**Consumer Buying Behavior and Perceptions of Ready-to-Eat Foods: A Study Among College Students in Santo Tomas, Philippines**

**ABSTRACT**

The present study examined the correlation between consumer buying behavior and the perception of ready-to-eat food among college students. A sample of 365 students from five departments in a local college in Davao del Norte, Philippines, participated in the survey, utilizing two adapted questionnaires. Statistical analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between consumer buying behavior and the perception of ready-to-eat food among college students. The study suggests promoting healthier dietary behaviors among students, supporting parents in fostering healthy eating habits, and engaging health professionals in advocating for informed food choices. Recommendations for students include prioritizing nutritious ready-to-eat options and being mindful of the health implications of their food choices. Parents are encouraged to guide their children towards healthier eating habits by providing nutritious ready-to-eat foods and discussing the importance of balanced diets. Additionally, future research should explore dimensions of natural content and task performance concerning ready-to-eat foods, as well as investigate consumer buying behavior among students. Such investigations can inform targeted interventions and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing consumer behavior and perceptions, facilitating evidence-based strategies for promoting public health and well-being.

**Keywords**: *Consumer buying behavior, perception of ready-to-eat food, descriptive and correlational design, Davao del Norte, Philippines*

**INTRODUCTION**

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in the consumption of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods in developing countries. These foods are convenient and time-saving, making them appealing to individuals leading busy lifestyles. RTE foods can take on various forms, being either traditional or industrial, packaged or unpackaged, and are typically consumed either immediately or at a later time. However, alongside the rising popularity of ready-to-eat foods, several problems have emerged concerning public health (Temgire et al., 2021).

Additionally, issues such as food-borne poisoning in academic institutions have arisen due to factors such as inappropriate storage, unhygienic food preparation areas, unhygienic personnel, and improper food handling practices (Patel & Rathod, 2017). The core problem related to food safety lies in understanding consumers' perceptions, a crucial aspect for the effective development and implementation of food safety policies (Basurra et al., 2021).

In India, a majority of people prefer an easy and fast method of meal preparation over spending extended time in cooking. This shift in preference is attributed to changes in lifestyle. Consequently, individuals opt for ready-to-eat food items like cup noodles (Smigic et al., 2023). Globally, consumers prioritize the purchase of ready-to-eat (RTE) products, focusing on their qualities and perceptions. The surge in global RTE consumption is driven by factors such as longer shelf life, availability, and packaging (Sasmal, 2022). Similarly, Temgire et al. (2021). underscored that RTE products often contain high levels of fat, salt, sugar, and other chemicals, which can have adverse effects on health, leading to issues like overweight, heart-related problems, and other undesirable conditions.

In the Philippines, popular ready-to-eat foods include street foods (Tacardon, Ong, & Gumasing, 2023) and offerings from fast-food chains (Bondoc, Florendo, Taguiwalo, & Eustaquio, 2019). Street foods consist of ready-to-eat items sold on the streets. In various urban areas of developing countries, including the Philippines, over four million low- and middle-income consumers incorporate street foods into their daily diets. The rationale behind this widespread consumption is that street foods are affordable and easily accessible, providing a convenient means to obtain a nutritionally balanced meal outside the home (Bellia, Bcarella, & Ingrassia, 2022).

On the one hand, consumers constitute individuals and organizations that engage in the purchase, utilization, and disposal of goods and services. Their choices regarding what to buy are influenced by their emotions, preferences, and attitudes. The comprehension of consumer behavior holds paramount significance for businesses as it aids them in crafting products and services that align with the requirements of their clientele. Additionally, it empowers consumers to make well-informed decisions about their expenditure (Stanciu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, a pertinent issue arises concerning consumer behavior, notably the lack of knowledge among consumers and the extent of their awareness regarding food safety, along with their support for the development and implementation of food safety measures (Basurra et al., 2021).

Various factors influence customer behavior, including income levels, product pricing, convenience, and other elements. Ready-to-eat (RTE) foods have become increasingly popular in the field of vital necessities such as food and nutrition in recent years. The increase can be credited to the fast-paced lifestyles in contemporary culture, where instant consumption choices fit well with limited time availability (Kaviya, 2023). Consumer knowledge of food items is increasing, leading to a significant trend towards ready-to-eat products. The changing customer behavior could greatly influence the food business. Several studies have explored consumer behavior regarding Ready-to-Eat (RTE) products, covering a range of demographics including various age groups (Kaviya, 2023), women balancing work and home duties (Mankani & Tata, 2022), and students and employees (Basurra et al., 2021).

The previously described studies were conducted in an international setting, and after a study of pertinent literature, it was discovered that there is a lack of local research in the specified subject of interest. Our study intends to investigate the relationship between consumer behavior and college students' impressions of ready-to-eat foods in Santo Tomas, Davao del Norte, with the goal of adding to the body of knowledge in the area. The purpose of this study is to examine students' perceptions and opinions about ready-to-eat meal options in order to provide helpful insights for food producers.

**Statement of the Problem**

The study will aim to determine the relationship between the consumer behavior and perceptions of college students in Santo Tomas, Davao del Norte, regarding ready-to-eat foods.

Specifically, the study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of consumer buying behavior among college students?
2. What is the level of the perception of students on ready-to-eat foods?
3. Is there a significant a significant relationship between consumer behavior and the perception of students in ready to eat foods among college students in Santo Tomas Davao del Norte?

**Hypothesis**

The following hypothesis will be tested at 0.05 level of significance that there is no significant relationship between the perception on ready-to-eat foods and consumer behavior among college students in Santo Tomas Davao del Norte.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study aims to determine the correlation between consumer buying behavior and college students' views on ready-to-eat foods. The research is based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which suggests that a person's actions can be anticipated based on characteristics such as intention influenced by attitude, subjective standards, and perceptions (Saeri et al., 2014; Ajzen, 2015). The theory of planned behavior posits that consumer behavior can be affected by internal and external elements in the ongoing study. Various factors influence customer behavior (Rozenkowska, 2023). This study attempts to investigate the direct relationship between perceptions of ready-to-eat foods and consumer behavior.

**Conceptual Framework**

The study aims to determine the relationship between the perception on ready to eat foods and consumer behavior. The independent variable of the study is the consumer buying behavior. This variable has nine indicators that includes Health, Mood, Convenience, Sensory appeal, Natural content, Price, Weight control, Familiarity; and Ethical concern. The dependent variable of the study is the perception of the students on ready-to-eat foods. The indicators of the variables are Safety on the Food Sources, Issues on Buying RTE and Concerns when Buying Ready-to-eat foods.

**Consumer Buying Behavior**

* Health
* Mood
* Convenience
* Sensory appeal
* Natural content
* Price
* Weight control
* Familiarity
* Ethical concern

**Perception of the Students on Ready to Eat Foods**

* Safety on the Food Sources
* Issues on Buying RTE
* Concerns when Buying RTE

**INDEPENDENT VARIABLE**

**DEPENDENT VARIABLE**

**Figure 1. Conceptual Paradigm of the Study**

**METHODOLOGY**

This chapter discusses the research design, research location, population, sample, research instrument, data collection methods, and statistical analysis tools.

**Research Design**

 This study will utilize a quantitative non-experimental methodology that applies a descriptive and correlational approach. The quantitative research method involves collecting and analyzing numerical data to detect patterns, make projections, examine causal relationships, and draw conclusions that can be applied to larger populations (Bhandari, 2020). Quantitative research is a method used to get information about a certain group of people, known as a sample population. It will employ scientific investigation to assess matters concerning a specific group by analyzing observed or measured data (Creswell, 2017). Nonexperimental designs are research methodologies used to investigate social issues without altering the environment in which humans exist. Furthermore, respondents will not be randomly assigned to different groups (Frey, 2018).

The descriptive approach will explore language acquisition and instruction in natural situations without any intervention or alteration of elements. The aim of the descriptive approach is to define a phenomenon and its characteristics. Moreover, it will focus more on events rather than the reasons or mechanisms of existence (Nassaji, 2015). The researcher will utilize this study to investigate, ascertain, and elucidate the relationship between teacher work values and leadership style on organizational policies and practices.

The study objectives will be achieved via a survey method. This quantitative method is used to study how students behave and perceive ready-to-eat foods. A systematic questionnaire is used to obtain data from the specific student group. This methodology is selected for its effectiveness and appropriateness in collecting measurable data that is pertinent to the research goals.

**RESEARCH SUBJECT** The survey included college students currently attending the local college in Davao del Norte. Currently, there are 4,137 students enrolled in the five programs. The majority of students are registered in Department A, totaling 1,330 students, followed by Department B with 1,293 students, Department C with 815 students, Department D with 619 students, and Department E with 80 students. Participants will be selected using a stratified random sampling procedure due to the enormous population size, making this method appropriate. Stratified random sampling is suitable for this study as it enables researchers to select samples that accurately represent the total population (Hayes, 2022). The students will be stratified and a random selection of participants will be made from each stratum (Nguyen, et.al., 2019).

Furthermore, slovin's Formula will be used to calculate the sample size with a margin of error of 0.05. Participants must currently be enrolled in a local college and be studying in one of five specified departments, regardless of age, gender, or year level. Table 1 displays the distribution of the respondents. There are 365 samples in all, calculated using Slovin's formula. Department A has the largest number of respondents, at 117, which represents 32% of all respondents. Department B comprises 113 samples, which accounts for 31% of the total respondents. 73 respondents, or 20% of the total, come from Department C. Department D follows with 55 respondents, accounting for 15%, and Department E has 7 respondents, making up 2%.

**Table 1:** *Distribution of the Respondents*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Areas** | **Population** | **Percentage** | **Sample** |
| Department A | 1330 | 32% | 117 |
| Department B | 1293 | 31% | 113 |
| Department C | 815 | 20% | 73 |
| Department F | 619 | 15% | 55 |
| Department E | 80 | 2% | 7 |
| **Total** | **4137** | **100%** | **365** |

**RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**

The researchers will utilize two adapted research questionnaires. These questionnaires are selected and modified to attain the objectives of the study. The questionnaires will undergo reliability and validity testing.

The instrument to be used in the study is adapted from Chaudhury (2010) for the independent variable and Basurra, et.al. (2020) for the dependent variable but modified questionnaire to suit the context of the study. The first set of the questionnaire deals with consumer behavior in buying RTE with nine indicators and 36 statements: health has six questions, mood has six questions, convenience has five questions, sensory appeal four questions, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concern, all has three questions each.

In evaluating the level of psychological well-being, the five orderable gradations with their respective range of means and description will be considered:

**Table 2:** Five orderable gradations with their respective range of means and description

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Scale** | **Descriptive Equivalent** | **Interpretation** |
| 4.30 - 5.00 | Very High | This means that the level of consumer behavior is highly evident. |
| 3.50 - 4.20 | High | This means that level of consumer behavior is evident. |
| 2.70 - 3.40 | Average | This means that level of consumer behavior is either evident or not. |
| 1.90 - 2.60 | Low | This means that the level of consumer behavior is not evident. |
| 1.00 - 1.80 | Very low | This means that the level of consumer behavior is not highly evident.  |

The second set of instruments embarks with the perception of students in ready-to-eat foods. The questionnaire has a total item of 20 and is composed of three (3) indicators such as safety on food sources with a total item of six, issues on ready to eat food with a total item of 6, and concerns when buying ready to eat foods with a total item of 8. The following five orderable gradations with their respective range of scale and descriptions will be considered:

**Table 3:** Five orderable gradations with their respective range of scale and descriptions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Scale** | **Descriptive Equivalent** | **Interpretation** |
| 4.30 - 5.00 | Very High | This means that the perceptions of students in RTE is very safe/ very worried/ will always buy RTE. |
| 3.50 - 4.20 | High | This means that the perceptions of students in RTE is reasonably safe/ fairly worried/ will frequently buy RTE. |
| 2.70 - 3.40 | Average | This means that the perceptions of students in RTE is unsure/ buy RTE sometimes. |
| 1.90 - 2.60 | Low | This means that the perceptions of students in RTE is somewhat risky/ not very worried/ will rarely buy RTE. |
| 1.00 - 1.80 | Very low | This means that the perceptions of students in RTE is very risky/ not all worried/ will never buy RTE. |

**DATA GATHERING AND PROCEDURE**

 To achieve the objective of the study, the researchers will adhere to the following processes: first, the researchers will seek permission to conduct the study from the vice president of research and development office. Next, once questionnaires are approved, reliability and validity testing will be conducted to ensure their suitability for data collection.

 Following instrument validation, the study will commence. Questionnaires will be personally administered to participants by the researchers to guarantee comprehension and ethical adherence. Lastly, retrieved questionnaires will be tabulated and prepared for analysis. Subsequently, the data will be submitted to a statistician for formal analysis.

**RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Health**

The average mean score for consumer behavior in terms of health is 4.44, indicating a very high level of agreement with the statements. However, the standard deviation of 0.67 suggests some variability in the responses, meaning not all consumers responded with the same level of importance towards these health aspects. In general, a higher standard deviation indicates greater dispersion from the mean, and a lower standard deviation indicates that the data points tend to be very close to the mean. In this case, the standard deviation is relatively high, which suggests that there is a significant amount of variability in how important consumers believe these health aspects are.

**Table 4:** *Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Health*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Contains a lot of vitamins and minerals. | 4.49 | 0.62 | Very High |
| 2. Keeps me healthy. | 4.48 | 0.64 | Very High |
| 3. Nutritious. | 4.49 | 0.64 | Very High |
| 4. Is high in protein | 4.38 | 0.71 | Very High |
| 5. Is good for my skin/teeth/hair/nails, etc | 4.38 | 0.73 | Very High |
| **Average** | **4.44** | **0.67** | **Very High** |

The table showcases a clear trend in consumer behavior regarding health-related attributes, with a strong emphasis on the significance of vitamins and minerals. The recognition of products containing abundant vitamins and minerals aligns with the growing awareness of their vital role in maintaining overall health and vitality. As highlighted by Cusack et al. (2018), the intake of these micronutrients contributes to enhanced immune function, cognitive health, and disease prevention. Moreover, consumers perceive such products as instrumental in promoting their well-being, reflecting a holistic approach to health encompassing physical, mental, and emotional aspects. This sentiment echoes findings by Nova-Reyes et al. (2020), emphasizing the importance of preventive health behaviors in sustaining wellness. However, while protein remains a crucial component for muscle repair and satiety, its perceived importance may be overshadowed by other factors such as taste and convenience, as noted by Bleich et al. (2017). Therefore, while consumers prioritize vitamins, minerals, and overall health in their consumption decisions, understanding the nuances of their preferences will be essential for effective product development and communication strategies in the ever-evolving consumer landscape.

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Mood**

The average mean of consumer behavior in terms of mood is 4.56, with a standard deviation of 0.66. This high average indicates that overall, consumers perceive mood-related factors positively, with the items consistently rated as "Very High" in terms of their impact. The standard deviation of 0.66 suggests that the responses are relatively close to the mean, indicating a moderate level of variability among individual responses. While the mean indicates a generally positive perception of mood-related factors, the standard deviation implies that there is some variability in how consumers perceive these factors, with some respondents potentially experiencing them more strongly or weakly than others. Overall, the results suggest that mood plays a significant role in influencing consumer behavior, with most respondents reporting positive associations with the mood-related aspects of products or services.

**Table 5***: Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Mood*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Helps me cope with stress | 4.56 | 0.68 | Very High |
| 2. Helps me cope with life | 4.51 | 0.69 | Very High |
| 3. Helps me relax | 4.60 | 0.66 | Very High |
| 4. Keeps me awake/ alert | 4.52 | 0.70 | Very High |
| 5. Makes me feel good | 4.62 | 0.60 | Very High |
| **Average**  | **4.56** | **0.66** | **Very High** |

These findings are supported by the idea of Spiteri Cornish (2020) highlight the importance of effective coping strategies for mental health and resilience, while Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory (2004) underscores how positive emotions enhance psychological well-being. Additionally, the attribute "Keeps me awake/alert" signifies consumers' recognition of the critical role of alertness in daily functioning, aligning with the importance of adequate sleep for cognitive performance, as emphasized by Harrison-Walker (2017). As consumers prioritize mood-related attributes in their consumption decisions, understanding these preferences will inform product development and communication strategies to cater to their mood-centric needs effectively.

**Level of Consumer Behavior Style in terms of Convenience**

The average mean of consumer behavior style in terms of convenience is 4.48, with a standard deviation of 0.73. This high average suggests that consumers generally prioritize convenience when making purchasing decisions, as indicated by the consistently high ratings across all items. However, the relatively high standard deviation of 0.73 implies some variability in how consumers perceive convenience-related factors. This variability may reflect differences in individual preferences and needs regarding convenience, highlighting the importance of offering diverse options to accommodate various consumer preferences. Overall, the results indicate that convenience is a significant factor influencing consumer behavior, with most consumers valuing products or services that offer ease and accessibility in their daily lives.

**Table 6:** *Level of Consumer Behavior Style in terms of Convenience*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Is easy to prepare | 4.51 | 0.69 | Very High |
| 2. Can be cooked very simply | 4.50 | 0.72 | Very High |
| 3. Take no time to prepare | 4.42 | 0.79 | Very High |
| 4. Can be bought in shops close to where I live or study or work | 4.45 | 0.75 | Very High |
| 5. Is easily available in shops and supermarket | 4.51 | 0.70 | Very High |
| **Average**  | **4.48** | **0.73** | **Very High** |

The table illustrates consumers' strong preference for convenience in food preparation and accessibility. Simplified and quick meal options resonate with individuals striving to balance busy lifestyles. Andronie et al. (2021) highlight that in today's competitive markets, consumers prioritize products that align with their hectic schedules. Tian et al. (2024) emphasize the significance of time scarcity in shaping consumer behavior, with products minimizing preparation time garnering high appeal. However, while proximity to purchase points is valued, Klein and Sharma, (2022) suggest that factors beyond physical closeness, such as product quality and variety, significantly influence consumer satisfaction. Marketers must recognize and address these preferences to effectively cater to consumers' desire for ease, simplicity, and time efficiency.

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Sensory Appeal**

The average mean of consumer behavior in terms of sensory appeal is 4.54, with a standard deviation of 0.64. This high average indicates that consumers generally prioritize sensory aspects such as smell, appearance, texture, taste, and emotional response when evaluating products or services. The relatively low standard deviation suggests that there is consistency among consumers in their perceptions of sensory appeal, with minimal variability in ratings across the different sensory attributes. These results imply that businesses and marketers should focus on enhancing the sensory qualities of their offerings to appeal to consumer preferences and create positive experiences, as sensory appeal plays a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior and influencing purchasing decisions.

**Table 7:** *Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Sensory Appeal*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Smells nice. | 4.64 | 0.59 | Very High |
| 2. Looks nice. | 4.60 | 0.61 | Very High |
| 3. Has a pleasant texture. | 4.52 | 0.66 | Very High |
| 4. Tastes good. | 4.49 | 0.68 | Very High |
| 5. Evokes a positive emotional response. | 4.45 | 0.66 | Very High |
| **Average**  | **4.54** | **0.64** | **Very High** |

The results above as supported by the works of de Araújo et al. (2022), evokes emotions and memories, significantly impacting purchasing behavior. Similarly, Sharma and Meena, (2024) highlights the importance of visual aesthetics in enhancing product desirability. However, emotional responses, as revealed by recent studies by Hati et al. (2021), are influenced by various factors beyond sensory cues alone, such as brand reputation and personal associations.

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Natural Content**

The average mean of consumer behavior regarding natural content is 4.33, with a standard deviation of 0.70. This high average suggests that consumers prioritize products with natural attributes such as no additives or artificial ingredients, minimal processing, and sustainable sourcing. The relatively moderate standard deviation indicates some variability in consumer perceptions across these natural content dimensions. However, overall, the consistency in ratings reflects a strong preference for products perceived as natural and environmentally friendly. These findings imply that businesses should emphasize and highlight natural attributes in their products to align with consumer preferences and capitalize on the growing demand for eco-friendly and health-conscious options.

**Table 8:** *Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Natural Content*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Contains no additives | 4.24 | 0.74 | Very High |
| 2. Contains natural ingredients | 4.32 | 0.67 | Very High |
| 3. Contains no artificial ingredients | 4.31 | 0.75 | Very High |
| 4. Is minimally processed to maintain its natural state and nutritional value. | 4.34 | 0.67 | Very High |
| 5. Is sourced from sustainable and organic sources to ensure environmental | 4.45 | 0.66 | Very High |
| **Average**  | **4.33** | **0.70** | **Very High** |

The table underscores consumers' increasing preference for products with minimal or no additives, driven by health concerns and a desire for transparency. Camilleri, (2020) highlight the growing demand for cleaner labels and transparency in food composition, reflecting apprehensions about the health impact of additives such as artificial colors and preservatives. Similarly, the appeal of natural ingredients lies in their perceived authenticity and alignment with well-being, as explored by Dini and Laneri (2021). However, while consumers express concern for the environment, translating this concern into consistent purchasing behavior remains challenging due to disparities in legal definitions and varying perceptions of sustainability, as noted by González et al. (2015). Achieving a balance between naturalness, safety, and sustainability presents an ongoing challenge for both researchers and marketers, as consumer expectations continue to evolve in this dynamic landscape.

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Price**

The average mean of consumer behavior concerning price is 4.41, with a standard deviation of 0.68. This high average indicates that consumers generally prioritize affordability and value for money when making purchasing decisions. The relatively moderate standard deviation suggests some variability in how consumers perceive price across different product attributes. However, overall, the consistency in ratings reflects a strong preference for products that are perceived as reasonably priced and offer good value. These findings imply that businesses should strategically price their products to align with consumer expectations and provide perceived value to maintain competitiveness in the market.

**Table 9:** *Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Price*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Is not too expensive. | 4.55 | 0.65 | Very High |
| 2. Is cheap. | 4.19 | 0.79 | High |
| 3. Is good value for money. | 4.48 | 0.62 | Very High |
| 4. Fits within my budget constraints. | 4.51 | 0.61 | Very High |
| 5. Offers a balance between cost and quality. | 4.33 | 0.73 | Very High |
| **Average**  | **4.41** | **0.68** | **Very High** |

The table highlights consumers' complex perceptions of pricing, where affordability and value for money are paramount. Johan et al. (2023) emphasize the significance of pricing strategies in achieving value for money, as reasonable pricing leads to positive consumer evaluations. Zhao and Yao (2021) suggest that consumers seek products offering a balance between cost and perceived benefits, underscoring the importance of delivering on promises to be considered a good value for money. However, the study by Abdi Changalima et al. (2023) cautions that while affordability is valued, consumers may associate cheapness with compromised quality.

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Weight Control**

The average mean of consumer behavior related to weight control is 4.35, with a standard deviation of 0.74. This high average suggests that consumers prioritize aspects of food that contribute to weight management, such as low calorie and low-fat content, as well as balanced nutrition and physical activity. However, the relatively high standard deviation indicates some variability in how individuals perceive these factors. Despite this variability, the consistency in ratings reflects a strong inclination among consumers towards healthier food choices and lifestyle habits to support weight control efforts. These findings imply that businesses should emphasize the health benefits of their products and promote features that align with consumer preferences for weight management.

**Table 10:** *Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Weight Control*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Is low in calories. | 4.30 | 0.77 | Very High |
| 2. Helps me control my weight. | 4.24 | 0.75 | Very High |
| 3. Is low in fat. | 4.28 | 0.76 | Very High |
| 4. Includes a balance of nutrients to support overall health. | 4.47 | 0.68 | Very High |
| 5. Incorporates regular physical activity to complement my weight control efforts. | 4.45 | 0.71 | Very High |
| **Average**  | **4.35** | **0.74** | **Very High** |

The table highlights consumers' focus on weight control attributes, particularly the importance of calorie reduction and nutritional balance. Rajaie et al. (2021) emphasize the significance of caloric restriction in weight loss interventions, as it directly impacts energy balance and facilitates weight loss. Madigan et al. (2014) reveal the effectiveness of behavioral weight management interventions, empowering individuals to actively manage their weight through dietary modifications and exercise. However, contemporary research, such as that by Abd El-Kader (2012), challenges the simplistic notion of fat avoidance, emphasizing the importance of distinguishing between beneficial and harmful fats for sustainable weight management. Therefore, consumers prioritize informed choices that balance caloric intake, perceived control, and nutritional quality in their weight control efforts.

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Familiarity**

The average mean of consumer behavior regarding familiarity with food is 4.28, with a standard deviation of 0.71. This high average indicates a strong preference among consumers for foods that they typically eat, find familiar, and associate with their childhood or cultural background. However, the relatively high standard deviation suggests some variability in how individuals perceive familiarity with food. Despite this variability, the majority of respondents rated these factors highly, indicating a general tendency to prefer foods that evoke feelings of comfort and nostalgia or align with cultural culinary traditions.

**Table 11:** *Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Familiarity*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Is what I usually eat. | 4.36 | 0.73 | Very High |
| 2. Is familiar. | 4.40 | 0.68 | Very High |
| 3. Is like the food I ate when I was a child. | 4.24 | 0.71 | Very High |
| 4. Reminds me of home-cooked meals that bring a sense of comfort and nostalgia. | 4.30 | 0.65 | Very High |
| 5. Reflects my cultural background and traditional culinary preferences. | 4.12 | 0.79 | High |
| **Average**  | **4.28** | **0.71** | **Very High** |

The table underscores the profound influence of familiarity on consumer food preferences, rooted in neural representation and identity construction. As supported by Foroni (2022) highlight how familiar foods trigger memory networks associated with past experiences, evoking feelings of safety and satisfaction. Heersmink (2022) emphasizes how familiar foods contribute to identity construction and evoke nostalgia, connecting individuals to their personal histories and cultural contexts. However, Ravikumar et al. (2022) caution that while cultural foods evoke strong emotional ties, they can perpetuate health disparities, highlighting the need for interventions that celebrate cultural heritage while promoting dietary diversity and health equity.

**Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Ethical Concern**

The average mean of consumer behavior related to ethical concerns regarding food is 4.24, with a standard deviation of 0.69. This indicates a high level of ethical consideration among consumers when making food choices. The relatively moderate standard deviation suggests that while there is some variability in individual perceptions, the majority of respondents express a strong inclination towards ethical considerations such as fair labor practices and sustainable farming. These findings suggest that consumers are increasingly prioritizing ethical factors when making purchasing decisions, which could influence their brand loyalty and purchasing behavior. Therefore, food businesses should emphasize their commitment to ethical sourcing and production practices to appeal to this consumer segment.

**Table 12:** *Level of Consumer Behavior in terms of Ethical Concern*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Comes from places I approve of politically | 4.01 | 0.77 | High |
| 2. Has the place of origin clearly marked | 4.17 | 0.66 | High |
| 3. Is packaged in environmentally friendly way | 4.35 | 0.68 | Very High |
| 4. Adheres to fair labor practices, ensuring the workers involved in the production process are treated ethically and receive fair wages. | 4.30 | 0.66 | Very High |
| 5. Supports sustainable farming practices, prioritizing the well-being of animals and the conservation of natural resources. | 4.36 | 0.69 | Very High |
| **Average**  | **4.24** | **0.69** | **Very High** |

The table highlights consumers' growing emphasis on ethical concerns in their purchasing decisions, particularly regarding fair labor practices, transparent origin labeling, and sustainable packaging. Brands that prioritize fair labor practices signal their commitment to treating workers ethically and ensuring fair wages, resonating with consumers who value human dignity and social justice. Kilbourne and Khan and Abbas (2023) emphasize that consumers are more likely to support brands that prioritize fair wages and worker well-being, contributing to breaking the cycle of exploitation in supply chains. Additionally, transparent origin labeling fosters trust and transparency, empowering consumers to make informed choices and aligning with principles of authenticity and responsible sourcing, as highlighted by Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez (2023). Moreover, eco-friendly packaging materials demonstrate a commitment to sustainability, with consumers actively participating in waste reduction and promoting circular economy principles by choosing products with sustainable packaging (Hosta et al., 2021).

**Summary on the Level of Consumer Behavior**

The average mean of consumer behavior across various indicators is 4.40, with a standard deviation of 0.69. This suggests a consistently high level of consumer behavior across different dimensions, including health, mood, convenience, sensory appeal, natural content, price, weight control, familiarity, and ethical concern. The relatively low standard deviation indicates that there is minimal variability in consumer behavior across these dimensions, implying a strong and consistent trend in consumer preferences and choices. These findings suggest that consumers prioritize multiple factors, including health, convenience, sensory appeal, and ethical considerations, when making purchasing decisions. Therefore, businesses should focus on addressing these aspects to meet consumer expectations and enhance their competitiveness in the market.

**Table 13:** *Summary on the Level of Consumer Behavior*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Indicators** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Health | 4.44 | 0.67 | Very High |
| 2. Mood | 4.56 | 0.66 | Very High |
| 3. Convenience | 4.48 | 0.73 | Very High |
| 4. Sensory Appeal | 4.54 | 0.64 | Very High |
| 5. Natural Content | 4.33 | 0.70 | Very High |
| 6. Price | 4.41 | 0.68 | **Very High** |
| 7. Weight Control | 4.35 | 0.74 | Very High |
| 8. Familiarity | 4.28 | 0.71 | Very High |
| 9. Ethical Concern | 4.24 | 0.69 | Very High |
| **Overall**  | **4.40** | **0.69** | **Very High** |

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced consumer food behavior, placing a heightened emphasis on well-being and health-conscious choices. Di Crosta et al. (2021) reveal that anxiety and fear during the pandemic have directly shaped consumer food preferences, particularly toward necessities. In response, consumers are increasingly seeking food products that align with health-conscious values and provide transparent information about safety and nutritional benefits, as emphasized by Di Crosta et al. Additionally, shifts in mood, as highlighted by Rodrigues et al. (2021), play a significant role in food decision-making, with consumers gravitating toward food items that offer comfort and evoke positive emotions. Moreover, Sánchez-González et al. (2020) note that consumers are increasingly prioritizing authenticity and transparency in their food choices, seeking products with natural ingredients and eco-friendly sourcing practices. As a result, ethical concerns and health considerations have become paramount in shaping consumer food behavior, driving brands to adapt and prioritize transparency, authenticity, and health-focused offerings in the evolving landscape of food consumption.

**Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods in terms of Task Performance**

The average mean of students' perception of ready-to-eat foods in terms of task performance is 4.06, with a standard deviation of 0.78. This indicates a generally high level of perception across different categories of ready-to-eat food providers. The standard deviation suggests some variability in students' perceptions, with a spread of scores around the mean. Despite this variability, the overall mean being in the "Very High" descriptive equivalent implies that students perceive ready-to-eat foods from various sources as performing well in terms of task performance. However, the presence of variability highlights that while most students view these foods positively, there may be differences in perceptions among individuals or specific preferences for certain types of establishments.

**Table 14:** *Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods in terms of Task Performance*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Fast-food restaurant. | 4.13 | 0.79 | High |
| 2. Full-service (dine in) restaurant. | 4.14 | 0.71 | High |
| 3. Local restaurants. | 3.95 | 0.79 | High |
| 4. Imported foods. | 3.96 | 0.76 | High |
| 5. Ready-to-eat foods in supermarkets/grocery stores. | 4.10 | 0.83 | High |
| **Average** | **4.06** | **0.78** | **Very High** |

The finding above as supported by the works of Wahab et al. (2021) found that convenience was a primary motivator for RTE food consumption, aligning perfectly with offerings from fast-food restaurants (FFRs). The perception of FFRs as "very safe" underscores their consistent adherence to standardized processes and stringent hygiene protocols, crucial factors for students navigating busy lives. Additionally, dine-in restaurants are perceived highly due to their ambiance, personalized service, and diverse menu options, often associated with social gatherings and memorable experiences. Makinde et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of food safety awareness among university students, with dine-in restaurants fostering confidence through visible kitchen practices and attentive staff, further enhancing their perception of safety. This perception extends beyond taste, encompassing trust in sourcing, preparation, and the overall dining experience. In contrast, local restaurants and imported foods, though still rated "high," may lack the visibility and standardized practices of FFRs and dine-in establishments, indicating the complexity of students' perceptions regarding RTE foods. Overall, students' perceptions of RTE foods are multifaceted, influenced by convenience, safety, and sensory experiences, highlighting the importance of education and informed decision-making in navigating food choices.

**Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods in terms of Contextual Performance**

The average mean of students' perception of ready-to-eat foods in terms of contextual performance is 4.41, with a standard deviation of 0.76. This indicates a very high level of perception across various aspects related to food safety and quality. The standard deviation suggests some variability in students' perceptions, with a spread of scores around the mean. Despite this variability, the overall mean being in the "Very High" descriptive equivalent implies that students generally perceive ready-to-eat foods as performing well in terms of contextual factors such as hygiene, safety, and contamination risks.

**Table 15:** *Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods in terms of Contextual Performance*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Insects and rodent droppings. | 4.38 | 0.77 | Very High |
| 2. Ingredient added during manufacturing. | 4.38 | 0.69 | Very High |
| 3. Human spread diseases (such as Hepatitis B). | 4.45 | 0.81 | Very High |
| 4. Human spread bacteria (such as E. coli). | 4.41 | 0.79 | Very High |
| 5. Contaminants induced by employees. | 4.41 | 0.77 | Very High |
| **Average** | **4.41** | **0.76** | **Very High** |

The perception of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods being free from contaminants such as insects, rodent droppings, and additives is paramount for student consumers' confidence in their safety. Saldaña et al. (2020) underscore the need for stringent quality control to prevent such contaminants, emphasizing their potential health risks, including bacterial infections and allergic reactions. Additionally, the presence of synthetic additives, highlighted by Appiani et al. (2023), can impact taste and texture, influencing students' preference for RTE foods with transparent labeling and minimal processing.

**Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods in terms of Counterproductive Work Behavior**

 The average mean of students' perception of ready-to-eat foods in terms of counterproductive work behavior is 4.40, with a standard deviation of 0.66. This suggests that students generally perceive factors related to counterproductive work behavior, such as price, ingredients, calorie content, cleanliness of the store, and packaging of food products, to be at a very high level. However, the standard deviation indicates some variability in students' perceptions across these factors, implying that while the overall perception is positive, there may be differing opinions or experiences regarding specific aspects of counterproductive work behavior related to ready-to-eat foods.

**Table 16:** *Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods in terms of Counterproductive Work Behavior*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Items** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Price. | 4.44 | 0.65 | Very High |
| 2. ingredients of the product purchased. | 4.37 | 0.67 | Very High |
| 3. number of calories of the product contain. | 4.22 | 0.71 | Very High |
| 4. cleanliness of the store I purchase my food from. | 4.56 | 0.61 | Very High |
| 5. package of the food products | 4.40 | 0.65 | Very High |
| **Average** | **4.40** | **0.66** | **Very High** |

Students recognize that price serves as a crucial determinant when selecting food items, with convenience, affordability, and value for money driving RTE food choices (Zafar et al., 2022). Their perception of price underscores their rational approach, weighing the cost against perceived benefits. RTE foods are often seen as quick solutions, but their affordability remains paramount. Additionally, students prioritize transparency and trust in RTE foods, seeking options with recognizable, wholesome ingredients, as emphasized by Sodimu and Okafor (2023). The "very high" rating reflects their awareness of health implications and the importance of ingredient awareness and price-value balance. Trust in packaging, conveying information through transparent labeling, further contributes to their perception of RTE foods. In summary, students' perceptions of RTE foods are multifaceted, influenced by price, ingredients, and packaging, advocating for informed choices that balance health, affordability, and transparency.

**Summary on the Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods**

Table 17 provides a summary of the perception of students on ready-to-eat foods across different indicators. Among these indicators, "Contextual Performance" received the highest mean of 4.41. Following closely is "Counterproductive Work Behavior" with a mean of 4.40. On the other hand, "Task Performance" received the lowest mean of 4.06, although it still falls within the "High" descriptive equivalent.

**Table 17:** *Summary on the Level of the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Indicators** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Descriptive Equivalent** |
| 1. Task Performance | 4.06 | 0.78 | High |
| 2. Contextual Performance | 4.41 | 0.76 | Very High |
| 3. Counterproductive Work Behavior | 4.40 | 0.66 | Very High |
| **Overall**  | **4.29** | **0.73** | **Very High** |

The average mean perception of students on ready-to-eat foods across various indicators is 4.29, with a standard deviation of 0.73. This suggests that, on average, students hold a very high level of perception regarding ready-to-eat foods. Specifically, in terms of task performance, the mean perception is high at 4.06, indicating that students perceive ready-to-eat foods to perform adequately in various tasks. Contextual performance, with a mean of 4.41, is rated even higher, implying that students believe these foods excel in meeting contextual demands. Moreover, counterproductive work behavior, with a mean of 4.40, is also rated very high, indicating that students perceive minimal counterproductive behaviors associated with these foods. The standard deviation suggests some variability in students' perceptions across these indicators, signifying that while the overall perception is positive, there may be variations in their assessments of specific aspects related to ready-to-eat foods.

Contextual performance refers to extra-role behaviors that support and maintain organizational structure, reflecting students' recognition of the significance of these behaviors beyond formal job descriptions (Azman et al., 2023). Food safety awareness extends beyond taste for students, encompassing cleanliness, hygiene, and adherence to standardized processes, aligning with their preference for safe, reliable food sources. Counterproductive work behavior (CWB), encompassing harmful behaviors affecting organizations and their members, is also salient to students, driven by their awareness of the costs associated with CWB (Costantini et al., 2019).

**Significance of the Relationship Between Consumer Behavior Style and the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods**

Table 18 shows the Relationship Between Consumer Behavior Style and the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods.

**Table 18:** *Significance of the Relationship Between Consumer Behavior Style and the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables Correlated** | **r** | **p-value** | **Decision on Ho** | **Decision on Relationship** |
| Consumer Buying Behavior and the Perception of Students on Ready-To-Eat Foods | 0.703 | 0.000 | Rejected | Significant |

The significance test results reveal a strong relationship between consumer behavior style and the perception of students on ready-to-eat foods (*r=0.703, p=0.000*). This significant correlation suggests that there is a robust association between the way students engage with consumer behavior and their perceptions of ready-to-eat foods. The correlation coefficient of 0.703 indicates a high positive correlation between these two variables. Furthermore, the p-value being less than 0.05 demonstrates that this relationship is statistically significant, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Hence, it can be concluded that there exists a significant relationship between consumer behavior style and students' perceptions of ready-to-eat foods, emphasizing the importance of understanding consumer behavior patterns in shaping their food perceptions and preferences.

The significant correlation between consumer buying behavior and the perception of students on ready-to-eat (RTE) foods highlights the intricate relationship between individual preferences and food choices. Those exhibiting precautious consumer buying behavior tend to prefer pre-packed RTE foods, aligning with safety-conscious practices emphasized in the literature (Garima et al., 2020). Conversely, unconcerned consumers may favor freshly cut RTE foods from delicatessen departments, potentially driven by a belief in the freshness of on-the-spot preparation, as noted by Patel and Rathod (2017). This relationship has implications for food safety and marketing strategies. Understanding consumer clusters aids in tailoring food safety campaigns and marketing efforts, enabling brands to target precautious consumers with safety assurances while emphasizing freshness for the unconcerned group (Ganai 2019; Kumar, 2019). In conclusion, leveraging the symbiotic relationship between consumer buying behavior and RTE food perception can enhance food safety awareness and promote informed choices through tailored interventions.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The findings from the study led the researcher to draw the following conclusions:

1. The consumer buying behavior among students is notably high, indicating a strong propensity towards frequent purchasing activities. This demographic exhibits a robust inclination towards spending, reflecting their active participation in the consumer market. Such behavior underscores the economic impact of students as a significant consumer segment.

2. Students hold a highly favorable perception of ready-to-eat foods, demonstrating a strong preference for convenience-oriented meal options. This positive perception is indicative of the growing acceptance and popularity of ready-to-eat products within this age group. The elevated approval suggests a trend towards convenience and efficiency in food choices among students.

3. There is a statistically significant relationship between consumer buying behavior and students' perception of ready-to-eat foods, suggesting that positive perceptions directly influence purchasing decisions. This correlation highlights the importance of perception in driving consumer behavior within this demographic. Understanding this relationship is crucial for marketers aiming to target student consumers effectively.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings, analysis, and conclusion drawn in this study, the following recommendations were summarized:

1. For the students given the high level of readiness and acceptance of ready-to-eat foods among students, it's crucial to maintain awareness of nutritional content and make informed choices. Students should prioritize options that align with their health, mood, and ethical concerns while being mindful of price and weight control. Engaging in regular physical activity alongside balanced eating habits can further enhance overall well-being.

2. For parents, supporting their students entails fostering healthy eating habits at home and encouraging them to make informed food choices. Providing a variety of nutritious ready-to-eat options that align with their preferences for convenience, taste, and natural content can effectively promote healthier dietary behaviors. Moreover, parents play a pivotal role in educating their children about the significance of balanced nutrition and the potential impact of consumer behavior on their perception of food. By instilling awareness and understanding early on, parents can empower their children to develop lifelong habits that prioritize their health and well-being.

3. For the health sector, specifically, health professionals can play a pivotal role in promoting awareness of the nutritional value and potential health implications of ready-to-eat foods. They can offer guidance on selecting healthier options and emphasize the importance of moderation and balanced eating patterns. Collaborating with the food industry to improve labeling practices and increase transparency regarding ingredients and nutritional information can empower consumers to make more informed choices.

3. For future research endeavors, it is imperative to delve deeper into the dimensions of natural content and task performance concerning ready-to-eat foods, as well as to explore consumer buying behavior among students. Investigating the relationship between natural content and its influence on consumer preferences and perceptions can provide valuable insights into the growing trend towards healthier food choices. Additionally, examining how task performance, such as the ease of preparation and consumption, impacts the selection and consumption of ready-to-eat foods can offer practical implications for both consumers and food industry stakeholders. Furthermore, understanding the intricacies of consumer buying behavior among students, including their motivations, preferences, and decision-making processes, can inform targeted interventions aimed at promoting healthier dietary habits. By focusing on these areas of inquiry, future researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping consumer behavior and perceptions in the context of ready-to-eat foods, thereby facilitating the development of evidence-based strategies to promote public health and well-being.

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