



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***MICROBIOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT OF MICROWAVE HEATING
ON READY-TO-EAT FOODS***

NEW CHIA YEUNG

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**MICROBIOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT OF MICROWAVE HEATING
ON READY-TO-EAT FOODS**

By

NEW CHIA YEUNG

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

October 2017

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

**MICROBIOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT OF MICROWAVE HEATING
ON READY-TO-EAT FOODS**

By

NEW CHIA YEUNG

October 2017

Chair : Professor Son Radu, PhD
Faculty : Food Science and Technology

The microwave oven is an inexpensive multifunctional device commonly used for reheating purpose during meal preparation. The safety level of microwave heated foods remains in vague due to consumers' lack of awareness and knowledge on microwave heating the food safely. This research study aimed to scientifically address the microbiological safety of microwave heated ready-to-eat (RTE) foods. To initiate the study, a consumer survey study was conducted to measure the Malaysian's consumers' knowledge and practice microwave oven safety. Next, the survivability of *Salmonella enterica* and Shiga-toxigenic *Escherichia coli* (STEC) O157 in microwave heated RTE foods was studied to identify the risk factors and subsequently evaluate the risk factors. The prevalence of the foodborne pathogens' survivability in microwave heated RTE foods was investigated using the Most Probable Number coupled Polymerase Chain Reaction (MPN-PCR) method. The highest possibility of the foodborne pathogens' survival was due to factors affecting the microwave heating in particular presence of cold spots, microwave heating time and consumers' knowledge; all identified as risk factors. In the food safety context, microwave heating time and consumers' knowledge was given more attention. The microwave heating time on the influence of different food composition in relation to bacteria inactivation was then studied and the data was used to model the bacterial inactivation using the Weibull model. These studied risk factors were then incorporated into a retail and consumer phase exposure assessment model to estimate the risk of consumption of contaminated RTE food reheated at different microwaving times using @risk. The outcome of the study showed that the respondents demonstrated low level of knowledge and safety practice of the microwave oven, although they had neutral attitude on food safety. Out of the 329 samples of various convenience meals collected around Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur and Selangor regions, 20.1% were tested positive with *Salmonella* spp. and 5.2% with STEC O157. Fats were observed to have the highest influence to the microwave heating time compared to proteins and carbohydrates. Based on the overall food composition, the results indicated that the

foodborne pathogens were fully inactivated by microwave heating at 60 seconds as no viable growth was observed. However, the risk assessment model estimated probable foodborne illness cases for RTE food microwave heated less than 90 seconds for *S. enterica* serovar Enteritidis and STEC O157 exposure assessment models. The outcome indicated that RTE food should be microwave heated up to 90s and more to ensure the safety of the food and other interventions such as controlling the holding temperature and having a fixed display holding time. The current risk research study provided comparative information on the evaluation of microwave technology in terms of food safety. Notably, foodborne pathogens can survive the microwave heating which put the consumers at risk when improper safety practice and usage of the microwave oven is taken. The implementation of microwave heating guidelines, involving the safe microwave heating time and safety practice, into food safety educational programs should be established as risk interventions and further to conserve the public health.

Keywords: microwave oven, safe microwave heating time, safety practice, risk assessment, *Salmonella enterica*, Shiga-toxigenic *Escherichia coli* (STEC) O157

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PENILAIAN RISIKO MIKROBIOLOGI PEMANASAN MICROWAVE
PADA MAKANAN READY-TO-EAT**

Oleh

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Microwave oven yang digunakan untuk memanaskan makanan, adalah sebuah peranti yang murah dan mempunyai pelbagai fungsi. Walau demikian, tahap keselamatan makanan yang dipanaskan dengan microwave oven masih berada di tahap ketidakpastian disebabkan oleh kekurangan ilmu dan kesedaran oleh para pengguna. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk melaporkan keselamatan mikrobiologi makanan yang dipanaskan dengan microwave oven secara saintifik. Kajian ini dimulakan dengan menilai tahap ilmu para pengguna mengenai microwave oven dan praktik keselamatan menggunakan soal kaji selidik. Seterusnya, kebertahanan *Salmonella enterica* dan Shiga-toxigenic *Escherichia coli* (STEC) O157 dalam makanan ready-to-eat (RTE) yang dipanaskan menggunakan microwave oven dikaji menggunakan teknik Most Probable Number-Polymerase Chain Reaction (MPN-PCR) untuk mengenalpasti faktor-faktor risiko. Faktor-faktor yang dikenalpasti adalah penghasilan 'cold spots' ketika pemanasan microwave, masa pemanasan gelombang dan tahap ilmu para pengguna. Dari segi konteks keselamatan makanan, masa pemanasan gelombang dan tahap ilmu para pengguna diberi lebih perhatian. Pengaruh komposisi makanan terhadap masa pemanasan microwave dan kematian bakteria juga dikaji dan data tersebut digunakan untuk membina model kematian bakteria dengan Weibull model. Kesemua faktor risiko yang dikaji akan dimasukkan ke dalam model exposure assessment fasa runcit dan pengguna untuk menganggar risiko pengambilan makanan RTE yang dicemar dengan *S. enterica* serovar Enteritidis dan STEC O157 menggunakan @risk. Keputusannya menunjukkan para responden mempunyai ilmu yang rendah mengenai microwave oven dan praktik keselamatan walaupun mereka menunjukkan sikap neutral terhadap keselamatan makanan. Daripada 329 makanan RTE sampel yang dikumpul sekitar kawasan Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur dan Selangor, didapati patogen makanan dapat menahan pemanasan microwave di mana 20.1% positif dengan *Salmonella* spp. and 5.2% positif dengan STEC O157. Berdasarkan semua komposisi makanan, didapati patogen makanan tidak boleh bertahan sehingga 60 saat pemanasan microwave. Tetapi, model penilaian risiko

mikrobiologi tersebut telah menganggarkan kes keracunan makanan akan berlaku jika makanan RTE dipanaskan menggunakan microwave oven selama 90 saat atau kurang. Oleh demikian, ia adalah selamat untuk memanaskan makanan RTE lebih daripada 90 saat serta mengawal suhu dan masa pameran makanan. Kajian penilaian risiko ini telah memberi maklumat mengenai penilaian teknologi microwave dari segi keselamatan makanan. Para pengguna akan berhadapan dengan risiko keracunan makanan kerana patogen masih boleh wujud setelah makanan dipanaskan dengan microwave oven ditambah pula dengan praktik keselamatan penggunaan microwave oven yang tidak dijalankan dengan sepatutnya. Standard penggunaan microwave oven perlu ditubuhkan dan masa pemanasan yang dikira selamat dan praktik keselamatan perlu dimasukkan sebagai langkah pengawalan risiko untuk memastikan kesejahteraan ramai.

Kata-kata Kunci: Microwave oven, masa pemanasan microwave selamat, praktik keselamatan, risk assessment, *Salmonella enterica*, Shiga-toxigenic *Escherichia coli* (STEC) O157

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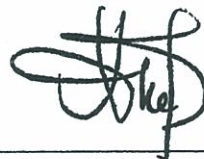
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	Page
ABSTRAK	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
APPROVAL	v
DECLARATION	vi
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
LIST OF APPENDICES	xv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xvii
	xviii

CHAPTER

1	INTRODUCTION	1
	1.1 Background	1
	1.2 Problem Statement	1
	1.3 Objectives	2
2	LITERATURE REVIEW	4
	2.1 Microwave Oven	4
	2.1.1 Historical Background	4
	2.1.2 Components of a Microwave Oven	5
	2.2 Microwave Heating	6
	2.2.1 Mechanism of Microwave Heating	6
	2.2.2 Dielectric Properties and Propagation of Microwaves	7
	2.2.3 Advantages of using Microwave Heating	13
	2.2.4 Disadvantages of using Microwave Heating	13
	2.3 Microwave Ovens and Food Safety Guidelines	16
	2.4 <i>Salmonella</i>	17
	2.4.1 Background	17
	2.4.2 Salmonellosis	18
	2.4.3 Sources and Route of Exposure	19
	2.4.4 Epidemiology	20
	2.5 Shiga-toxigenic <i>Escherichia coli</i> (STEC) O157	21
	2.5.1 Background	21
	2.5.2 STEC Infection	22
	2.5.3 Sources and Route of Transmission	23
	2.5.4 Epidemiology	23

2.6	Most Probable Number-Polymerase Chain Reaction (MPN-PCR)	24
2.7	Risk Analysis	25
2.7.1	Risk Assessment	26
2.7.2	Quantitative Microbiological Risk Assessment (QMRA)	27
2.8	Predictive Microbiology	29
2.8.1	Bacterial Inactivation	30
2.8.2	Mathematical Models for Bacterial Inactivation	33
3	MICROWAVE OVEN SAFETY: A FOOD SAFETY CONSUMER SURVEY IN MALAYSIA	35
3.1	Introduction	35
3.2	Materials and Methods	36
3.2.1	Survey Design	36
3.2.2	Data Collection	37
3.2.3	Data Analysis	38
3.3	Results and Discussion	38
3.3.1	Demographic	38
3.3.2	Microwave Oven - Usage and Knowledge	40
3.3.3	Microwave Oven Safety Practice When Reheating or Cooking Food	41
3.3.4	Food Safety Attitude and Concerns about Microwaved Food	44
3.3.5	Association of the Microwave Oven Knowledge, Microwave Oven Safety Practice During Reheating and Food Safety Attitude with Demographics (Gender and Level of Education)	47
3.4	Conclusion	49
4	SURVIVABILITY OF <i>Salmonella enterica</i> AND SHIGA-TOXIGENIC <i>Escherichia coli</i> O157 IN MICROWAVE HEATED READY-TO-EAT FOODS	50
4.1	Introduction	50
4.2	Materials and Methods	52
4.2.1	Sampling	52
4.2.2	Most Probable Number-Polymerase Chain Reaction (MPN-PCR)	53

	4.2.3	Isolation of <i>Salmonella</i> and STEC O157	53
	4.2.4	DNA Template Preparation	53
	4.2.5	PCR Analysis	54
	4.2.6	PCR Analysis Validation	57
	4.2.7	Risk Assessment	57
	4.3	Results and Discussion	58
	4.4	Conclusion	69
5		INFLUENCE OF FOOD COMPOSITION TYPE ON THE MICROWAVE HEATING TIME IN RELATION TO THE INACTIVATION OF <i>Salmonella enterica</i> SEROVAR ENTERITIDIS AND SHIGA-TOXIGENIC <i>Escherichia coli</i> O157	70
	5.1	Introduction	70
	5.2	Materials and Methods	71
	5.2.1	Bacterial Strains	71
	5.2.2	Preparation of Bacterial Strains	71
	5.2.3	Food Composition Type Microwave Heating Process	72
	5.2.4	Recovery of Survival Bacteria	72
	5.3	Results and Discussion	73
	5.4	Conclusion	79
6		MODELLING MICROWAVE INACTIVATION OF <i>Salmonella enterica</i> SEROVAR ENTERITIDIS AND SHIGA-TOXIGENIC <i>Escherichia coli</i> O157 IN READY-TO-EAT FOODS USING WEIBULL MODEL	80
	6.1	Introduction	80
	6.2	Materials and Methods	81
	6.2.1	Origin of Experimental Data	81
	6.2.2	Weibull Model	82
	6.2.3	Modelling Microwave Inactivation	82
	6.2.4	Model Validation and Performance Evaluation	83
	6.3	Results and Discussion	83
	6.4	Conclusion	88

7	EXPOSURE ASSESSMENT OF <i>Salmonella enterica</i> SEROVAR ENTERITIDIS AND SHIGA-TOXIGENIC <i>Escherichia coli</i> O157 IN READY-TO-EAT FOODS REHEATED USING A MICROWAVE OVEN	89
7.1	Introduction	89
7.2	Materials and Methods	90
7.2.1	The Exposure Pathway	90
7.2.2	Retail Phase	91
7.2.3	Consumer Phase	92
7.2.4	Exposure Model and Simulation	93
7.3	Results and Discussion	94
7.3.1	Outputs and Risk Estimate	94
7.3.2	Risk Analysis	97
7.4	Conclusion	100
8	SUMMARY, GENERAL CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS	101
8.1	Summary	101
8.2	General Conclusion	101
8.3	Recommendations for Future Research	102
8.4	Limitations	102
	REFERENCES	103
	APPENDICES	121
	BIODATA OF STUDENT	153
	LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	154

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Description of the survival curve pattern	31
3.1 Demographic of the respondents	38
3.2 Consumers' compliance to microwave instructions when reheating or cooking commercial food using the microwave oven	44
3.3 Frequencies of the consumers' food safety attitude	46
3.4 Association between demographic (gender and level of education) with microwave oven knowledge, safety practice during reheating of food using the microwave oven and food safety attitude	48
4.1 Primer sequence used for <i>Salmonella</i> detection	55
4.2 Primer sequence used for <i>Escherichia coli</i> O157:H7 detection	56
4.3 Description of parameters and input distributions of the risk assessment model	58
4.4 Number of positive samples and concentration of <i>Salmonella</i> and STEC detected in accordance with the type of sample	61
4.5 Risk estimates of consumption of <i>Salmonella</i> and STEC O157 in microwave heated RTE foods	67
5.1 Proximate composition of white rice, roasted chicken breast, nuggets and fried rice	72
6.1 Inactivation parameters of the Weibull models (δ and p) for <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis together with adjusted Aikake Information criterion (AICc); determination coefficient (R_2); and Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE).	85
6.2 Inactivation parameters of the Weibull models (δ and p) for STEC O157 together with adjusted Aikake Information criterion (AICc); determination coefficient (R_2); and Root Mean Squared Error (RMSE).	86
6.3 Proposed models for microwave inactivation of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis and STEC O157	88
7.1 Risk estimates of consumption of RTE food contaminated with <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis reheated at different range of microwave heating time.	96
7.2 Risk estimates of consumption of RTE food contaminated with STEC O157 reheated at different range of microwave heating time.	96

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
2.1	Components of a typical microwave oven	5
2.2	Relationship of the components in a risk analysis	25
3.1	Consumers' knowledge on the safety usage of the microwave oven	40
3.2	Consumers' safety practice of reheating food using microwave oven	42
3.3	The reheating period used by consumers to reheat their food using the microwave oven	43
3.4	Consumers' concern about eating microwaved foods	47
4.1	The risk assessment model to simulate the risk of consumption of survived pathogens in microwaved heated RTE food	57
4.2	PCR amplification product of <i>Salmonella</i>	59
4.3	PCR amplification product of <i>E. coli</i> O157:H7.	59
4.4	The center temperatures of the heated RTE foods	64
5.1	Survival curves of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis (Initial count: 6.44 log CFU/g) and STEC O157 (Initial count: 6.16 log CFU/g) in white rice reheated at different heating times	74
5.2	Survival curves of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis (Initial count: 6.28 log CFU/g) and STEC O157 (Initial count: 6.26 log CFU/g) in roasted chicken breast reheated at different heating times	75
5.3	Survival curves of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis (Initial count: 6.40 log CFU/g) and STEC O157 (Initial count: 6.57 log CFU/g) in deep fried nuggets reheated at different heating times	75
5.4	Survival curves of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis (Initial count: 6.41 log CFU/g) and STEC O157 (Initial count: 5.91 log CFU/g) in fried rice reheated at different heating times	76
5.5	<i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis survival in various food composition types in accordance with microwave heating times	77
5.6	STEC O157 survival in various food composition types in accordance with microwave heating times	77
6.1	Inactivation curve of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis using microwave heating. Symbols represent the observed data while the solid lines correspond to the simulated Weibull model.	84
6.2	Inactivation curve of STEC O157 using microwave heating. Symbols represent the observed data while the solid lines correspond to the simulated Weibull model.	85

6.3	Survival of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis in fried rice (dots) and fitted Weibull model (solid line)	87
6.4	Survival of STEC O157 in fried rice (dots) and fitted Weibull model (solid line)	87
7.1	Exposure model of the retail and consumer phase of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis and STEC O157 in RTE food	91



LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix		Page
A1	Nucleotide sequence of the PCR product for <i>Salmonella</i> genus, <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis and <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Typhimurium for primers validation	121
A2	Nucleotide sequence of the PCR product for <i>E. coli</i> O157: H7 for primers validation	123
B1	Table of results of MPN-PCR	126
B2	Log reduction of <i>S. enterica</i> serovar Enteritidis in different food compositions reheated using a microwave oven	142
B3	Log reduction of STEC O157 in different food compositions reheated using a microwave oven	144
B4	Calculation of the proximate composition of fried rice	146
C	Consumer Survey Questionnaire	149

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAC	CODEX Alimentarius Commission
CDC	Center for Control Disease and Prevention
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization
ECDC	European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
EPA	United States Environmental Protection Agency
FAO	Food Agriculture Organization
FSAI	Food Safety Authority of Ireland
FSANZ	Food Standards Australia New Zealand
FSIS	Food Safety and Inspection Service
IFT	Institute of Food Technologist
MPN-PCR	Most Probable Number-Polymerase Chain Reaction
MRA	Microbiological Risk Assessment
NRC	National Research Council
NTS	Non-typhoidal <i>Salmonella</i>
QMRA	Quantitative Microbiological Risk Assessment
STEC	Shiga-toxigenic <i>Escherichia coli</i>
US FDA	United States Food and Drug Administration
USA	United States of America
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WHO	World Health Organization
FoSIM	Malaysian's Food Safety and Quality Division

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The microwave oven is now an indispensable and popular item in every household as it reheats food quickly than conventional heating. Based on dielectric heating, the interaction between the microwaves and the food, particularly the water molecules produce volumetric heating which heats the food from inside out in a short period. When exposed to microwaves, the molecules will either re-orientate themselves according to the electromagnetic field or do not react. At a certain period, the re-orientating molecules lag behind which is then converted to heat energy used to heat up the food. Ionic conduction also occurs with the presence of charged molecules in the food whereby the charged molecules will vibrate and generate heat from friction.

In the current food technology, microwave heating is expanding into the food industry with many applications such as drying, bread baking, tempering, thawing and precooking. The potential of microwave heating is expected to be widely applied in the food industries in the future as it has emerged as a viable alternative for thermal processing by providing flexibility of usage in most operation units and a time-saving process.

1.2 Problem Statement

The popularity of using a microwave oven to prepare food continues to increase as shorter time of meal preparation is only required. Despite the added advantage, much research is still being conducted on microwave heating due to its major drawback of uneven heating distribution. This had led to a major food safety concern of the food being reheated in a microwave oven, in particular microbiological hazard. Insufficient heating of the food will allow the pathogens and spoilage microorganisms to survive through the thermal treatment and cause infection or intoxication. Outbreak cases concerning the consumption of food reheated with the microwave oven have been reported mostly in the United States of America (USA) with the most recent case in 2013. The safety of the food being reheated using a microwave oven is evidently an issue neglected by today's society. The risk of one suffering from foodborne illness via the consumption of microwave heated food is present.

1.3 Objectives

Generally, this study conducted aimed to scientifically address the microbiological safety of microwave heated ready-to-eat foods. The study contained five specific chapters with the following objectives:

- (a) To measure the Malaysian consumers' knowledge and practice and to understand their perspective of microwave oven safety
- (b) To study the prevalence of the survivability of *Salmonella enterica* and Shiga-toxigenic *Escherichia coli* (STEC) O157 in microwave heated ready-to-eat food and the risk factors associated
- (c) To investigate the influence of food composition to the microwave heating time in relation to the inactivation of *S. enterica* serovar Enteritidis and STEC O157
- (d) To model the microwave heating inactivation of *S. enterica* serovar Enteritidis and STEC O157 using the Weibull model
- (e) To perform the exposure assessment of *S. enterica* serovar Enteritidis and STEC O157 on microwave heated RTE food.

Microwave ovens can be seen in most convenience stores now and, even restaurants are using the microwave oven frequently. Consumers' knowledge on the microwave oven is relatively important to determine the safety of the food product. Therefore, the first study's objective was to measure their knowledge and practice of microwave oven emphasizing on food safety. Consumers' food safety attitude and concerns about microwave heated foods were also addressed.

The survivability of the naturally contaminated pathogens, particularly *Salmonella enterica* and Shiga-toxigenic *Escherichia coli* O157, in microwave heated ready-to-eat (RTE) food were evaluated. The survived pathogens were enumerated using the Most Probable Number-Polymerase Chain Reaction (MPN-PCR) technique and modelled through a simple exposure assessment to estimate the risk of consumption. The surviving factors of the pathogen were then studied extensively in the second study to identify the possible risk factors.

Based on the surviving factors, it was identified that the microwave heating time and the consumers' knowledge were essentially part of the main contributing factors of the pathogen survival apart from the uneven heating distribution. Hence, the third study focused more on the microwave heating time and explored the influence of food composition on microwave heating time in relation to the inactivation of the pathogens. The data collected was then subjected to model the microwave inactivation of the pathogens using the Weibull model in the third study.

To complete the study, a retail and consumer phase exposure assessment was conducted on *S. enterica* serovar Enteritidis and STEC O157 on microwave heated RTE foods. The retail and consumer phase exposure assessment model will incorporate the data and information from the previous studies to quantitatively assess the risk. Based on the characterized risk, interventions will be designed and evaluated to estimate the level of risk reductions.

All in all, it is hoped that this study will scientifically address the safety of microwave heated food and educate the public of the appropriate measures to be taken while microwave heating food to preserve the public health.



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