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Innovative Meatballs Based on Local Food Ingredients: Under Review by Perceptions of Gen Z Consumers

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the perception of Generation Z consumers towards innovative meatball products based on local food raw materials in students of Pattimura University, Maluku Province. The study used a quantitative approach with a descriptive method on 100 respondents, with data collection through questionnaires and analysis using frequency and percentage tabulation. The results showed that the product attributes that were most prioritized by respondents were texture and food safety, each at 96.4%, followed by taste and nutritional content at 94.6%. In addition, meat quality was considered important by 92.9% of respondents, while the use of local food raw materials was considered important by 80.4% of respondents.

Keywords: Consumer Perception, Innovative Meatballs, Generation Z, Local Food

INTRODUCTION

Local food has a strategic role in supporting food diversification, increasing the added value of agricultural and fishery commodities, and strengthening the development of regional resource-based agribusiness. In Maluku Province, the potential of food resources such as tuna, skipjack, sago, and hotong opens up opportunities for the development of processed products that are innovative and have regional characteristics. One form of diversification is the development of innovative meatballs based on local food raw materials, both through the use of local fish raw materials and the use of regional food ingredients as formulation components. This innovation has the potential to create added value for local commodities, expand opportunities for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and strengthen the relationship between raw material producers and the food processing industry. However, the availability of local raw materials does not automatically guarantee

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the success of a product in the market. Consumer acceptance, product quality, price affordability, and the ability of producers to meet market needs are important aspects that need to be considered in the development of innovative food products.

The success of food innovation is closely related to the ability of producers to understand consumer perceptions and preferences of product attributes. In meatball products, attributes such as taste, texture, aroma, quality of raw materials, nutritional content, food safety, hygiene, price, packaging, and brand identity can be considered in the product selection process (Zalukhu & Widiawati, 2026). The use of local raw materials needs to be balanced with sensory quality and food safety that meets consumer expectations. For example, the development of tuna or skipjack-based meatballs and the use of sago and hotong as formulation components require testing to ensure the suitability of product characteristics, including texture, taste, aroma, and overall acceptance. Thus, product innovation is not enough to highlight the uniqueness of raw materials, but also needs to produce benefits that can be felt by consumers. A consumer-oriented approach is important so that local food development can develop from just product innovation to sustainable business opportunities (Rahmadiani et al, 2026).

Generation Z is a relevant consumer segment in the development of innovative food products because it is in the stage of forming consumption preferences and has the potential to be a market for new products (Puspitasari & Lasmi, 2026). However, interest in innovation is not always in line with purchasing decisions. Consumers may be interested in trying products that have never been consumed, but are not necessarily willing to choose these products over familiar alternatives or buy them regularly. Zuo et al. (2022), through research on Generation Z's food preferences in China, showed the importance of understanding the various dimensions of consumer experience and evaluation in explaining their preference for food. The research provides the basis that food acceptance in young consumers needs to be understood through product characteristics and consumption experiences, not solely based on product novelty. Meanwhile, Alexandra and Choirisa (2024) examine Generation Z's consumption experience and behavioral intentions towards local Indonesian cuisine, which shows the relevance of consumption experiences and consumer interaction in understanding the marketing potential of local food.

Addition to product characteristics, value perception is also a relevant aspect in understanding buying interest in local food. Pratap et al. (2024) used the Value-Attitude-Behaviour approach to examine the purchase intention of local food by Generation Z tourists. In the context of innovative meatballs based on local food, product value can be related to quality, taste, affordability, regional identity, and consumption experience offered. However, the use of local raw materials does not necessarily make products more desirable than

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conventional products. Producers need to understand the attributes that consumers consider important while identifying the extent to which consumers are interested in trying, willing to buy, and have preferences for innovative products. This understanding is needed to reduce the gap between the potential for innovation based on local resources and the acceptance of products in the market.

In the context of Maluku Province, the development of innovative meatballs has agribusiness relevance because it can be an alternative to diversifying processed products that connect the potential of local fisheries and food with consumer needs. Products such as tuna meatballs, skipjack meatballs, or meatballs with local food-based formulations have the potential to be developed as products that have a distinctive regional identity. This development can open up opportunities to increase the added value of commodities, expand product choices for consumers, and create business opportunities for MSMEs. However, these opportunities need to be supported by empirical information about consumer characteristics, prioritized product attributes, and buying interest in the products offered. This information is important so that product development is not only oriented towards the availability of raw materials, but also considers market needs, consumer purchasing power, and the potential for repeat purchases.

Pattimura University students are a relevant group to be studied in understanding the perception and buying interest of young consumers towards innovative meatballs based on local food raw materials. As one of the consumer segments in Maluku, students can provide an initial overview of the acceptance of innovative products in the university environment. This study needs to distinguish between the level of importance of product attributes and buying interest because consumers who consider an attribute important do not necessarily have the desire to buy products that offer these attributes. Therefore, analysis of both aspects simultaneously is needed to obtain an overview of market acceptance opportunities and product development priorities. The results of the research can also be preliminary information for business actors in designing products that suit the preferences of young consumers.

Based on this description, this study aims to describe the characteristics of respondents, identify product attributes that are considered important, and descriptively analyze the purchasing interest of Generation Z consumers in innovative meatball products based on local food raw materials in Pattimura University students. This research is expected to make an empirical contribution to the development of local processed food products that are oriented to consumer needs, as well as a consideration for MSMEs and agribusiness actors in Maluku in determining product innovation priorities, price strategies, brand identity strengthening, and marketing approaches. Thus, the use of local food raw

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materials is expected not only to encourage product diversification, but also increase market acceptance opportunities and sustainable agribusiness business development.

THEORICAL REVIEW

Meatball innovation based on local food ingredients is a food product development strategy that integrates formulation creativity, raw material diversification, and increased added value of local commodities to meet the needs of the growing market. The development of this innovation can be carried out through the use of local foodstuffs, such as sago, hotong, tuna, and skipjack, both as main ingredients and substitute or additional ingredients according to the expected product characteristics. The success of innovation is not only determined by the novelty of the ingredients used, but also by the ability of the product to maintain sensory qualities, including taste, aroma, texture, color, and appearance, as well as meeting consumer expectations of quality and price. Siegrist and Hartmann (2020) explain that consumer acceptance of new foods is influenced by product perceptions, beliefs, and individual characteristics. Therefore, the development of local food-based meatballs needs to consider a balance between innovation, product quality, consumer acceptance, and the potential for strengthening the local economy.

Generation Z (Gen Z) consumer perception is an important aspect in evaluating the attractiveness and potential acceptance of innovative meatball products. Perception is the process when consumers interpret product attributes and form assessments of the benefits, quality, uniqueness, and suitability of products with their needs. In the context of innovative food, Gen Z's assessment can be influenced by sensory quality, value perception, price, accurately informed nutritional content, practicality, and local identity inherent in products. Kristia et al. (2024) show the relevance of sustainability values and the influence of food influencers in understanding Gen Z's relationship with traditional foods in Indonesia. Meanwhile, Monaco et al. (2024) explained that new food acceptance is related to psychological factors, such as familiarity, curiosity, and food neophobia, which is the tendency to avoid unfamiliar foods. Thus, the use of local food ingredients in meatball products has the potential to increase attractiveness through uniqueness and local identity, but its acceptance still needs to be proven through empirical assessment of consumers.

Theoretically, the relationship between consumer perception and buying interest can be explained using the Theory of Planned Behavior developed by Ajzen (1991), which places attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavioral control as factors that shape behavioral intentions. In research on innovative meatballs based on local foodstuffs, positive perceptions of the taste, quality, novelty, and value of products can be related to better attitudes and increased interest in trying or buying. In addition, peer influence, social media

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recommendations, affordability, and ease of obtaining products can be important considerations in the decisions of Gen Z consumers. The results of the research are expected to be the basis for the development of meatball products that are in accordance with the preferences of young consumers while supporting food diversification and increasing the added value of local commodities in Maluku.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive research design to describe Generation Z consumers' perceptions and buying interest toward innovative meatball products based on local food ingredients in Maluku Province, Indonesia. The descriptive design was used to identify the product attributes considered important by consumers and to examine their tendencies toward purchasing innovative meatball products. The study focused on describing consumer preferences and buying interest without testing causal relationships between variables.

Setting and Study Population

The study was conducted at Universitas Pattimura, Maluku Province, Indonesia. The study population consisted of students at Universitas Pattimura who belonged to Generation Z. This population was selected because young consumers represent a relevant market segment for innovative food products, particularly those incorporating local food ingredients. The study focused on students' perceptions of product attributes, including sensory characteristics, price, nutritional value, hygiene, food safety, packaging, practicality, and the use of local food ingredients, as well as their interest in purchasing innovative meatball products.

Sampling Technique and Procedure

A purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents based on predetermined inclusion criteria. The sample consisted of 100 respondents who were Universitas Pattimura students, belonged to the Generation Z group, and were willing to participate in the study. Respondents were selected according to their eligibility and willingness to provide information relevant to the research objectives. This sampling technique enabled the researchers to obtain data from participants who matched the characteristics of the target population. However, because purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method, the findings should be interpreted within the context of the respondents studied and should not automatically be generalized to all Generation Z consumers in Maluku Province.

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Research Instruments

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire designed to collect quantitative data on respondents' characteristics, perceptions of product attributes, and buying interest in innovative meatball products based on local food ingredients. The questionnaire covered 15 product attributes: taste, texture, aroma, price, nutritional content, meat quality, use of local food ingredients, hygiene, food safety, size, shape, packaging, practicality, taste variation, and product identity. Buying interest was assessed through six indicators: interest in trying innovative products, willingness to purchase at an affordable price, likelihood of making repeat purchases, willingness to recommend the products, preference for innovative meatballs over conventional meatballs, and interest in seeking additional product information. Responses were organized into categories suitable for descriptive statistical analysis. If a Likert scale was used, its response categories and scoring procedures should be specified in the final research report.

Data Collection

The study used primary data collected directly from the 100 selected respondents through the administration of structured questionnaires. Data collection focused on obtaining information about respondent characteristics, the perceived importance of product attributes, and consumers' buying interest in innovative meatball products incorporating local food ingredients. Respondents were invited to provide answers based on their perceptions and preferences regarding the proposed product characteristics. The collected questionnaires were reviewed for completeness and consistency before being coded and entered into the dataset for analysis. Participation was voluntary, and respondents' information should be handled confidentially in accordance with applicable research ethics procedures.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequency tabulation and percentage calculations. These methods were used to summarize respondent characteristics, identify the product attributes considered important by consumers, and describe their buying interest in innovative meatball products. The percentage for each response category was calculated using the following formula:

$P=f/N \times 100\%$

Where:

P = percentage of responses;
f = frequency of responses in a particular category;
N= total number of valid responses for the item being analyzed.

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The results were presented in tables accompanied by descriptive explanations to identify the most prioritized product attributes and illustrate patterns in respondents' buying interest. The analysis provided an empirical overview of Generation Z consumers' perceptions and potential acceptance of innovative meatball products based on local food ingredients. Because the study employed descriptive statistics, the findings were not intended to establish causal relationships but rather to provide an evidence base for product development and marketing strategies that promote local food-based meatball innovations in Maluku Province.

RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents

Description	Number (People)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	21	21
Female	79	79
Age (years)		
17-19	52	52
20-22	46	46
>22	2	2
Monthly Allowence/Personal Expenses (IDR)		
<500.000	45	45
500.000-1.000.000	41	41
>1.000.000-1.500.000	14	14
>1.500.000	0	0

Source: Primary data, processed in 2026.

Table 2. Consumer Preference for Innovative Meatball Product Attributes

Product Attributes	Important (%)	Not important (%)
Feel	94,6	5,4
Texture	96,4	3,6
Aroma	85,7	14,3
Price	89,3	10,7
Nutrition Content	94,6	5,4
Meat Quality	92,9	7,1
Local Groceries	80,4	19,6

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Product Hygiene	92,8	7,2
Food Safety	96,4	3,6
Product Size	82,1	17,9
Product Form	67,8	32,2
Packaging	85,7	14,3
Practicality	76,8	23,2
Flavor Variation	82,1	17,9
Brand/Product Identity	91,1	8,9

Source: Primary data, processed in 2026.

DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Respondents

This study involved 100 Pattimura University students who represent Generation Z consumers in the context of selecting processed food products. Based on gender, female respondents dominated with 79 people (79%), while men totaled 21 people (21%). This composition shows that the results of the study reflect more the perception of female respondents. However, this dominance cannot be directly interpreted as women have a higher interest in buying innovative meatballs than men, because this study has not presented a comparison of buying interest based on gender. The characteristics of the respondents can be seen in Table 1.

Based on Table 1, the majority of respondents in the 17-19 year old group, namely 52 people (52%), followed by the 20-22 year group as many as 46 people (46%), while respondents over 22 years old amounted to 2 people (2%). The composition shows that the study describes the perception of students in late adolescence to early adulthood. In the context of food marketing, the young consumer group is a relevant segment to test acceptance of product innovation, especially products that offer a combination of taste, practicality, quality, and local identity.

Judging from the pocket or personal expenses per month, as many as 45 respondents (45%) had expenses below IDR 500,000, as many as 41 respondents (41%) were in the range of IDR 500,000-IDR 1,000,000, and 14 respondents (14%) were in the range above IDR 1,000,000-IDR 1,500,000. There were no respondents with expenses above IDR 1,500,000. Thus, 86% of respondents had a maximum of IDR 1,000,000 in allowance or personal expenses per month. This condition indicates that price affordability has the potential to be an important consideration in the development of innovative meatballs for the student market. Products with quality local raw materials still need to be offered at a price level that is in accordance with the target purchasing power.

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Consumer Preferences for Attributes of Innovative Meatball Products Based on Local Food Raw Materials

The results of the study show that students' preferences for innovative meatballs based on local food raw materials are not only determined by sensory characteristics, but also related to food safety, nutritional content, price, quality of raw materials, and product identity. Of the 15 attributes assessed, food safety and texture occupy the highest position, each at 96.4%. Furthermore, taste and nutritional content obtained a score of 94.6%, meat quality 92.9%, product hygiene 92.8%, and brand or product identity 91.1%. These findings indicate that acceptance of innovative meatballs needs to be built through a combination of consumption quality, safety assurance, and consumer trust. Consumer preference for innovative meatball attributes can be seen in table 2.

Food safety is one of the most important attributes for respondents, with 96.4% stating that it is important. Meanwhile, product hygiene is considered important by 92.8% of respondents (table 2). The high assessment shows that raw material and flavor innovation cannot be separated from the assurance that products are safe to consume, processed hygienically, and handled with proper procedures. In meatball products that use local foodstuffs, manufacturers need to ensure that raw materials, equipment, water, milling, cooking, cooling, storage, and packaging meet food safety requirements. Conceptually, food safety is an attribute that can shape consumer trust in products, especially when consumers do not have enough experience to assess product quality directly. Research on food buying interest in Generation Z also shows the relevance of knowledge and trust in shaping consumer attitudes towards food products (Sutikno et al, 2026).

Texture is the attribute with the highest level of importance along with food safety, at 96.4%, while taste is considered important by 94.6% of respondents. These results confirm that sensory characteristics remain a key consideration in the development of innovative meatballs. Consumers may be interested in the idea of using local foodstuffs, but acceptance of the product ultimately also depends on the experience when the product is consumed. In meatballs, a chewy, compact, and non-perishable texture and a taste that matches consumer preferences can be important characteristics to maintain the appeal of the product.

These findings are in line with the research of Zuo et al. (2022) which developed an understanding of Generation Z's food preferences and showed that evaluation of dishes, dietary choices, marketing innovations, and service quality are related to food preferences. The study also found that food preferences are related to buying interest through food preferences. In addition, Awahita et al.'s (2026) research on traditional Indonesian drinks found that texture modification can affect Generation Z's sensory acceptance.

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The implication is that the development of local food-based meatballs in Maluku needs to go through formulation testing and sensory testing in stages. The use of sago flour or hotong as a binding agent or formulation component, for example, needs to be tested at several levels of substitution to determine its effect on elasticity, elasticity, density, taste, and overall acceptance. For tuna or skipjack-based meatballs, the formulation also needs to consider the characteristics of the fish raw materials in order to produce a product that is acceptable to consumers. The recommendation is still a development direction that needs to be tested empirically, not evidence that all locally made formulations necessarily produce the desired texture.

As many as 94.6% of respondents considered nutritional content as an important attribute, while meat quality was considered important by 92.9% of respondents. Both results show that consumers not only pay attention to the enjoyment of the product, but also pay attention to the quality of raw materials and the value of the food offered. For the development of innovative meatballs, this condition opens up opportunities to combine animal raw materials with local commodities that have a certain food technology function or nutritional value, as long as the benefits and characteristics of the product can be proven through proper analysis.

In the development of fish-based products, for example, the use of tuna or skipjack can be part of product differentiation based on the type of raw material. Meanwhile, sago and hotong can be explored as ingredients to support formulations according to their respective characteristics. However, claims regarding the content of protein, energy, fiber, or other nutrients must be based on calculations of accountable compositions or laboratory tests, not solely on the type of ingredients used. Similarly, the use of local foods does not automatically make a product healthier than conventional meatballs. These results are relevant to the study of Pratap et al. (2024), which uses the Value-Attitude-Behavior approach to understand Generation Z's interest in local food. The study places the perceived values of consumers as an important part in explaining attitudes and behavioral tendencies towards local foods. Thus, local meatball producers need to convey the advantages of their products in a concrete way, for example through the transparency of raw materials, composition information, product quality, and nutritional testing results if available. This strategy is more powerful than simply using "local" or "healthy" labels without supporting information.

Price is considered important by 89.3% of respondents, while 10.7% consider it unimportant. This high percentage shows that price is one of the attributes that need to be considered in the development of innovative meatballs for the student segment. This finding is consistent with the characteristics of respondents, who as many as 86% have a maximum

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of Rp 1,000,000 per month in pocket money or personal expenses. Therefore, products that have good sensory quality and food safety need to be designed with a cost structure that allows selling prices to remain affordable. However, affordability does not always mean setting the lowest possible price. Producers need to balance the selling price with the cost of raw materials, processing costs, packaging, distribution, and business margins. In the context of agribusiness, the use of local raw materials can open up opportunities for supply chain development involving local farmers, fishermen, processors, and MSME actors. However, cost savings can only be achieved if the availability of raw materials, continuity of supply, inter-island transportation costs, and production efficiency support it.

Research on food buying interest in Generation Z places the ability of consumers to buy and access products as one of the relevant aspects in explaining purchase intentions (Al Baiti, 2025). In this study, the results provide a basis for recommending the testing of several price alternatives through a willingness to pay survey. Thus, producers can find out the price range that students can accept while estimating the financial feasibility of the product. It should be emphasized that the percentage of price importance in this study has not shown the nominal price that respondents are willing to pay.

The attributes of local food ingredients were considered important by 80.4% of respondents, while 19.6% considered them unimportant. Compared to food safety, texture, taste, nutritional content, and quality of raw materials, attributes of local food obtained a lower level of importance. This finding is interesting because it shows that local identity has the potential to be a source of differentiation, but it is not necessarily the main consideration when consumers choose processed foods. In other words, the use of local ingredients can be an added value, but it should not replace sensory quality, safety, and affordability. In the context of Maluku, the development of innovative meatballs can explore products such as Tuna Banda Meatballs, Skipjack Meatballs, Maluku Sago Meatballs, or meatball formulations with local supporting ingredients. The development can connect product innovation with the potential of local fishery and food resources, while providing opportunities for MSMEs to create a distinctive product identity. However, these names are examples of product concepts that still require formulation validation, consumer acceptance, food safety, and commercial feasibility. Alexandra and Choirisa (2024) show that consumption experience, health value, emotional value, interaction, and social media interaction are relevant in explaining attitudes towards local culinary and behavioral intentions of Generation Z. Meanwhile, research on the purchase of local food by Generation Z tourists in organic tourist destinations shows that local food attributes and ecological awareness are related to purchase intentions (Ashari & Pauzy, 2026). Both studies provide a perspective that local food can have functional as well as emotional and identity value. However, because this

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study was conducted on students in a campus environment, cultural values, pride in local food, and environmental awareness need to be specifically measured before being stated as a driver of buying interest of Pattimura University students.

The brand or product identity received an important rating from 91.1% of respondents, followed by packaging at 85.7%, taste variation at 82.1%, product size at 82.1%, and practicality at 76.8%. The shape of the product obtained the lowest percentage among all attributes, at 67.8%. This pattern shows that brand identity and packaging remain relevant in building product appeal, while the physical form of meatballs is relatively less prioritized than safety, texture, taste, and nutrition attributes. The high valuation of brands indicates the importance of building an identity that is easily recognizable and trusted. For innovative meatball products based on local food, brands can communicate the type of raw materials, taste character, product origin, and local values offered. Packaging needs to support this information while fulfilling the functions of product protection, maintaining quality, and providing clear information to consumers.

Variations in taste, size, and practicality can be developed through product testing based on consumer needs, for example, individual portions that are suitable for students or flavor choices that still retain the main character of meatballs. Zuo et al. (2022) show that marketing innovation is one of the relevant dimensions in understanding the food preferences of Generation Z. Research by Alexandra and Choirisa (2024) also underlines the relevance of social media interaction in building a local culinary image and young consumer attitudes. Therefore, a local meatball marketing strategy can combine a consistent brand identity with digital communication, attractive product visuals, transparent raw material information, and authentic consumer reviews. However, attributes that have a higher percentage of importance do not automatically have a greater influence on purchasing decisions. To determine whether brand, packaging, flavor variation, or practicality really influence buying interest, testing of the relationship between variables is needed. In the initial stage, these descriptive results can be used as a basis for determining product development and testing priorities.

CONCLUSION

The results showed that the perception of Generation Z students of Pattimura University towards innovative meatball products based on local food raw materials was mainly determined by food safety and texture attributes (96.4% each), followed by taste and nutritional content (94.6% each), meat quality (92.9%), and product hygiene (92.8%).

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