outcomes, they are more likely to intend to purchase them (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, the first hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Attitude toward international food brands positively influences university students' intention to purchase international food brands in Sabah.

## **2.4 Subjective Norms and Purchase Intention**

Subjective norms reflect the influence of friends, family, classmates, social media influencers, and online communities (Ajzen, 1991). University students may try international food brands because the products are recommended by peers, displayed on social media, or perceived as socially acceptable (Yang et al., 2025). In a student environment, social approval and peer validation can encourage students to purchase brands that are popular or widely discussed (Solomon, 2018). Therefore, the second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Subjective norms positively influence university students' intention to purchase international food brands in Sabah.

## **2.5 Perceived Behavioral Control and Purchase Intention**

Perceived behavioral control refers to students' confidence that they can purchase international food brands (Ajzen, 2002). This includes having sufficient financial resources, access to physical or online channels, product availability, and familiarity with the purchasing process. Students who perceive fewer barriers are expected to report stronger purchase intention (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, the third hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Perceived behavioral control positively influences university students' intention to purchase international food brands in Sabah.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design and Sample**

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. The target population consisted of university students in Sabah. Convenience sampling was applied because the study required respondents who were accessible, willing to participate, and had exposure to international food brands. A total of 87 valid questionnaires were collected through an online survey. Respondents were recruited from Universiti Malaysia Sabah, which served as the sampling frame for this study.

#### **3.2 Respondent Profile**

Of the 87 respondents, 60 were female and 27 were male. Most respondents were aged 21 to 23 years. Undergraduate students represented 95.4% of the sample, while postgraduate students represented 4.6%. The largest programme group was International Business, followed by Accounting, Entrepreneurship, and Financial Economics.

#### **3.3 Measures and Data Analysis**

The questionnaire measured attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, and purchase intention using five-point Likert scale items. The items were adapted from established studies on the Theory of Planned Behavior and consumer behavior. Data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling with SmartPLS 3.0. The analysis involved assessment of the measurement model and structural model.

### **4. Results**

#### **4.1 Measurement Model**

The measurement model was assessed through indicator loadings, composite reliability, average variance extracted, and discriminant validity. Composite reliability values ranged from 0.813 to 0.875, which indicates acceptable internal consistency. AVE values ranged from 0.522 to 0.701, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.50. Most indicator loadings were above 0.70, while the lowest loading was 0.693, which remained close to the accepted threshold. These results indicate acceptable reliability and convergent validity.

#### **4.2 Structural Model**

The structural model explained 53.9% of the variance in purchase intention. This indicates moderate explanatory power in behavioral research. The bootstrapping results showed that attitude had a positive and significant influence on purchase intention. Subjective norms also had a positive and significant influence. Perceived behavioral control did not significantly influence purchase intention.

Table 1. Hypothesis testing

| Hypothesis | Relationship                                      | Std Beta | Std Error | t-value | p-value | Decision      |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------|-----------|---------|---------|---------------|
| H1         | Attitude > Purchase intention                     | 0.422    | 0.119     | 3.544** | 0.000   | Supported     |
| H2         | Subjective norms > Purchase intention             | 0.294    | 0.132     | 2.230*  | 0.013   | Supported     |
| H3         | Perceived behavioral control > Purchase intention | 0.132    | 0.091     | 1.454   | 0.073   | Not supported |

## 5. Discussion

The findings show that attitude is the strongest predictor of purchase intention. Students are more likely to intend to purchase international food brands when they perceive these brands positively. Positive attitudes may come from beliefs about higher quality, attractive taste, safety, global image, convenience, and lifestyle compatibility. This result supports the Theory of Planned Behavior and indicates that personal evaluation plays a central role in students' food brand decisions.

Subjective norms also significantly influence purchase intention. This means that students' choices are shaped by friends, family, peer groups, and social media exposure. In the context of university students in Sabah, where students interact closely in academic and social settings, brand choices can become part of group identity. The result suggests that student consumers may respond strongly to peer recommendations, influencer content, online reviews, and trend-based marketing.

Perceived behavioral control does not significantly influence purchase intention. One possible explanation is that access, affordability, and purchasing confidence are not the main barriers for these respondents. Students may still intend to purchase international food brands even when they face price or access constraints because their intention is driven more strongly by attitude and social influence. This result suggests that emotional and social drivers outweigh control-related factors in this sample.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the factors influencing university students' intention to purchase international food brands in Sabah using the Theory of Planned Behavior. Based on data from 87 respondents, the findings show that attitude and subjective norms significantly influence purchase intention, while perceived behavioral control does not. The model explains 53.9% of the variance in purchase intention. The results indicate that students' intention to buy international food brands is shaped mainly by positive brand evaluation and social influence. For brands targeting young consumers in East Malaysia, emotional appeal, lifestyle relevance, peer validation, and digital visibility are important strategic priorities.

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