

## Research Article

# FACTORS AFFECTING PERCEIVED PRODUCT QUALITY TOWARD CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTION OF READY-TO-EAT FOODS IN CONVENIENCE STORES - A CASE STUDY OF VIETNAM'S GEN Z

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## ABSTRACT

Despite of Vietnam's rapidly evolving retail environment and the growth of convenience stores, limited research in Vietnam has dived into this field. This study explores what influences Vietnam's Gen Z in perceiving product quality and intending to buy ready-to-eat (RTE) foods in convenience stores. Using the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, it examines psychological factors (attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control) and product traits (price, convenience, packaging, taste) impacting perceived product quality (PPQ) and its effect on purchase intention (PI). A structured questionnaire was distributed online via social media, yielding 304 valid responses. The data were analyzed using SPSS v.30 and PLS-SEM via SmartPLS 4.0. Results show that attitude, taste, perceived control, and price positively affect PPQ, while subjective norms and convenience have negative impacts. Packaging showed no significant influence. Importantly, PPQ strongly drives purchase intention. The findings suggest Gen Z prioritizes taste, autonomy, and authenticity over social influence or convenience. It also provides practical insights for convenience stores retailers and RTE food manufacturers aiming to align product strategies with Gen Z's expectations, emphasizing authenticity, sensory quality, and value over superficial convenience or social influence.

**Keywords:** perceived product quality, purchase intention, Generation Z, RTE foods, convenience stores, Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Over the past decade, Vietnam's retail sector has been rapidly evolving, influenced by urbanization, rising disposable incomes, and shifting consumer preferences. A prominent feature of this transformation is the proliferation of convenience stores, which reached approximately 6,720 outlets as of March 2023, with Ho Chi Minh City leading in store density (Statista, 2024). These stores offer round-the-clock access to a variety of products and have become essential to daily life, especially for urban dwellers seeking speed, accessibility, and modern retail experiences (Fiingroup, 2024; Thao, 2020).

Simultaneously, the demand for ready-to-eat (RTE) food products has surged, reflecting Vietnam's fast-paced lifestyle and the rise of dual-income households. Convenience stores have capitalized on this trend by expanding their RTE offerings, implementing digital payment systems, and adopting innovations such as AI-driven inventory management and self-checkout systems (Euromonitor International, 2023; MPRA, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated these developments, reinforcing consumer preferences for hygienic, pre-packaged meals and seamless shopping experiences (Nguyet, 2021).

Among the most influential consumer segments driving these changes is Generation Z (born 1997–2012). Their food choices are influenced by convenience, price sensitivity, social media, and growing health awareness. Despite modest incomes, Gen Z in Vietnam allocates a notable portion of their spending to eating out

and consuming RTE foods, often treating convenience stores as both social venues and meal providers (Vietnam Insider, 2018; CukCuk, 2023). These behaviors underscore the increasing importance of perceived product quality in shaping their purchase intentions within the RTE food category.

### Research Problem

While the global rise of convenience stores and RTE foods is well-documented, research focusing specifically on Vietnamese Generation Z in this context is scarce. Prior studies have examined RTE consumption in countries like India, Korea, the UAE, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Chaurasiya *et al.*, 2020; Bae *et al.*, 2010; Mostafa *et al.*, 2024; Ahmat *et al.*, 2024; Szymczak *et al.*, 2023), but few address generational differences or delve into Gen Z's unique values and perceptions.

International research has explored RTE foods in convenience store settings (Moon *et al.*, 2024; NielsenIQ, 2019), yet Vietnamese studies largely emphasize general consumer motivations (Ken Research, 2025; Quynh & Dinh Quy, 2021) and overlook psychological and perceptual aspects, particularly among Gen Z consumers. This lack of focus on product quality perceptions and their impact on purchase intentions reveals a gap in the literature.

This study addresses that gap by investigating the factors, such as taste, price, convenience, and packaging, that influence perceived product quality and, in turn, purchase intentions among Vietnam's Gen Z in convenience stores. Given that this generation makes up 26% of the national workforce (Nguyen Thi Van Anh *et al.*, 2024) and drives emerging retail trends, understanding their behavior is crucial for brands, retailers, and policymakers aiming to engage this key demographic.

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## Objectives of the study

This study aims to examine the influence of both consumer-related factors, including attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, and product attributes such as price, taste, packaging, and convenience on Generation Z's perceived quality of RTE food products in Vietnam's convenience stores. It further seeks to assess how this perceived product quality shapes their purchase intention. Ultimately, the study intends to generate strategic insights and practical suggestions for retailers and food manufacturers to enhance product quality, marketing, and engagement strategies tailored to the preferences of Vietnam's Gen Z consumers in the evolving convenience retail landscape.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Ready-to-eat foods

Ready-to-Eat (RTE) foods are pre-cooked or semi-processed foods requiring little to no cooking or preparation, catering to modern consumers' demand for convenience and speed (Rosli *et al.*, 2024; Chaurasiya *et al.*, 2020). These include chilled, frozen, or shelf-stable products commonly sold in convenience stores, supermarkets, or online (Bae *et al.*, 2010). RTE options range from packaged snacks and salads to frozen meals and takeaway dishes (Negi & Sharma, 2024). Retailers like 7-Eleven and Family Mart enhance accessibility by offering in-store microwaves and hot water stations. This aligns with fast-paced lifestyles where limited time and cooking skills push consumers toward convenient food solutions (Meenambekai & Selvarajan, 2012).

### Perceived Product Quality

Perceived product quality is the overall judgment of customers towards a product's quality or superiority, typically evaluated in comparison to alternatives and aligned with its intended purpose (Steenkamp, 1990). This perception forms through a combination of intrinsic factors, like taste and freshness, and extrinsic factors like branding, packaging, and the retail environment (Solin & Curry, 2022; Steenkamp, 1990). Importantly, perceived quality is subjective, influenced by personal experiences, expectations, and the specific context in which the product is encountered. Research shows that sensory factors such as taste and quality heavily influence consumer perception, especially when they have limited direct experience with the product (Mueller & Szolnoki, 2010; Dodds *et al.*, 1991). Thus, perceived quality serves as a key factor guiding consumer choice and intention.

### Purchase Intention

Purchase intention (PI) is consumers' conscious willingness or likelihood to purchase a particular product or service in the future (Pang, Tan, & Lau, 2021). In the food sector, and particularly with RTE products, PI reflects not only rational evaluations but also emotional, psychological, and ethical considerations (Tan *et al.*, 2022; Ahmat *et al.*, 2024; Moon *et al.*, 2024). It is shaped by both internal factors, like attitudes, perceived behavioral control, and lifestyle, and external influences such as promotions and post-pandemic consumer confidence (Pang, Tan, & Lau, 2021; Jiang *et al.*, 2023). Overall, PI represents a complex, intention-driven decision-making process influenced by a combination of personal beliefs, contextual stimuli, and evolving consumer expectations in the modern food landscape.

## PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

### H1: Attitude (A) positively influences Perceived Product Quality (PPQ).

Attitude is a central construct in consumer behavior, commonly described as individuals' favorable or negative judgment of the performance of a specific behavior (Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1990; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Ajzen, 1991). It reflects learned predispositions shaped by personal traits, sociocultural background, and psychological tendencies (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Positive attitudes toward a product can enhance perceived quality, even when actual performance is average, driven by factors like brand trust, past experiences, and confirmation bias (Zeithaml, 1988).

### H2: Subjective Norm (SN) positively influences Perceived Product Quality (PPQ).

A subjective norm is described as a sense of social obligation to get involved in a behavior based on normative views or personal perceptions (Prakash *et al.*, 2023). It includes injunctive norms (perceived social expectations from others) and descriptive norms (perceptions of how others behave) (Cialdini *et al.*, 1991). In food choices, norms are influenced by peers, family, and societal trends regarding health, convenience, and sustainability (Shepherd & Raats, 2010). Individuals often align their perceived product quality with the opinions of their reference groups, especially in unfamiliar or high-involvement categories (Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Peer recommendations, influencer endorsements, and positive social cues have been shown to enhance perceived quality (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

### H3: Perception of Behavior Control (PBC) positively influences Perceived Product Quality (PPQ).

PBC refers to an individuals' assessment of the simplicity or complexity of carrying out an action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Control belief is considered individuals' belief in the presence of a particular factor that can help or impede the performance of a certain behavior (e.g. time, money and opportunity) (Ajzen, 1991). When customers believe they have sufficient time, money, knowledge, or access, their sense of control increases, boosting their confidence in decision-making (Kim & Chung, 2011). In the context of RTE foods, ease of access, availability, and transparent product information can strengthen perceived quality by reducing uncertainty (Verplanken & Wood, 2006; Zeithaml, 1988). Conversely, limited access, financial constraints, or lack of information can lower PBC and undermine perceived quality (Grewal *et al.*, 2003).

### H4: Price (P) positively influences Perceived Product Quality (PPQ).

Price significantly influences consumer decisions, particularly for RTE foods in convenience stores, as it reflects both cost and perceived value (Zeithaml, 1988; Dodds, 1991). Consumers often rely on the price-quality heuristic, using price as an extrinsic cue to judge quality when intrinsic attributes (e.g., freshness or ingredients) are not immediately accessible (Rao & Monroe, 1989; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 1993). While high-income consumers may associate higher prices with superior quality, price-sensitive individuals tend to seek discounts and promotions (Rihn *et al.*, 2018; Mamuaya, 2024). First-time buyers are especially influenced by price as an indicator of quality (Brucks *et al.*, 2000).

### H5: Convenience (C) positively influences Perceived Product Quality (PPQ).

Convenience in the context of RTE foods refers to reduced time, effort, and complexity in acquisition, preparation, and consumption (Luning, 2001; Brunso *et al.*, 2004). It is a multidimensional construct encompassing physical ease, time savings, and psychological comfort. As modern lifestyles become increasingly fast-paced, consumers, particularly Gen Z and millennials, prioritize convenience in meal solutions (Scholderer & Grunert, 2005; Brunner *et al.*, 2010). RTE foods that are quick to access, portable, and require not much preparation are often perceived as higher quality, especially when supported by smart packaging and health-oriented labels (Rundh, 2013; Hsu *et al.*, 2019).

### H6: Packaging (Pa) positively influences Perceived Product Quality (PPQ).

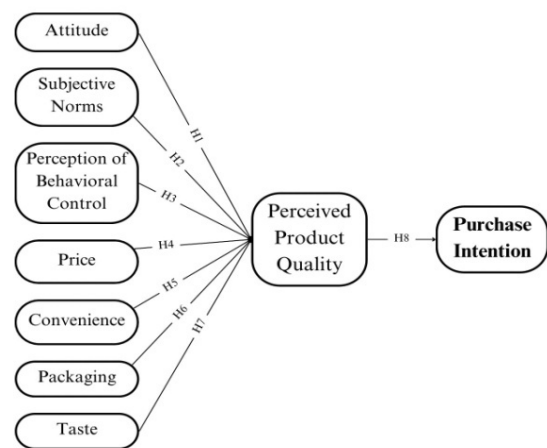
Visually appealing elements, such as color, typography, and design, act as powerful branding tools that attract attention and generate positive impressions (Srivastava *et al.*, 2022; Suci *et al.*, 2021). Packaging that supports ease of use, portability, and on-the-go consumption enhances satisfaction and purchase intent, particularly in convenience store contexts (Wyrwa & Barska, 2017). Well-designed packaging creates a halo effect, where attractive external design leads consumers to assume higher internal product quality (Underwood & Klein, 2002; Wansink, 2004). In contrast, damaged or cluttered packaging can diminish perceived value (Silayoi & Speece, 2007). Additionally, sustainable materials, recyclable, enhance perceived quality, especially among Gen Z consumers who value environmental responsibility (White *et al.*, 2019).

### H7: Taste (T) positively influences Perceived Product Quality (PPQ).

Taste is the most influential intrinsic attribute shaping perceived product quality (Schroder & Earle, 1998). Unlike external cues like price or packaging, taste is a direct sensory experience evaluated after purchase or through sampling (Grunert, 2005; Hyun *et al.*, 2010). Positive taste experiences boost repeat purchases and recommendations, while free samples help reduce uncertainty before launch (Hyun *et al.*, 2010). When taste meets or exceeds expectations, consumers perceive higher quality and build brand trust (Köster, 2009). Taste confirms or disconfirms initial impressions from packaging and branding (Jaeger, 2006). For convenience foods, taste strongly influences initial and repeat buying and often outweighs price or convenience in long-term success (Schifferstein, 2010). Inconsistent taste harms perceived quality and loyalty (Guinard *et al.*, 1998).

### H8: Perceived Product Quality (PPQ) positively influences Purchase Intention (PI).

Higher perceived product quality (PPQ) strongly boosts consumers' purchase intention (PI) (Basha *et al.*, 2019). Customers are willing to pay more when they expect better flavor, nutrition, and health benefits. Quality remains a key factor in decision-making, with greater PPQ leading to stronger purchase likelihood (Dodds & Monroe, 1985; Gan & Wang, 2017; Chen, 2012). For ready-to-eat foods, organic ingredients and clear nutritional labels increase buying interest, while artificial additives and unclear info reduce it (Magnier & Schoormans, 2017; Hsu *et al.*, 2019). Overall, perceived quality directly and positively affects purchase intention (Basha *et al.*, 2019).



Proposed Research Model

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study used a quantitative research design, through questionnaire surveys. Quantitative methods involve analyzing phenomena through numerical data and statistical techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), allowing for objective measurement, hypothesis testing, etc (Hair *et al.*, 2020). Given the study's aim, to identify key factors influencing Vietnam Gen Z's purchase intention toward RTE foods in convenience stores, this approach enables systematic analysis of consumer behavior and validates relationships among constructs in the proposed model.

### Research method and Sample size

Data collected by sending structured questionnaires in Google Forms through social media platforms, primarily Facebook, Instagram, and Zalo. A questionnaire is a standardized tool designed to gather data aligned with research objectives (Brace, 2018). All items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), commonly used to assess opinions and perceptions (Joshi *et al.*, 2015). Snowball sampling was employed, allowing initial respondents to refer to others, thus broadening the participant pool (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017).

By concentrating on all Gen Z consumers (born 1997-2012), including students, office workers and others, this study aims to obtain relevant insights of the group towards perceived product quality and purchase intentions of RTE foods in convenience stores. Based on DeCoster (2004), the minimum sample size used in statistical analysis should be:  $N \geq 100$ ,  $N \geq 5 \times K$ , where K is the number of variables (38), yielding a minimum of 190. And following Comrey and Lee's (1992) scale, a sample size of 300 is considered "good". So, 300 was targeted to ensure data adequacy and account for incomplete responses.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The research sent approximately 330 questionnaires online, to the specified target audience. Out of them, 304 forms were submitted to the researcher, with all 304 classified as usable and working. The collected responses via Google Forms which was linked to Google Sheets, then exported to Excel Sheet for initial coding and data cleaning. The cleaned dataset was subsequently imported into SPSS v.30 and SmartPLS 4.0 for analysis.

**Respondents Demographics****Age Frequency**

|       |              | Frequency  | Percent       | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|--------------|------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | 13 - 17      | 17         | 5.60          | 5.60          | 5.60               |
|       | 18 - 22      | 259        | 85.20         | 85.20         | 90.80              |
|       | 23 - 28      | 28         | 9.20          | 9.20          | 100.00             |
|       | <b>Total</b> | <b>304</b> | <b>100.00</b> | <b>100.00</b> |                    |

**Buying Experience Frequency**

|       |                             | Frequency  | Percent       | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Know but have not purchased | 1          | 0.33          | 0.33          | 0.33               |
|       | Have purchased              | 303        | 99.67         | 99.67         | 100.00             |
|       | <b>Total</b>                | <b>304</b> | <b>100.00</b> | <b>100.00</b> |                    |

**Gender Frequency**

|       |              | Frequency  | Percent       | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|--------------|------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Others       | 3          | 0.99          | 0.99          | 0.99               |
|       | Male         | 78         | 25.66         | 25.66         | 26.65              |
|       | Female       | 223        | 73.35         | 73.35         | 100.00             |
|       | <b>Total</b> | <b>304</b> | <b>100.00</b> | <b>100.00</b> |                    |

**Education Level Frequency**

|       |                              | Frequency  | Percent       | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|------------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Secondary school & Below     | 0          | 0             | 0             | 0                  |
|       | University/College           | 275        | 90.46         | 90.46         | 90.46              |
|       | Graduated students & Above   | 12         | 3.95          | 3.95          | 94.41              |
|       | High school/Technical school | 17         | 5.59          | 5.59          | 100.00             |
|       | <b>Total</b>                 | <b>304</b> | <b>100.00</b> | <b>100.00</b> |                    |

**Monthly Income Frequency**

|       |                            | Frequency  | Percent       | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------------------------|------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | No Income                  | 66         | 21.71         | 21.71         | 21.71              |
|       | <1.000.000 VND             | 90         | 29.61         | 29.61         | 51.32              |
|       | 1.000.000 - 5.000.000 VND  | 115        | 37.83         | 37.83         | 89.15              |
|       | 5.000.000 - 10.000.000 VND | 18         | 5.92          | 5.92          | 95.07              |
|       | >10.000.000 VND            | 15         | 4.93          | 4.93          | 100.00             |
|       | <b>Total</b>               | <b>304</b> | <b>100.00</b> | <b>100.00</b> |                    |

Respondents were categorized into 3 age groups, the majority (85.2%) were aged 18-22, totaling 259 individuals. The 23-28 age group included 28 respondents (9.2%), while the 13-17 age group comprised 17 respondents (5.6%). And out of the 304 participants, 303 (99.67%) reported having purchased RTE foods, while only 1

respondent (0.33%) indicated awareness without prior purchase experience. Gender distribution was predominantly female, with 223 females accounting for 73.36%, 78 males accounting for 25.66% and 3 others accounting for 0.99% of the 304 respondents. Moreover, respondents were categorized into 4 educational groups. The majority (90.46%) were University/College students (275 respondents), followed by High school/Technical school students (17 respondents, 5.59%). Graduated students and above comprised 12 respondents (3.95%), while no participants reported as Secondary school and below students. Regarding monthly income, the largest group (37.83%) consisted of 115 individuals earning 1-5 million VND per month. The second-largest group (29.61%) included 90 respondents earning less than 1 million VND. 66 respondents (21.71%) reported having no income. 18 participants (5.92%) earned 5-10 million VND, while the smallest group, 15 respondents (4.93%), had a monthly income exceeding 10 million VND.

**Descriptive Analysis**

|      | N   | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|------|-----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| A1   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.77 | 0.726          |
| A2   | 304 | 2       | 5       | 3.67 | 0.720          |
| A3   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.90 | 0.753          |
| A4   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.71 | 0.881          |
| SN1  | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.58 | 0.897          |
| SN2  | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.18 | 0.676          |
| SN3  | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.92 | 0.865          |
| SN4  | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.30 | 0.722          |
| PBC1 | 304 | 3       | 5       | 4.61 | 0.514          |
| PBC2 | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.24 | 0.844          |
| PBC3 | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.11 | 0.913          |
| PBC4 | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.57 | 0.559          |
| PBC5 | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.55 | 0.617          |
| P1   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.13 | 0.986          |
| P2   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.40 | 0.688          |
| P3   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.44 | 0.662          |
| P4   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.17 | 0.646          |
| C1   | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.54 | 0.684          |
| C2   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.42 | 0.767          |
| C3   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.29 | 0.888          |
| C4   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.28 | 0.827          |
| C5   | 304 | 3       | 5       | 4.45 | 0.663          |
| Pa1  | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.15 | 0.829          |
| Pa2  | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.18 | 0.764          |
| Pa3  | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.04 | 0.837          |
| Pa4  | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.43 | 0.672          |
| T1   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.35 | 0.653          |
| T2   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.34 | 0.618          |
| T3   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.16 | 0.656          |
| T4   | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.24 | 0.539          |
| PPQ1 | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.06 | 0.858          |
| PPQ2 | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.61 | 0.780          |
| PPQ3 | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.79 | 0.843          |
| PPQ4 | 304 | 1       | 5       | 3.80 | 0.841          |
| PI1  | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.61 | 0.547          |
| PI2  | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.19 | 0.853          |
| PI3  | 304 | 1       | 5       | 4.23 | 0.856          |
| PI4  | 304 | 2       | 5       | 4.58 | 0.575          |

Overall, the results suggest that respondents expressed a generally positive perception, with most showing strong levels of agreement. This indicates a favorable attitude and consistent support for the key constructs examined in the study.

## MEASUREMENT MODEL EVALUATION

### Reliability Test

By analyzing how much of each indication's fluctuation can be accounted for by its underlying structure, indicator dependability is evaluated. Hair et al. (2021) state that indicator loadings should be greater than 0.708, indicating that the construct satisfies the reliability requirement by explaining over 50% of the indicator's variance.

#### Outer loadings of measurement items

| Variable                         | Code | Outer Loadings |
|----------------------------------|------|----------------|
| Attitude                         | A1   | 0.872          |
|                                  | A2   | 0.842          |
|                                  | A3   | 0.820          |
|                                  | A4   | 0.849          |
| Subjective Norms                 | SN1  | 0.817          |
|                                  | SN2  | 0.803          |
|                                  | SN3  | 0.812          |
|                                  | SN4  | 0.832          |
| Perception of Behavioral Control | PBC1 | 0.757          |
|                                  | PBC2 | 0.921          |
|                                  | PBC3 | 0.889          |
|                                  | PBC4 | 0.785          |
|                                  | PBC5 | 0.856          |
| Price                            | P1   | 0.863          |
|                                  | P2   | 0.861          |
|                                  | P3   | 0.816          |
|                                  | P4   | 0.552          |
| Convenience                      | C1   | 0.776          |
|                                  | C2   | 0.919          |
|                                  | C3   | 0.877          |
|                                  | C4   | 0.921          |
|                                  | C5   | 0.918          |
| Packaging                        | Pa1  | 0.845          |
|                                  | Pa2  | 0.837          |
|                                  | Pa3  | 0.879          |
|                                  | Pa4  | 0.867          |
| Taste                            | T1   | 0.936          |
|                                  | T2   | 0.949          |
|                                  | T3   | 0.903          |
|                                  | T4   | 0.752          |
| Perceived Product Quality        | PPQ1 | 0.874          |
|                                  | PPQ2 | 0.904          |
|                                  | PPQ3 | 0.956          |
|                                  | PPQ4 | 0.949          |
| Purchase Intention               | PI1  | 0.810          |
|                                  | PI2  | 0.889          |
|                                  | PI3  | 0.919          |
|                                  | PI4  | 0.818          |

The Table above reveals that the majority of items have outer loadings larger than 0.752, showing that all indicators have good dependability with the exception of P4 (0.552). So, item P4 was eliminated from the model.

Internal consistency reliability phase used to analyze how closely linked indications are within the same construct using composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha. Composite reliability ratings between 0.70 and 0.90 are regarded good, while values over 0.95 may indicate redundancy. Cronbach's alpha should also exceed 0.70 to indicate satisfactory dependability (Hair et al., 2021).

### Internal consistency assessment

| Construct                        | Items | Cronbach's | Composite Reliability (rho_c) |
|----------------------------------|-------|------------|-------------------------------|
| Attitude                         | A     | 0.868      | 0.910                         |
| Subjective Norms                 | SN    | 0.835      | 0.888                         |
| Perception of Behavioral Control | PBC   | 0.906      | 0.925                         |
| Price                            | P     | 0.871      | 0.903                         |
| Convenience                      | C     | 0.932      | 0.947                         |
| Packaging                        | Pa    | 0.880      | 0.917                         |
| Taste                            | T     | 0.910      | 0.937                         |
| Perceived Product Quality        | PPQ   | 0.940      | 0.957                         |
| Purchase Intention               | PI    | 0.885      | 0.919                         |

According to the Table above, all of the constructs' Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values are greater than 0.70, demonstrating that the model has good overall reliability.

### Validity Analysis

Hair et al., (2021) define the third phase as examining each construct's convergent validity (the amount that the construct converges to clarify the variance of its indicators). The average variance extracted (AVE) was examined in this phase, and the its value should be at least 0.50.(Hair et al., 2017).

#### Variable Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

| Items | AVE   |
|-------|-------|
| A     | 0.716 |
| SN    | 0.666 |
| PBC   | 0.712 |
| P     | 0.757 |
| C     | 0.781 |
| Pa    | 0.734 |
| T     | 0.789 |
| PPQ   | 0.849 |
| PI    | 0.740 |

All constructs above have AVE values higher than 0.6, showing the model achieves good convergent validity overall.

To determine discriminant validity, this study used the Fornell-Larcker criterion. In the model, the AVE value of constructs must be greater than their squared correlation value with any other constructs, in order to be regarded as appropriate discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017; 2021).

#### Discriminant validity – Fornell-Larcker criterion

|    | A     | C     | P      | PBC   | PI    | PPQ   | Pa    | SN | T |
|----|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|----|---|
| A  | 0.846 |       |        |       |       |       |       |    |   |
| C  | 0.167 | 0.884 |        |       |       |       |       |    |   |
| P  | 0.159 | 0.188 | 0.870  |       |       |       |       |    |   |
| PB | 0.538 | 0.270 | 0.313  | 0.844 |       |       |       |    |   |
| PI | 0.509 | 0.254 | 0.216  | 0.571 | 0.860 |       |       |    |   |
| PP | 0.618 | 0.061 | 0.239  | 0.470 | 0.600 | 0.922 |       |    |   |
| Pa | 0.026 | 0.090 | -0.003 | 0.169 | 0.147 | 0.064 | 0.857 |    |   |

|    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| SN | 0.64 | 0.20 | 0.25 | 0.52 | 0.45 | 0.40 | 0.09 | 0.81 |      |
|    | 5    | 9    | 2    | 4    | 1    | 1    | 8    | 6    |      |
| T  | 0.43 | 0.25 | 0.19 | 0.41 | 0.51 | 0.48 | 0.15 | 0.42 | 0.88 |
|    | 4    | 8    | 9    | 8    | 2    | 7    | 3    | 1    | 8    |

As shown in Table above, the AVE values of all constructs are bigger than their squared correlation values.

### Structural Model Assessment

The initial step is the collinearity assessment. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values indicate collinearity, with values from 3-5, especially above 5, suggesting potential issues (Hair *et al.*, 2021).

#### Collinearity statistics (VIF) - Inner model - Matrix

|     | A | C | PBC | PI    | PPQ   | Pa | P | SN | T |
|-----|---|---|-----|-------|-------|----|---|----|---|
| A   |   |   |     |       | 1.994 |    |   |    |   |
| C   |   |   |     |       | 1.125 |    |   |    |   |
| PBC |   |   |     |       | 1.730 |    |   |    |   |
| PI  |   |   |     |       |       |    |   |    |   |
| PPQ |   |   |     | 1.000 |       |    |   |    |   |
| Pa  |   |   |     |       | 1.060 |    |   |    |   |
| P   |   |   |     |       | 1.152 |    |   |    |   |
| SN  |   |   |     |       | 1.933 |    |   |    |   |
| T   |   |   |     |       | 1.392 |    |   |    |   |

All VIF values above are smaller than 3. Thus, it could be said that there is no collinearity within the constructs.

### Structural Evaluation Metrics

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) shows how much variance in the dependent factor, is explained by the model, counting from 0 to 1. Higher values indicate stronger explanatory power.  $R^2$  values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 indicating significant, moderate, and weak explanatory power (Hair *et al.*, 2021). Adjusted  $R^2$  accounts for model and data size but does not indicate explained variance directly. Effect size ( $f^2$ ) measures the effect of each factor on  $R^2$ . Values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 indicate small, medium, and large effects (Cohen, 1988). Predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) examines the ability of a model in predicting new data.  $Q^2$  values above 0.35, 0.15, and 0.02 indicate strong, moderate, and weak predictive power, respectively (Hair *et al.*, 2021).

#### Coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) and Predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ )

|     | R2    | R2 adjusted | Q <sup>2</sup> |
|-----|-------|-------------|----------------|
| PI  | 0.360 | 0.358       | 0.323          |
| PPQ | 0.483 | 0.471       | 0.448          |

Based on Table, the value of  $R^2$  for the PI is 0.360 and the PPQ is 0.483, demonstrating moderate predictive accuracy. Specifically, seven constructs explain 48.3% of the variance in PPQ. While PPQ explains 36.0% of the variance in PI. The results reveal that the  $Q^2$  value for PPQ is 0.448, reflecting strong predictive relevance, while the value for PI is 0.323, indicating nearly strong predictive relevance. These findings suggest that the model not only fits the existing sample data but also possesses substantial predictive power for future or unseen cases.

#### Effect size assessment ( $f^2$ )

| Causal Path | $f^2$ | Level of effect |
|-------------|-------|-----------------|
| A -> PPQ    | 0.243 | Medium          |
| C -> PPQ    | 0.029 | Small           |

|            |       |               |
|------------|-------|---------------|
| Pa -> PPQ  | 0.000 | Insignificant |
| PBC -> PPQ | 0.025 | Small         |
| PPQ -> PI  | 0.563 | Large         |
| P -> PPQ   | 0.022 | Small         |
| SN -> PPQ  | 0.013 | Insignificant |
| T -> PPQ   | 0.098 | Small         |

The data illustrates the effect sizes of each construct on others and the strength of their causal relationships. Specifically, removing the subjective norms (SN) and packaging (Pa) constructs would have minimal impact on the perceived product quality (PPQ) construct. Similarly, eliminating perceived behavioral control (PBC), price (P), convenience (C), and taste (T) would result in only a small impact on PPQ. In contrast, the attitude (A) construct shows a medium influence on PPQ, meaning its removal would cause a noticeable change. Most significantly, PPQ itself has a large influence on purchase intention (PI), indicating that excluding PPQ would greatly affect PI.

### Hypothesis Testing

Path coefficients reflect the magnitude and direction of relationships between latent variables in a structural model, falling between -1 and +1. Values closer to either end indicate stronger associations, while values outside this range may suggest multicollinearity issues. (Hair *et al.*, 2021).

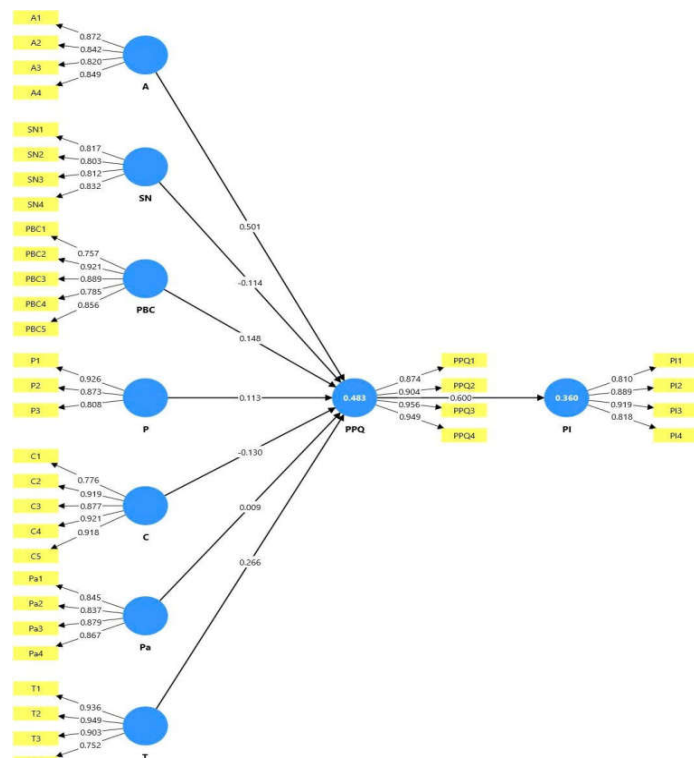
#### Significant testing and path coefficients

| Causal Path | Hypothesis | Path Coefficients ( $\beta$ ) | T - values | P - values | Statistically Significant P < .05 | Conclusion |
|-------------|------------|-------------------------------|------------|------------|-----------------------------------|------------|
| A -> PPQ    | H1         | 0.501                         | 7.953      | .000       | Significant                       | Supported  |
| SN -> PPQ   | H2         | -0.114                        | 1.992      | .046       | Insignificant                     | Rejected   |
| PBC -> PPQ  | H3         | 0.148                         | 2.716      | .007       | Significant                       | Supported  |
| P -> PPQ    | H4         | 0.113                         | 2.184      | .029       | Significant                       | Supported  |
| C -> PPQ    | H5         | -0.130                        | 2.584      | .010       | Insignificant                     | Rejected   |
| Pa -> PPQ   | H6         | 0.009                         | 0.182      | .855       | Insignificant                     | Rejected   |
| T -> PPQ    | H7         | 0.266                         | 4.554      | .000       | Significant                       | Supported  |
| PPQ -> PI   | H8         | 0.600                         | 13.814     | .000       | Significant                       | Supported  |

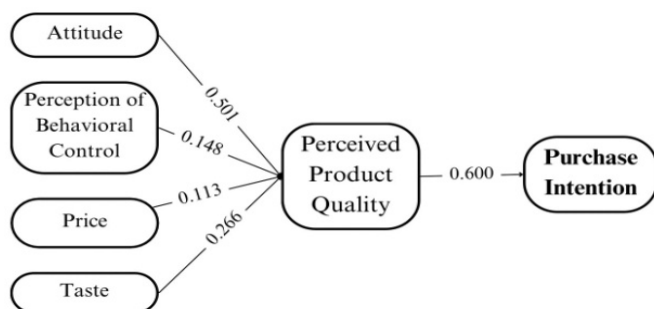
As in the table, Perceived product quality (PPQ) is positively and significantly influenced by attitude ( $\beta = 0.501$ ), taste ( $\beta = 0.266$ ), perceived behavioral control (PBC) ( $\beta = 0.148$ ), and price ( $\beta = 0.113$ ), supporting H1, H3, H4, and H7. Packaging ( $\beta = 0.009$ ) has a positive but non-significant effect, so H6 is not supported. However, subjective norms ( $\beta = -0.114$ ) and convenience ( $\beta = -0.130$ ) negatively and significantly affect PPQ, leading to the rejection of H2 and H5. For purchase intention (PI), PPQ has a strong positive impact ( $\beta = 0.600$ ), supporting H8. Among all constructs with PPQ, attitude is the strongest driver, followed by taste, PBC, convenience, subjective norms, price and packaging.



## Summary of Results



Summary of results



Revised research framework

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the factors influencing perceived product quality (PPQ) and purchase intention (PI) of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods among Vietnam's Gen Z, applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework.

Attitude was found to be the most significant positive driver of PPQ, confirming TPB's core claim that internal beliefs shape behavioral evaluations (Ajzen, 1991; Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1990). This supports past findings that favorable attitudes enhance quality perceptions (Zeithaml, 1988). Taste, as an intrinsic cue, also showed strong influence, aligned with literature asserting its pivotal role in shaping product quality perception and long-term loyalty (Schroder & Earle, 1998; Jaeger, 2006; Hyun *et al.*, 2010). Perceived Behavioral Control and price had small but significant positive effects on PPQ, consistent with Verplanken & Wood (2006), Zeithaml (1988) and Rao & Monroe (1989), who noted that consumers evaluate quality based on their ability to access, afford, and understand the product. Price acts as a quality cue, especially when intrinsic attributes can't immediately

accessible, guiding value perception, particularly for first-time or uncertain buyers (Rao & Monroe, 1989; Dodds, 1991; Lichtenstein *et al.*, 1993; Brucks *et al.*, 2000).

However, subjective norms negatively affected PPQ, contradicting earlier research (Shepherd & Raats, 2010; Lou & Yuan, 2019) that emphasized social influence as a positive driver. This suggests Gen Z may perceive social pressure as inauthentic, preferring independent evaluation. Similarly, convenience had a negative impact, contrasting with studies that associated it with higher perceived quality (Luning, 2001; Rundh, 2013). This indicates growing Gen Z skepticism toward overly quick, easy and simple meals, echoing White *et al.*, (2019)'s findings on Gen Z's demand for authenticity and health-conscious choices. Packaging, though widely cited as a quality signal (Underwood & Klein, 2002; Wansink, 2004), showed no significant effect. This result suggests that in low-involvement, fast-paced contexts like convenience stores, Gen Z evaluates quality based more on substance, like taste and ingredients, than on external aesthetics. Finally, PPQ had a strong positive effect on purchase intention, supporting established research (Dodds & Monroe, 1985; Basha *et al.*, 2019; Gan & Wang, 2017; Chen, 2012) that perceived quality is a decisive factor in consumer purchase intention.

In conclusion, the study confirms that Gen Z consumers are independent, critical, and driven by authentic value. They don't just buy what looks good or what's popular, they buy what feels right to them. For marketers, this means success in the RTE sector depends not only appearance or popularity, but on delivering real, consistent product experiences grounded in transparency and quality.

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