

The Instant Food Revolution: Exploring Modern Consumer Buying Patterns

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Abstract

Aims: *This research explores the evolving consumer purchasing behavior towards instant food products, focusing on the Central Kerala region. The study investigates the impact of demographic factors on consumer perceptions, the influence of instant food products, and the role of gender, income, and occupation in shaping purchasing decisions. Additionally, it examines consumer awareness of potential health risks associated with instant food consumption.*

Methodology: *Employing a descriptive and analytical research design, data were gathered from 240 respondents in Central Kerala, using a structured questionnaire and analyzed through statistical tools like SPSS, MS Excel, and various inferential tests, including the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, Mann-Whitney U Test, and Pearson Correlation.*

Results: *Findings reveal that convenience, taste, and time-saving benefits are primary drivers of instant food consumption, especially among urban residents and working professionals. Advertising, peer recommendations, and personal preferences significantly influence purchasing behavior. However, a notable concern for health risks associated with processed foods, such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, is emerging among consumers. This health consciousness is reshaping consumer choices, prompting a demand for healthier instant food options.*

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Implications: *The study concludes that while convenience and taste remain pivotal, there is a clear shift towards health-conscious decision-making among consumers. This presents a critical opportunity for businesses and policymakers to offer healthier alternatives and promote nutritional awareness.*

Keywords: *Instant food products, consumer behavior, convenience, health consciousness, advertising influence*

JEL Classification: D12, I12, M31, L66

1. Introduction

Food is a fundamental necessity for human survival, providing essential nutrients required for growth, tissue repair, maintenance, and regulating vital bodily functions (Brown, 2000). It serves as a primary source of energy and strength, consumed daily in various forms such as fruits, vegetables, grains, and cereals. A balanced diet, composed of a variety of foods, ensures that the body receives the necessary nutrients (Kamalaveni, 1996). In today's fast-paced world, convenience is paramount, leading to the rise of "instant foods" – a category of food that is simple, quick to prepare, and designed to be both hygienic and free from microbial contamination (Sundaram, 2012). These foods cater to the modern consumer's need for convenience, offering ready-to-eat options that require minimal preparation. The popularity of instant foods is attributed to the shift in lifestyle patterns, particularly in urban settings, where quick and convenient meal solutions have become essential (Ramasamy, 2005).

Instant food products encompass a wide range, including canned, frozen, dried, and preserved foods. This sector has seen significant growth, particularly in India, where Western influences and urbanization have altered traditional food consumption patterns (Sheeja, 1998). The demand for such products has grown substantially, with both catering industries and households increasingly relying on these ready-to-eat options. As more families in urban India adopt double-income lifestyles, the ready-to-eat food market has become a focal point for businesses aiming to cater to this demographic shift (Indumathi, 2007).

The consumption of instant food products has been steadily increasing as people become busier with their daily lives and have less time to dedicate to cooking. As lifestyles shift and nuclear families become more common, consumers are increasingly turning to packaged foods for convenience. The rise in dual-income families is also driving the demand for instant food products (Chinnaiyan, 2003). Analyzing consumer behavior towards food is

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critical, as it represents a significant portion of household expenditures and reflects broader lifestyle changes and spending patterns. Consumers are shifting from a cost-conscious mindset to one that is more health-conscious and value-oriented (Brown, 2000).

Despite the growing importance of prepared foods, research into consumer behavior related to instant food products remains limited. This study aims to address this gap by exploring consumer perceptions and behaviors regarding prepared foods. The central research question focuses on understanding the perceptions, purchasing behavior, and health concerns associated with instant food products. Hence, the study seeks to explore consumer behavior concerning instant food products, focusing on factors such as purchasing frequency, consumer awareness, and the drivers behind these buying decisions (Inbalakshmi, 2014).

1.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of the research study are outlined as under:

1. To study demographic factors' effect on the perception of instant food products.
2. To find out the Influence of instant food products on consumers.
3. To analyze the effect of gender, income, and occupation on purchasing behavior of instant food products.
4. To understand the awareness regarding health issues by using instant food products.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have investigated the factors influencing consumer behavior towards instant food products. Kamalaveni (1996) found a significant alignment between the preferences of housewives and working women when it came to the factors driving their purchases of instant food products with age, occupation, education, family size, and income influencing per capita expenditure. Television advertisements emerged as a critical source of information for consumers, significantly impacting their buying behavior, as noted by (Ramasamy, 2005). With the proliferation of social media platforms, influencers, and targeted digital ads, however, the role of traditional television advertising must be reconsidered. Modern consumers increasingly rely on social media for product discovery and validation. According to Shabir et al. (2019), digital influencers and targeted advertising on platforms like Instagram and YouTube now play a significant role in consumer decision-making, especially among younger demographics who are drawn to instant food products for their convenience. Research by Dehghani and Tumer

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(2015) showed that social media engagement has become a crucial factor in influencing consumer decisions, providing a more interactive and personalized way to shape purchasing behavior compared to traditional media.

The importance of advertising in influencing consumer perceptions and driving awareness was echoed by (Kumar, 2007), who emphasized that in the case of non-durable products like masala powders, advertising heavily influenced purchasing behavior by enhancing brand awareness and promoting product quality. However, the study did not account for the rise of digital marketing and the increasingly personalized nature of content delivery. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2019) argue that the shift towards personalized marketing and AI-driven advertising has fundamentally changed how brands engage with consumers. Recent research, such as that by De Vries et al. (2017) has also pointed out that online reviews, user-generated content, and social media conversations now significantly impact brand perception, suggesting the need for updated studies on consumer behavior towards instant food products in a digital-first world.

In terms of rural consumer preferences, (Chinnaiyan, 2003) explored soft drink brand awareness in rural Tamil Nadu, where factors like word-of-mouth marketing and family recommendations were key drivers. Yet, digital technology's penetration in rural areas has significantly increased, changing how rural consumers access information. A study by (Sheth, 2021) found that mobile internet usage in rural areas has transformed consumer behavior, with e-commerce platforms offering new product options and enhancing brand reach. This shift highlights the need to reexamine rural consumer behavior in the context of increased digital access and its impact on product choices, including instant food products.

Using Garrett's ranking technique, Hemameena (2006) identified product quality and retail price as the top factors influencing rural consumer preferences for soft drinks. This was supported by (Indumathi, 2007), whose study highlighted that women's occupations, family income, and the need to save time while cooking were key drivers of purchasing behavior for spicy products. Health consciousness has become a major focus in contemporary consumer behavior studies. Sundaram (2012) examined health-conscious consumers in Southern India, noting that ingredients, brand awareness, and packaging were key factors. However, more recent research suggests that health-conscious consumers are now prioritizing organic, sustainable, and clean-label products, driven by concerns over food safety and environmental impact. Yadav and Pathak (2016) found that consumer awareness about

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health and environmental sustainability is rapidly increasing, leading to higher demand for healthier instant food alternatives that minimize artificial additives.

In addition, the role of digital platforms in shaping health awareness has expanded. A study by Pantano et al. (2020) demonstrated that health-related digital content, including nutritional blogs, apps, and influencers, has significantly impacted how consumers evaluate food products. This reflects a modern shift in consumer behavior, as individuals now have immediate access to health-related information, influencing their purchasing decisions for instant food products based on convenience, nutrition, and health.

3. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive and analytical research design to explore consumer behavior towards instant food products. The target population consisted of consumers of instant food products in Central Kerala, and data was collected from a sample of 240 respondents using the Convenience Sampling method. The sampling method was chosen for its practicality and effectiveness in capturing relevant data from a broad section of consumers in a time-efficient manner. This method allowed the researchers to swiftly gather responses from individuals who are readily accessible and actively engaged with instant food products, especially through online platforms like Google Forms. By leveraging this approach, the study could focus on gaining quick, initial insights into emerging trends in consumer behavior, making it a valuable tool for exploratory research. While convenience sampling does not fully ensure the randomness of the sample, its flexibility and ease of implementation provide an efficient starting point for understanding consumer behavior. While the primary data was obtained through a structured questionnaire circulated via Google Forms, secondary data was gathered from various sources, including websites, academic studies, government publications, and relevant articles.

To analyze the collected data, a combination of statistical tools and software were employed, including SPSS, MS Excel, and MS Word. Descriptive statistics such as percentages, mean, and standard deviation were used to summarize the data. Cronbach's Alpha was applied to assess the reliability of the data. Inferential statistical tests, including the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, Mann-Whitney U Test, and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient, were utilized to explore relationships between variables.

a. Demographic Composition of the Respondents

The demographic profile of the 240 respondents in the study reveals notable trends. Most respondents (85.6%) fall within the age group of 19-30, followed by 11.1% in the 31-60 age group, and 3.3% under 18 years of age. Regarding occupation, nearly half of the respondents (48.9%) are students, 32.2% are private employees, 7.8% are homemakers, 6.7% are professionals, and 4.1% are business owners. The gender distribution shows that females constitute 64.1% of the respondents, while males account for 35.6%. Income levels also varied, with 46.7% of respondents being students with no monthly income, while 26.7% reported incomes below ₹20,000, and 21.1% in the ₹20,001-₹40,000 range. Only 3.33% earn above ₹80,000, and a small percentage (1.11%) fall in the ₹40,001-₹60,000 and ₹60,001-₹80,000 brackets. Geographically, 56.7% of respondents reside in rural areas, while 43.3% are from urban areas. The most common source of information about instant food products was the Internet (29.4%), followed by advertisements (23.2%), family and friends (18.1%), television (16.9%), newspapers (8%), and other media sources (4.1%).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Effect of demographic factors on the perception of instant food products

4.1.1 Perception of Instant Food Products across Age Categories

- H0: There is no significant difference in the mean ranks of Perception on instant food products across Age categories.
- H1: There is a significant difference in the mean ranks of Perception on instant food products across Age categories.

Table 4.1.1: Kruskal-Wallis H Test

	Perception
Chi-Square	1.000
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.607

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Age

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The Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed no statistically significant relation in mean rank perception on instant food products among different age categories ($\chi^2 = 1.00, p = 0.6070 > 0.05$), with the age below 18, age group of 19-30, and 31-60. Therefore, the null hypothesis failed to be rejected. The lack of a significant relationship between the age group of respondents and their perception of instant food products suggests that preferences for convenience foods might be more universally accepted across different age ranges than previously thought. In the context of Central Kerala, this could imply a broader cultural shift where traditional demographic boundaries around food consumption are becoming less relevant, possibly due to the widespread availability and marketing of such products across all age groups.

4.1.2 Perception of instant food products across Occupation categories

- H0: There is no significant difference in the mean ranks of Perception on instant food products across Occupation categories.
- H1: There is a significant difference in the mean ranks of Perception on instant food products across Occupation categories.

Table 4.1.2: Kruskal-Wallis H Test

	Perception
Chi-Square	7.641 4
Df	
Asymp. Sig.	.106

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: Occupation

The Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed no statistically significant difference in mean ranks of perception on instant food products among different occupation categories ($\chi^2 = 7.641, p = 0.106 > 0.05$) of students, professionals, private employees, homemakers, and own businesses. Therefore, the null hypothesis failed to be rejected. The absence of a significant link between occupation and consumer perceptions of instant food products suggests that

professional identity does not play a major role in shaping attitudes toward these products. In Central Kerala, where even rural populations have growing exposure to media and urban lifestyles, this homogeneity in perception might reflect a more pervasive shift in eating habits, independent of occupation.

4.1.3 Perception of instant food products among male and female consumers

- HO: There is no significant difference in the mean ranks of Perception of instant food products among male and female consumers.
- H1: There is a significant difference in the mean ranks of Perception of instant food products among male and female consumers.

Table 4.1.3: Mann-Whitney U Test

	Perception
Mann-Whitney U	890.500
Wilcoxon W	2601.500
Z	-.317
Asymp. Sig. (2tailed)	.751

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Mann-Whitney U Test studied the difference in mean rank of perception and gender and showed that there is no statistically significant difference ($U=890.500$, $p=0.751$) among males and females. The gender-based analysis also reveals no significant difference in the perception or purchasing behavior related to instant food products.

4.2 Influence of instant food products on consumers

4.2.1 Influence of instant food products across gender

H0: There is no significant difference in the mean ranks of Influence of instant food products and the gender of respondents.

H1: There is a significant difference in the mean ranks of Influence of instant food products and the gender of respondents.

Table 4.2.1: Mann-Whitney Test

	Influence
Mann-Whitney U	830.000
Wilcoxon W	2541.000
Z	-.830
Asymp. Sig. (2tailed)	.407

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Mann-Whitney U Test studied the difference in mean rank of influence of instant food products and gender and showed that there is no statistically significant difference ($U=830$, $p=0.407$) among males and females. The results of this study suggest that, in Central Kerala, both men and women may be equally influenced by the convenience and marketing of instant foods, possibly indicating an evolving dynamic where traditional gender roles related to food are less pronounced.

4.2.2 Influence of instant food products based on the level of usage

- H0: There is no significant difference in the mean ranks of Influence of instant food products based on level of usage.
- H1: There is a significant difference in the mean ranks of Influence of instant food products based on level of usage.

Table 4.2.2: Kruskal-Wallis Test

	Influence
Chi-Square	.780
Df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.941

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: How often do you prefer instant food products

The Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed no statistically significant difference in mean ranks of Influence among different levels of usage ($\chi^2 = 0.780$, $p = 0.941 > 0.05$), with the usage in several times in a day, once a day, several times a week, once a week and at least once a month. The failure to reject the null hypothesis implies that the level of usage does not have a notable impact on the overall perception or influence of instant food products in this sample. These findings challenge the assumption that heavier or more frequent consumers of instant food would exhibit a stronger inclination toward or dependency on these products. Instead, the results suggest a more uniform pattern of influence, potentially driven by factors other than mere consumption frequency, such as convenience, taste preferences, or external influences like advertising.

4.3 Effect of Gender, income and Occupation on the Purchasing behavior of instant food products

4.3.1 Purchasing behavior of instant food products across different income categories

- H0: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean ranks of purchasing behavior of different income categories of consumers.
- H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the mean ranks of purchasing behavior of different income categories of consumers.

Table 4.3.1: Kruskal-Wallis Test

	purchasing behaviour
Chi-Square	8.580
Df	5
Asymp. Sig.	.127

- Kruskal Wallis Test
- Grouping Variable: monthly income

The Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed no statistically significant relation in mean ranks of purchasing behavior among different income categories ($\chi^2 = 8.580$, $p = 0.127 > 0.05$), with the income group below 20000, income group of 20001-40000, income group of 40001-60000, income group of 60001-80000, income above 80001 and in case of not applicable. Therefore, the null hypothesis failed to be rejected showing that Income

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levels have no significant impact on the purchasing behavior of instant food products. Instant food products are consumed across different income brackets, potentially because they are viewed as affordable by a wide range of consumers or because they are perceived as a quick solution to the time demands of modern life. This finding is particularly relevant in a region like Central Kerala, where the middle and lower-income groups constitute a significant portion of the population, and instant food products might be perceived as cost-effective and accessible.

4.3.2 Relation between Purchasing behavior of instant food products and Gender of buyers

- H0: There is no relation between gender and purchasing behavior of instant food product buyers.
- H1: There is a relation between gender and purchasing behavior of instant food product buyers.

Table 4.3.2: Correlation

		Gender	Purchasing behaviour
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	.071
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.509
	N	240	240
Purchasing behaviour	Pearson Correlation	.071	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.509	
	N	240	240

The analysis reveals no statistically significant correlation between the purchasing behavior of instant food products and the gender of the respondents. With a correlation coefficient ($r = 0.071$, $p = 0.509 > 0.05$), it is evident that gender does not play a role in shaping purchasing patterns for instant foods in this study. The finding challenges common assumptions that gender significantly influences food choices, particularly in contexts where women are traditionally considered more health-conscious or inclined toward certain food products. In the context of Central Kerala, this result might suggest that instant food products are widely accepted and consumed by both genders, driven by convenience and lifestyle factors that transcend traditional gender roles.

4.3.3 Purchasing behavior of instant food products across different occupation categories

- H0: There is no statistically significant difference in the mean ranks of purchasing behavior of consumers across different occupation categories.
- H1: There is a statistically significant difference in the mean ranks of purchasing behavior of consumers across different occupation categories.

Table 4.3.3: Kruskal-Wallis Test

Purchasing behaviour	
Chi- Square	3.089
Df	4
Asym p. Sig.	.543

- Kruskal Wallis Test
- Grouping Variable: Occupation

The Kruskal-Wallis H test indicates no statistically significant difference in purchasing behavior among respondents from different occupational categories, including students, professionals, private employees, homemakers, and business owners ($\chi^2 = 3.089$, $p = 0.543 > 0.05$). This lack of significant variance in purchasing behavior across occupations suggests that instant food products are equally appealing to individuals regardless of their professional identity.

4.4 Awareness regarding health issues by using instant food products

4.4.1 Awareness regarding health issues of instant food products among male and female consumers

- H0: There is no significant difference in the mean ranks of awareness about health issues of instant food products among male and female consumers.
- H1: There is a significant difference in the mean ranks of awareness about health issues of instant food products among male and female consumers.

Table 4.4.1: Mann-Whitney Test

	health problem
Mann-Whitney U	890.500
Wilcoxon W	1418.500
Z	-.319
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.750

a. Grouping Variable: Gender

Mann-Whitney U Test studied the difference in mean rank of health problems and gender showed that there is no statistically significant difference ($U=890.500$, $p=0.75$) among males and females. The rejection of the null hypothesis explains that there is no significant relation between gender and the awareness of health problems of respondents. In Central Kerala, increasing exposure to health-related information through various media channels may have equalized health awareness across genders, leading to a more uniform understanding of the potential health risks of consuming instant foods.

5. Conclusion

The study “The Instant Food Revolution: Exploring Modern Consumer Buying Patterns” reveals a nuanced and multifaceted landscape, shaped by various factors that drive decision-making. Central to this behavior is the perception of convenience, taste, and time-saving advantages, which have made instant food products increasingly popular among consumers. Influences such as advertising, peer recommendations, and personal preferences also significantly contribute to shaping purchasing decisions. However, the growing recognition of health concerns associated with processed foods has emerged as a critical factor in consumer choices.

The study highlights the substantial impact of various external influences on consumer choices. Advertising campaigns and promotional efforts wield significant power in shaping consumer behavior, while recommendations from family, friends, and peers also play an important role in determining preferences. Also, personal factors, including individual tastes and cultural preferences, contribute to the popularity of specific instant food products. One of the most striking findings is the rising concern over health implications linked to the consumption of processed and preservative-laden instant foods. While convenience remains a key driver, many consumers are becoming more aware of the potential health risks, including obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases,

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associated with excessive consumption of such products. This growing awareness has prompted a segment of the population to reassess their choices and seek healthier alternatives.

Despite these insights, the study has several limitations. One limitation is the regional focus on Central Kerala, which may not fully capture variations in consumer behavior across different parts of India or in other cultural contexts. As the study relies on self-reported data, it may introduce biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracies. Future research could expand the geographic scope to include a broader sample of consumers, allowing for cross-regional comparisons and a deeper exploration of how cultural and socio-economic factors influence instant food consumption. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into how consumer preferences evolve, particularly in response to shifts in public health campaigns or new product offerings.

Further research could also explore the role of sustainability and environmental consciousness in consumer decision-making. Investigating the potential for “eco-friendly” or “green” instant food products could open new avenues for both research and business strategies.

In conclusion, the study underscores the complex dynamics of consumer purchasing behavior toward instant food products, shaped by a combination of convenience, perception, external influences, and health considerations. While factors like ease of preparation and taste remain influential, there is a clear shift toward greater health consciousness among consumers. As Central Kerala continues to modernize, this presents an opportunity for businesses and policymakers to respond to these concerns by offering healthier instant food options and promoting nutritional education. Future research can build upon these findings by exploring diverse consumer contexts and the long-term impact of health trends on purchasing behavior. Striking the right balance between convenience and health will be key to shaping the future trajectory of instant food product consumption in the region

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