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Consumer Perception and Buying Behavior Towards RTE and RTC Foods: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

The growing demand for RTE (Ready to Eat) and RTC (Ready to Cook) food products necessitates the need to understand the factors influencing customer perception and buying behavior. This thematic study was conducted to identify key determinants that shape consumer decisions towards RTE and RTC products. 40 studies were analyzed for thematic and bigram analysis. Results revealed six major factors that affect consumer purchase behavior and satisfaction level naming product attributes, convenience factors, health considerations, marketing and communication strategies, sustainability and ethical concerns along with safety and socio-cultural factors. Thematic analysis indicated that food quality, consumer perception, convenience, purchase intentions and sustainability related concerns are most repeating concepts in existing studies. Additionally, the evolving nature of consumer perceptions with respect to food choices is highlighted. Shift from product attributes to ethical, social and environmental concerns can be justified in this study. This paper contributes to existing pool of study through proposed Integrated Consumer Perception and Behavior Framework (ICPBF). It also provides guidance for future empirical research and managerial practice in the RTE and RTC food industry.

Keywords: RTE foods, RTC foods, consumer perception, consumer buying behavior

Introduction

RTE (Ready to Eat) and RTC (Ready to Cook) are food items that go through various processing stages, such as cleaning, chopping and pre-cooking. These are packaged appropriately and kept in frozen, refrigerated or ambient settings. These goods can be eaten raw or with a little heating. They are mostly made from agricultural, poultry, cattle and marine raw resources. Worldwide economic development and fast pace of life are leading to rapid growth of Ready to Eat (RTE) goods. (Zhang *et al* 2025) ^[35]. Food consumption behavior has been significantly affected by changing lifestyle patterns of consumers. Time Scarcity refers to a situation where time is not enough to complete daily tasks. The more time scarcity, the more likely consumers tend to purchase out of home foods (Oostenbach *et al* 2022) ^[28]. Intentions of customers to buy and consume convenience food are positively related with time constraints, lack of cooking skills, lack of confidence in meal preparation, lack of interest in the physical and mental efforts involved in cooking, familiarity with convenience food and a lack of motivation to cook. Consumers' intent to buy and consume convenience food is greatly influenced by circumstances, including a busy lifestyle, a demanding work schedule and several duties within the time scarcity construct (Imtiyaz *et al* 2023) ^[13]. Consumer awareness is increasing considerably. Nowadays, Food labels include information beyond nutrition, such as environmental sustainability, fair trade and animal welfare (Izcue-Gana & Palmeiro-Silva 2026) ^[16]. Consumers place greater value on environmental and social responsibility labeling programs (Tobi *et al* 2019) ^[33]. Eco-labels are social and psychological signals that affect consumer behavior in addition to being informational aids. To encourage sustainable food choices, label clarity, credibility and emotional resonance are very important (Ketkaew & Komsing 2025) ^[19].

Consumer perception is an important aspect which shapes purchase intention, satisfaction, loyalty and food choices in the food market. A satisfied consumer is more likely to believe that the product is sufficient and of high quality to satisfy their needs (García-Salirrosaset *al* 2024) ^[12]. As a sensory attribute, taste has a direct impact on food preferences and acceptance (Sari & Yulianto 2024) ^[31]. Characteristics like pleasing appearance, nice taste,

pleasant scent, and appealing texture impacts purchase intentions and satisfaction of consumer (Imtiyaz *et al* 2023) ^[13]. Numerous other elements, including the type of food, the contents mentioned on the package, labeling and the packaging design, affect perception regarding food goods (Berthold *et al* 2024) ^[2]. Perceived food quality is directly influenced by price fairness and perceived value (Konuk, 2019) ^[20]. Food industry and governments must understand and analyze the motivations, perceptions, and preferences of customers (Kaya 2016) ^[18]. It is important for policy makers, marketers and food manufacturers to deeply understand consumer perceptions. It can lead to customer satisfaction, growth and sustainable development of food industry.

Research Problem

RTE and RTC industries are growing due to factors like a rise in disposable income, time scarcity, convenience and changing lifestyles due to urbanization. It is complex to assess consumer behavior towards such products due to various interconnected factors like product attributes, convenience, health, nutrition and marketing related factors. Additionally, sustainability, Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical concerns also affect consumer behavior. Although various studies have examined these factors separately or to a limited extent, no study shows how these factors affect consumer behavior in an integrated manner. So, there is a need to combine existing knowledge to develop conceptual understanding regarding consumer behavior towards RTE and RTC goods.

Need of the Study

This study is going to provide a comprehensive framework which will help to understand the factors that influence consumer behavior towards RTE and RTC goods. Major factors determining consumer perception, satisfaction and acceptance will be determined using existing literature. A comprehensive conceptual framework will be developed, interlinking various factors identified and consumer outcomes. The results of the study will be helpful for food manufacturers, marketers, policymakers and researchers in shaping consumer focused products, effective communication strategies, sustainable food practices and health-oriented marketing strategies in the growing convenience food sector.

Objectives of Study

Main aim to undertake this study is to study the factors influencing consumer perception and buying behavior towards RTE and RTC food products. Under this main objective 6 Research propositions are developed:

P1: Product attributes positively influence consumer perception and attitude toward RTE and RTC foods.

P2: Convenience factors significantly influence consumer perception and buying behavior toward RTE and RTC foods.

P3: Health and nutrition-related factors influence consumers' purchase decisions and satisfaction.

P4: Marketing, branding, and communication strategies significantly shape consumer attitudes and purchase intention.

P5: Sustainability, ethical concerns, and CSR practices positively affect consumer trust and buying behavior.

P6: Safety perceptions and socio-cultural factors influence consumer acceptance and food consumption behavior.

Research Methodology

The present study is based on qualitative thematic analysis. In this study, existing literature is examined related to consumer perception towards Ready to Eat (RTE) and Ready to Cook (RTC) food products. Thematic analysis is used as a primary analytical tool in this study because of its flexibility and suitability for recognizing themes from qualitative data. Thematic Analysis offers methods for creating codes and themes from qualitative data that are easy to understand. The smallest analytical units that capture significant aspects of the data are called codes. Codes serve as the foundation for themes, which are bigger patterns of meaning supported by a fundamental organizing notion. A framework for arranging and summarizing the researcher's analytical observations is provided by themes. The goal of TA is not only to summarize the data; rather, it is to identify and interpret important aspects of the data. The focus is on generating thorough and superior analysis (Clarke & Braun 2017) ^[7].

Current work is based on secondary sources of data. Various research papers, review articles, book chapters, conference proceedings etc. were collected from Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, ResearchGate, Scopus, Web of Science and Science Direct. Keywords such as consumer perception, consumer behavior, processed food, ready to eat, ready to cook, health consciousness, sustainability, branding, convenience, food quality and purchasing behavior were used to search for appropriate content.

To maintain the quality of this research, only selected studies were included. The literature selection process included studies related to ready to eat and ready to cook foods. Along with this, studies focusing on consumer perception, attitude, buying behavior, food quality, sustainability or health-related aspects were included for the present study. Only peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly publications were considered. Empirical, conceptual and review-based studies relevant to the research objectives were incorporated. On the other hand, non-academic articles, blogs, and news reports were excluded. Studies unrelated to consumer perception or RTE/RTC food products and articles lacking sufficient conceptual or thematic relevance were not considered for this analysis. 67 studies were examined but based on inclusion criteria, 40 studies were comprised.

A structured Excel database was created by methodically extracting relevant information from the chosen studies. Author details, publication year, study title, keywords, research methods, variables examined, findings, implications, abstracts, conceptual frameworks, and starting codes were within the data that were extracted.

The study used thematic analysis framework for identifying and interpreting themes within the selected literature. Firstly, all selected studies were thoroughly reviewed to gain familiarity with the dataset. Subsequently, initial codes were generated from abstracts, keywords, findings, and conceptual discussions present in the literature. Similar codes and repetitive concepts were grouped together to develop broader thematic categories. These themes were continuously reviewed, refined and reorganized. The final themes identified in the study included Product Attributes, Consumer Buying Behavior, Convenience Factors, Health

and Nutrition Factors, Sustainability and Ethics, Consumer Perception and Attitude, Marketing and Communication, Safety and Risk Factors, Socio-Cultural Factors and Food Experience and Satisfaction.

Further to strengthen the study, bigram frequency analysis and thematic frequency analysis were conducted using R software. Pairs of continuous text units, such words or characters, are called bigrams. Understanding the frequency and distribution of word or character pairs in a text can reveal relationships between the text units (Webserv 2026) [34]. Theme frequency tables, year-wise thematic distributions and stacked thematic contribution analyses were generated to understand the relevance and evolution of themes across the reviewed literature.

The RStudio software was used to analyze dataset. Relevant R packages including readxl, tidytext, dplyr, ggplot2, and tidyverse were used. Software was used to conduct Theme frequency analysis, Bigram extraction and visualization, Year-wise thematic distribution analysis, stacked thematic contribution analysis, Graphical representation of themes and conceptual relationships.

Lastly, a conceptual framework was proposed to explain the influence of product attributes, convenience factors, health consciousness, sustainability concerns, marketing communication and socio-cultural factors on consumer perception and buying behavior toward RTE and RTC food products. Research propositions were developed inductively from recurring thematic patterns identified during the thematic analysis process.

Results and Thematic findings

Thematic analysis is a popular technique, which consists of evaluation and analysis of qualitative data. This study is based on principles of thematic analysis including data coding, generating themes, refining themes and reporting the findings (Naeemet *et al* 2023) [26]. Current study undertook systematic analysis of keywords, abstracts, findings and conceptual frameworks to identify reoccurring concepts and patterns. Then coding was done to form broader themes. The entire process gave major themes related to consumer perception and buying behavior towards RTE and RTC food products.

Theme frequency analysis was conducted to understand the importance of each theme. Thematic frequency table is presented following.

Table 1: Thematic frequency table

Themes	Frequency
Consumer Buying Behavior	3
Consumer Perception & Attitude	4
Convenience Factors	4
Food Experience & Satisfaction	3
Health & Nutrition Factors	3
Marketing & Branding	2
Marketing & Communication	2
Product Attributes	4
Safety & Risk Factors	3
Socio-Cultural Factors	3
Sustainability & Ethics	8

Source: Compiled by the Researcher using R Software (2026)

From the above findings, it is clearly visible that 'Sustainability & Ethics' is the most frequent occurring theme. Consumers' awareness of eco-friendly consumption is growing day by day. The customer base of socially

conscious attitude is increasing with rise in customer awareness. Concepts like carbon footprint, eco-friendly packaging and green plus sustainable purchasing are gaining importance (Çam *et al* 2025) [5]. 'Consumer Perception & Attitude', 'Product Attributes' and 'Convenience Factors' also dominate studies related to consumer perception towards RTE and RTC products. The primary factor influencing customers' purchase intention, consumption and satisfaction is sensory appeal. Product attributes such as appealing texture, good taste, pleasant appearance and nice scent impacts consumer's purchase intentions (Imtiyaz *et al* 2021) [14]. Further, convenience is one of the major drivers of food choice. Convenience is presented as an attribute that saves time and effort, which in turn benefits consumers (Bogard *et al* 2024) [3].

Conversely, themes such as 'Marketing & Branding' and 'Marketing & Communication' received less attention in studies. It provides potential opportunities for further research. Possible reasons for this fact can be a rise in customer awareness in areas of sustainability, ethics and product attributes. These findings indicate that contemporary research has shifted to health & nutrition factors, product attributes, socio-cultural factors along with sustainability & ethics.

Bigram Frequency analysis is used to identify conceptual relationships within existing literature. It was undertaken on the coded dataset in order to identify repetitive word pairs.

Table 2: Bigram Frequency Table

Word 1	Word 2	n
food	quality	13
consumer	perception	12
consumer	behavior	9
convenience	food	9
purchase	intention	9
perception	food	8
ready	to	8
taste	preference	8
consumer	attitude	7
consumer	awareness	7
sustainable	consumption	7
food	safety	6
healthy	eating	6
of	food	6
eat	food	5
food	choice	5
product	availability	5
social	responsibility	5
to	eat	5
easy	preparation	4

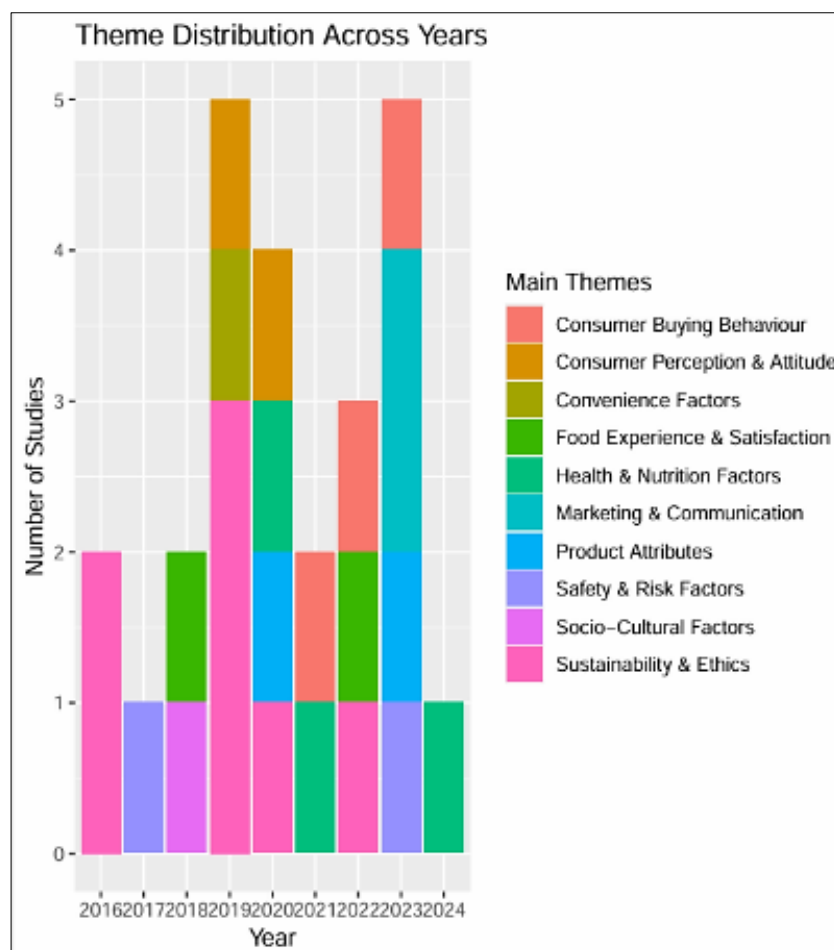
Source: Compiled by the Researcher using R Software (2026)

These are various word pairs that are repeatedly shown in various studies. 'Food quality' and 'Consumer perception' are the most recurring concepts in studies. It can be stated that consumers are strongly influenced by the quality of food. Consumers have a positive perception of sensory attributes of food products. They are considerate about food quality (de Araújo *et al* 2022) [9]. Other frequently occurring bigrams are 'Consumer behavior', 'Convenience food' and 'Purchase Intention'. This shows how behavior, convenience and intentions influence consumer perception. Word themes like 'Taste preference', 'Consumer attitude' and 'Consumer awareness' depict that sensory characteristic of food products, especially taste, affect consumer attitude

and awareness. Furthermore, repetition of ‘Sustainable consumption’, ‘Food safety’, ‘Healthy eating’, ‘Social responsibility’, ‘Product availability’ and ‘Easy preparation’ shows that these are various factors apart from food quality and taste preference, on which consumers evaluate the food product. Overall, existing literature is centered around consumer perception, awareness, behavior and purchase intention. While various factors affecting the same are food

quality, convenience, taste, sustainable consumption, food safety, healthy eating, social responsibility and easy preparation.

Year-wise theme distribution helps to get an idea of evolution about research focus over the span of time. Distribution of themes across literature was analyzed and the following results were obtained.



Source: Figure prepared by the author using R software

Fig 1: Theme Distribution across years

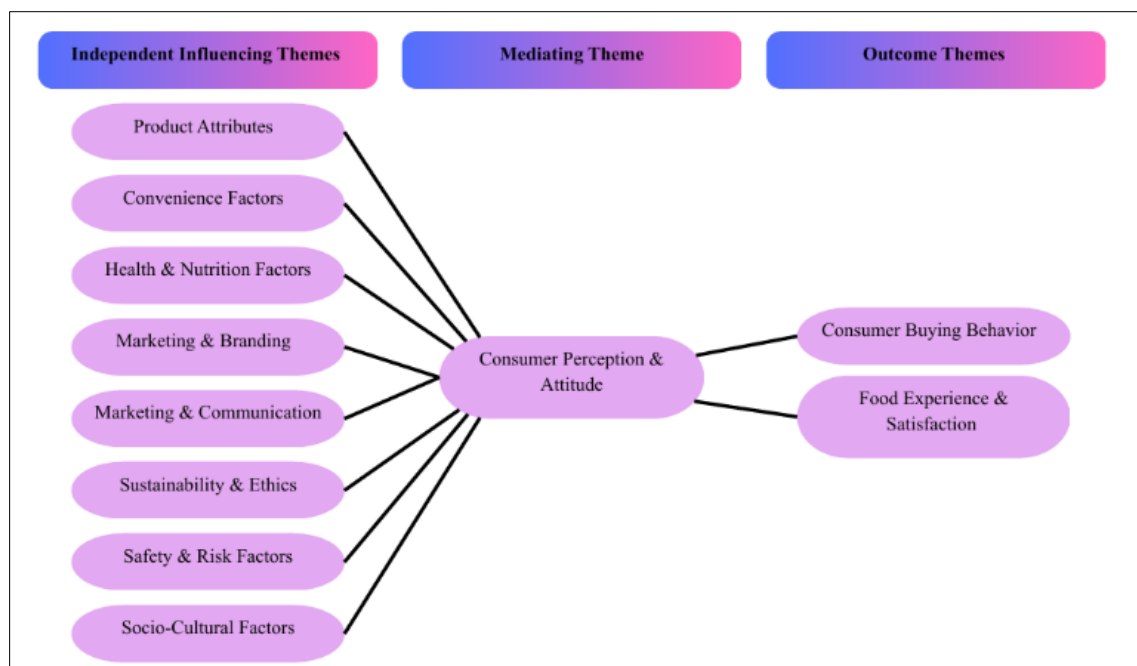
The figure demonstrates that a variety of research themes have gradually evolved during 2016-2024. At first glance, it is quite evident that published studies related to RTE and RTC have increased after the year 2019. The results show that themes like consumer buying behavior, consumer perception and attitude, convenience factors and product attributes have persisted throughout the study period. These arenas continue to gain scholarly interest and serve as fundamental theoretical pillars of literature.

The emerging significance of Safety & Risk Factors, Health & Nutrition Factors and Marketing & Communication in recent years is noteworthy. This trend shows a slow shift in the research agenda from one that is primarily focused on products to one that is focused on consumers and

sustainability. Nowadays research increasingly looks at health consciousness, ethical consumption, environmental responsibility, food safety and consumer well-being. Past studies mostly focused on functional benefits including convenience, product quality and accessibility.

The results show that social, economic and environmental factors are studied along with preexisting knowledge frameworks. Consumer food choice is today recognized as a multifaceted phenomenon. Consumer perception is influenced by both individual motivations and broader societal factors. So, the literature shows a shift toward a more comprehensive understanding of consumer behavior in the RTE and RTC food industry.

Conceptual framework



Source: Author's creation

Fig 2: Integrated Consumer Perception and Behavior Framework (ICPBF)

P1: Product attributes positively influence consumer perception and attitude toward RTE and RTC foods.

Thematic analysis shows that Product attributes is one of the significant factors that influence consumer perception towards RTE and RTC food products. Taste is an important factor influencing purchasing decisions. Further, food labelling and price are both considered important extrinsic factors in terms of product attributes (Symmank 2018). Consumers place high priority to quality of food products. They consider freshness to be an important attribute of quality (Dolezalová *et al* 2016) ^[10]. Favorable perception about food products leads to positive buying behavior and experience along with satisfaction.

P2: Convenience factors significantly influence consumer perception and buying behavior toward RTE and RTC foods.

Time scarcity is directly related to consumers' intention to purchase and consume convenience food. Busy lifestyle, hectic work schedule and multiple responsibilities within time scarcity construct were prominent factors which affect consumer perception and attitude towards RTE and RTC products (Imtiyaz *et al* 2023) ^[13]. Consumer demand is expanding because of urbanization, dual-income households and time pressures. Purchasing behavior is influenced by a confluence of factors, among which one is time saving (Nature Index n.d.). Convenience leads to positive experience and causes favorable buying behavior towards RTE and RTC products.

P3: Health and nutrition-related factors influence consumers' purchase decisions and satisfaction.

Health is determined as the most important trend in global food and beverage industries. Consumers purchase intentions are influenced by health and nutrition claims of RTE and RTC products (Duarte & Teixeira 2021) ^[11]. Health is seen as a factor which makes food attractive to consumers (Meiselman 2016) ^[24]. Customers encompassing nutritional knowledge, information and claims, assign

importance to health information of food (Mogendi *et al* 2016) ^[25]. Healthiness of RTE and RTC items is perceived by consumers through FoP (Front of pack) labels and health claims, the ingredients of the product and the organic origin of the product (Plasek *et al* 2020) ^[29]. So nutritional information and health-related perceptions shapes consumers decisions, which in turn affects purchase decisions and satisfaction levels.

P4: Marketing, branding, and communication strategies significantly shape consumer attitudes and purchase intention.

Customer satisfaction and purchase intention are significantly influenced by brand identity and brand image (Dash *et al* 2021) ^[8]. Purchase intentions are significantly influenced by marketing strategies (Zou 2025) ^[36]. Brand equity is positively and significantly impacted by communication. Communication creates awareness and attracts consumer attention (Iswati *et al* 2023) ^[15]. By creating brand awareness, spreading information, influencing attitudes and perceptions, differentiating brands, using social proof, promoting interaction and engagement, creating emotional connections, and motivating action, marketing communication strategies have a substantial impact on consumer purchasing behavior (Majaliwa *et al* 2024) ^[23].

P5: Sustainability, ethical concerns, and CSR practices positively affect consumer trust and buying behavior.

CSR practices and ethical behavior are important factors for consumers to make purchases. When making purchase decisions, most consumers examine the company's social responsibility. They are open to switching to a socially conscious brand, and do not only consider price and quality (Caldeira & Moro 2024) ^[4]. CSR and ethical concerns are vital factors that shape customers' perception in terms of ethical conduct and sustainable initiatives of RTE and RTC products. Sustainability-oriented initiatives are effective strategic tools to solidify trustworthiness among consumers

(Kumar 2025) ^[21]. Environmental concerns have a significant impact on pro-environmental behavior, which in turn affects attitudes and views of sustainability (Sánchez-Bravo *et al* 2020) ^[30].

P6: Safety perceptions and socio-cultural factors influence consumer acceptance and food consumption behavior.

Customers' perceptions of RTE and RTC food are influenced by their cultural background, which has an impact on how much they will utilize and accept the food product (Jeong & Lee 2021) ^[17]. Food preferences and habits are greatly influenced by cultural variables, such as customs and dietary restrictions. On the other hand, accessibility, cost and nutritional choices are influenced by socioeconomic levels (Ajetunmobi & Laobangdisa 2024) ^[1]. Along with socio-cultural factors, safety perceptions also influence purchasing decisions and consecutively satisfaction levels. Since consumers are crucial to food safety, it is critical to analyze the attitudes, behaviors and motivations that influence their choices (Lee *et al* 2022) ^[22]. Several food safety problems, including food contamination and adulteration, instances of food poisoning and legal infractions, have prompted consumers to seek guarantees regarding the quality and safety of food (Campos *et al* 2024) ^[6].

Conclusion

Consumer decision making is influenced by multidimensional factors like product attributes, convenience, health, marketing, sustainability, safety and socio-cultural factors. Consumer decision making is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained solely by a single factor. Customer evaluations are shaped majorly based on product attributes. Reoccurring concepts such as food quality, taste preference, freshness, packaging and nutritional value indicate that these affect consumer perceptions and attitudes. Quality perceptions play a central role in providing positive food experience and satisfaction. Additionally, time saving and easy preparation also increase demand for RTE and RTC food products. This is because of changing lifestyles, urbanization and reduced time available for meal preparation. Another important observation is that consumers are increasingly becoming more nutrition and health conscious. Gradual shifts have been seen towards health-oriented food consumption patterns. Also, positive customer attitudes and a higher chance of a purchase are facilitated by effective communication and marketing strategies. Moreover, purchase decisions are no longer influenced by personal benefits, but with sustainability, ethical concerns and corporate social responsibility. Likewise, food safety parameters and socio-cultural factors affect consumer perception and behavior. While evaluating RTE and RTC items, consumers perceive safety and hygiene standards. Food preferences and consumption habits are simultaneously shaped by cultural values, familial influence, lifestyle patterns, and demographic traits. Based on identified thematic patterns, integrated conceptual framework named Integrated Consumer Perception and Behavior Framework (ICPBF) is proposed to explain that various factors shape consumer perception and attitude, which in turn affects buying behavior, acceptance and satisfaction towards RTE and RTC products. This framework contributes theoretically to the existing body of literature.

This respective study provides various Implications for policy makers, food manufacturers, government, market personnel and researchers. Food manufacturers are suggested to emphasize food product attributes, quality, convenience, nutritional value, safety assurance and sustainable practices. Marketers must focus on marketing, branding and communication practices. The government should look after execution of law and order related to ethical practices, in order to ensure transparency to consumers. Also, the suggested framework gives researchers a starting point for further investigations into the connections between the characteristics revealed and how they affect consumer behavior. Since this study is based on existing literature, this paves a way to conduct empirical study for more accurate generalizations. Proposed propositions can be tested among various demographics, geographic areas and product types. This will further validate and refine the proposed conceptual framework.

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