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Ready to eat Food Perception, Food Preferences and Food Choice: A Theoretical Discussion

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Abstract

Food is one of the basic needs of the human being. It is required for the normal functioning of the body parts and for a healthy growth. Consumer interest in ready-to-eat (RTE) snack and ready-to-serve (RTS) food is growing due to their convenience, value, attractive appearance, taste and texture. This paper discusses the relationship between food perception, preferences and food choice. First, we aim to identify and point out what factors affect our food perception, preferences and thereby try to explain the many reasons for differing food choice and preferences. The underlying reasons might come from different sources, and this paper focuses on trying to fully grasp this complexity. Researcher illustrates the variation of factors affecting our ready to eat food preferences. Second, researcher aim to give a general overview over factors affecting ready to eat food choice and the actual decision making process used for food preference and choice. Third, researcher provides a brief discussion regarding the connection between food preferences and food choice. Finally, we conclude by stating that further insight is needed in areas such as cultural, historical and demographic factors.

Keywords: Ready-to-eat, Ready-to-serve, Food preference and Food Choice

Introduction

Ready-to-eat food is food that is offered or exposed for sale without additional cooking or preparation, which is packaged on the premises where they are being sold and are ready for consumption. Canned foods, convenience foods, fast foods, frozen foods, instant products, dried foods, preserved foods, etc. all come under Ready-to-Eat foods (Selvaraj, 2012).

Ready-to-eat (RTE) foods are increasingly popular with the consumer predominantly due to their convenience of consumption and ease of preparation and storage and consumer appeal factors such as convenience, value, attractive appearance and texture (Harper, 1981). The Food Standards Agency (FSA, UK) defines ready-to-eat products as: 'any food for consumption without further heating or processing'. This definition covers both open and pre-wrapped ready-to-eat products and is intended to apply whether the ready-to-eat food may be consumed hot or cold. The expression 'further heating or processing' is not intended to include food preparation activities such as light washing, slicing, chopping, portioning, marinating or preservation carried out by the consumer by way of preference to an otherwise ready to eat food item (Food Standards Agency, 2011). Under this definition, a number of processed foods can be regarded as RTE products including biscuits, crisps, breads, pies, sandwiches and rolls, dairy products (milk, cheese, spreads), prepared salads and vegetables, and fruit. The list can be extremely long and with new products entering the food market nearly every day, the list is getting longer and longer (Fast, 1999).

Indian Food Industry

India is second largest producer of food next to China, and has the potential of being the biggest with the food and agricultural sector. The total food production in India is likely to double in the next ten years and there is an opportunity for large investments in food and food processing technologies. The Indian food market is estimated at over US\$ 182 billion, and accounts for about two thirds of the total Indian retail market. Further, according to consultancy firm McKinsey & Co, the retail food sector in India is likely to grow from

around US\$ 70 billion in 2008 to US\$ 150 billion by 2025, accounting for a large chunk of the world food industry, which would grow to US\$ 400 billion from US\$ 175 billion by 2025.

The history of Indian Food has experienced extensive immigration and intermingling through many descents. The Indian subcontinent has benefitted from numerous food influences. Food has become a marker of religious and social identity in India with varying taboos and preferences, which has also surrounded these groups to innovate widely with the food sources that are deemed well enough.

The study "Flavors of Incredible India-Opportunities in the Food Industry" carried on by FICCI –Ernst &Young notes that the Indian Food industry is a significant part of the Indian Economy with food constituting about 30% of the consumer wallet. The key drivers for growth in the sector are:

- An increase in the per capita income by 8% over the last five year period during 2005-2010 which has led to an increase in per capita consumption expenditure on food by 20% over the same period.
- Growth in the size of the middle to very rich class which is projected to increase at more than 300% between 2005-2015. This will lead to an increasing demand for food products to meet demands of convenience, variety, health and a changing palate.
- Emergence of Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities which will present key opportunity for future growth due to rising income, increased awareness and limited availability of products currently in these markets. Ernst & Young further states that there are key lifestyle changes which will result in a transition of the consumers' consumption pattern:
- A growing number of nuclear working families who have limited time for cooking and hence are driven by a high need for convenience.
- An increasing incidence of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes, asthma, and obesity resulting in a demand for healthy products.
- An increased consumer awareness driven by media penetration and celebrity chefs promoting new cuisines and product categories.

This phenomenon is not restricted to urban areas because rural Indians are often exposed to such processed products through their urban family members.

Thus the study notes that the Indian Food Industry needs to consider certain key critical success factors to tap the opportunity created by these changes in perception and preference of consumer.

Ready-To-Eat Food Products

According to a recently published report by TechSci Research "India Ready-to-eat Food Market Forecast and Opportunities, 2019", the country's ready-to-eat (RTE) food market is projected to grow at a CAGR of around 22% during 2014-19. The market is anticipated to grow on account of increasing working population, growing per capita disposable income, rising per capita expenditure on prepared food, increasing middle class and affluent consumers, etc. With the rising employment opportunities and changing lifestyle of consumers, the demand for ready-to-eat food products in the country is projected to grow

during the forecast period as well. India has a large base of young consumers, who form majority of the country's workforce. These young consumers hardly find time for traditional cooking due to their busy lifestyles which further creates significant potential for ready-to-eat food products.

Transition in Food Consumption Patterns

There have been changes in the food purchase and intake patterns owing to the increase in per capita income, changing lifestyles, women employment and other environmental factors. The per capita intake of processed foods and non-cereal based products is increasing rapidly in developing countries like India (Sharma, 2011). In developed countries like U.S, the total energy intake has risen over the past two decades across all age groups with a shift away from meals to snacks, from at home consumption to consumption away from home (Nielsen et al, 2002). Similar transitions are being observed all over the world. A study conducted in Spain concluded that from 1992 to 2003, an increased consumption of foods away from home and between meals was observed with a remarkable decrease in the fruit and vegetable intake (Ribas-Barba et al, 2007). Urbanization leading to the increase in income, food availability and modernization of the food industry have brought about changes in the dietary choices (He et al, 2004). The use of supermarket has spread over across countries, cities to villages, from upper- and middle-class families to the working class. The percentage of income spent on processed foods has increased among urban consumers. The most significant factors influencing buying decisions were found to be quality, accessibility, regular supply, doorstep delivery and easy mode of payment (Morland et al, 2006). The same is occurring at different rates and stages in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa (Hu et al, 2004). WHO (2003) report indicated that the per capita per day energy intake has gone up by approximately 450-600 Kilocalories from 1960's to 2000. However, the energy supplied from cereals, animal and vegetable sources have declined over a period of time. Yet, an increase in the intake of fats is seen in different countries. Africa reportedly has the lowest fat consumption while Europe and North America had the highest fat consumption. The highest increase in fat consumption per capita of 14 g was observed in developing countries, and lowest increase by (4 grams per capita) in developed countries and the countries experiencing a transition recorded a 9 grams decrease in fat intake per capita. In U.S, although the total intake of energy by the children has not changed, the macronutrient intake of the diet has changed. There is lesser consumption of total energy from fats but an increase in the consumption of foods providing carbohydrates and protein. Eating pattern changes may describe the reasons for increase in adiposity among children. For instance, increases have occurred in the number of meals eaten outside home, availability of food, increase in the portion sizes, snacking and meal-skipping (Schluter and Lee 1999). Consumption of snacks, soft drinks and high fat foods is also continuously increasing (Lytle et al, 2000 and Harnack et al, 1999). The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) found that per capita calorie intake increased by more than 300 kilocalories among the US population from 1985 through 2002 (Kant and Graubard 2006).

Transition in Lifestyle

Accompanied with the changes in food intake, lifestyles of the people are also changing and undergoing transitions at a faster pace all over the world. Over the past two decades, there has been a sharp reduction in physical activity in all sections of the Indian population because of increase in mechanization in occupational, domestic and transportation spheres, both in rural and urban areas. Physical inactivity has been regarded as an important risk factor for various non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Sedentary lifestyles have been majorly attributed to cause cancers of around 21-25% of the breast and colon, approximately 27% of diabetes and 30% of heart disease (WHO, 2003). The report by WHO stated that globally around 3.2 million people die due to physical inactivity (WHO, 2010). Families with both parents working outside home, and time constraints have become crucial factors in determining the food purchase and consumption patterns. The food industry responded to these new family issues by increasing the numbers of convenience foods and prepared meals available. Unfortunately, the food industries too have been promoting foods that are high in fat and sugar and hence highly energy dense (French et al, 2001).

Consumer Perception about Ready-to-Eat Food

Kazmi S.Q. (2012): This study recognizing those factors which effect consumer perception about pasta products and also determined factors which stimulate buying decision of consumers towards pasta. Awareness and availability were chosen as main variables which effect consumer buying pattern. Quota sampling technique was used to collect data from a sample of 30 housewives living in Karachi city of Pakistan. Results of the study explored that product awareness was the factor which had a great impact on popularity and usage of any product especially the food item and also awareness about cooking method of particular product may affect the popularity of food product. Lavanya M.S. et al. (2012): This study attempted to explore consumer's awareness and perception towards quality certified products. Primary data was collected from 120 respondents through pre-tested interview schedule. In this study consumers' awareness, preference of certified products and their perception on pricing was analyzed with reference to three products: Ghee, vegetable Oils and spices. Results concluded that 85% people were aware about Agmark certification and most of the high income group people were about Agmark products and they are also satisfied with the products especially ghee.

M. Vijayabaskar and Sundaram N. (2012): In this study author attempted to explore purchasing attitude towards ready to eat/cook products by health conscious consumer in southern India. Health conscious consumers are all literate and accessing various sources before taking any decision. Results reveal that consumers deciding factors for purchasing ready to eat/cook food were based on ingredients, brand awareness, packaging etc. This study concluded that consumers were taking decisions on the various technological sources and was all highly aware of the food and its impact on health. Nirmalraj R.J.T. (2012): This study reveal the factors that are affected consumer buying behavior of "Ready to Eat Foods in India" A descriptive study was conducted to attain an insight in to customer's perception about the ready to eat foods. Findings of this study suggest that Indian companies must

focus on creating awareness towards ready to eat food products so that future growth chances can be maximized for ready to eat manufacturers.

Kumar H. et al. (2013): This study was conducted with objective of assessing consumer's awareness, safety perceptions and flavoring agents used in packed/canned food. Study was conducted in South India in the states of Karnataka & Kerala with a sample size of 126 respondents. Results of the showed that around 91.7% of total respondents were aware about food preservatives and (84.9) were aware towards flavoring agents (FA) but their knowledge was inadequate. Unfavorable practices were involved. Gaps in Knowledge and unhealthy practices need to be addressed by public awareness campaign.

Consumer Preference to Ready-to-Eat Food

Consumers the world over don't have enough time to prepare meals from scratch. The most common occasions among consumers across countries for eating RTE meals is for Dinner, and Breakfast is the least likely (ACNielsen, 2006). Consumers prefer to purchase RTE food products from the place they usually buy which enhances their frequency of purchase. The quality of food such as flavor, appearance texture etc.; socio-economic factors such as availability, price and culture; biologic factors such as energy and nutrient requirements; and psychological factors including behavior, moods and attitude towards eating influence food choice among consumers (Blades, 2001). However the consumption patterns of the population can be formulated in different groups such as young, educated etc. The marketing of RTE foods should not only consider the attitudinal and product factors of the product itself. Other factors like packaging play a very important role in determining the quality and sales of the product itself (Margretts, 1998).

However the brand of the RTE food product adds importance in the purchase decisions of the consumer. Brand awareness provides a sense of familiarity especially in products such as soaps, a sense of presence or commitment and substance and it was very important to recall at the time of purchasing process. Awareness is created by conventional mass media, event promotions, publicity, sampling and other attention getting process (Aaker, 2000). Brand extensions represent one of the most frequently used branding strategies (Völckner & Sattler, 2006). Extending brands both within and beyond the original product category is deemed to be profitable because, in general, it is assumed that brands that are already known and recognized require lower new product introduction expenses, such as advertising, trade deals, or price promotions (Collins-Dodd and Louviere 1999; Tauber 1988). Nevertheless, the success of brand extensions is uncertain. Failure rates of brand extensions in many fast-moving consumer good (FMCG) product categories are approximately 80% (Ernst & Young and ACNielsen 1999; *Marketing* 2003). Therefore, potential determinants of brand extension success (i.e., success factors of brand extensions) have emerged as an important focus of research inquiry to provide insights that may help managers reduce the failure rates of brand extensions (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Bottomley and Doyle 1996; Dacin and Smith 1994; Swaminathan, Fox, and Reddy 2001). The findings of previous studies provide important insights into the factors that influence brand extension success. In particular, they

reveal the kinds of success factors that play an important role in the success of an extension product, at least under certain conditions.

A significant body of research attests to the importance that managers and scholars attach to package design (e.g., Bloch 1995; Garber, Burke, and Jones 2000; Hertenstein, Platt, and Veryzer 2005; Rettie and Bruwer 2000; Schoormans and Robben 1997). Taken together, the results suggest that package design is an extremely influential medium because of its pervasive impact on purchasers, its presence at the crucial moment when the purchase decision is made, and consumers' high level of involvement when they actively scan packages in their decision making. The design of package elicits various responses. The relevance of packaging in purchase of RTE foods have tremendously increased especially in the Indian context. It has been observed that different types of RTE food require different types of packaging. Most of the research has been conducted to find the changing trends in the consumption pattern of foods in India. Indian people prefer to go in for RTE foods because of convenience, growing working culture of consumers, more working people moving away from homes, which has improved tastes of the RTE food products (Bhanga, 2009).

TechnoPak (2009) in its annual report identifies the different trends in the Indian food market. It has been observed that a majority of people (99%) consider nutrition and health in their purchase decisions. Increasing number of people are moving towards the convenience and change that RTE provide: 35 - 40% of housewives regularly shop for packaged and convenience foods items like noodles, pasta and soup powders, and 'ready to cook' offerings from

companies like MTR and Aashirvaad, regardless of whether they are shopping from traditional format or modern format grocery store. Consumers also are showing growing preferences for foods that be eaten on the move like snacks. The urban lifestyle lends itself to the 'snacking and grazing' consumption behavior, which one observes in more developed countries. As Indian consumers increasingly move to a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, snack foods that are easily portable and hygienic have become a ready substitute for hot-snacks.

In terms of variety and geographical preferences, Sharma (2009) has observed that traditional Indian foods remain an under-penetrated area as far as RTE segment is concerned. The visible trends in the category suggest that certain RTE Indian meal dishes such as lentils (dal makhani), chhole, palak paneer, rajma etc. are especially popular across all regions (north, east, south and west), among both vegetarian and non-vegetarian consumers, and are therefore part of most players' brand portfolio. Marketing of the RTE foods also involves easy availability and reach to the potential consumers. They also mention the importance of retail trade in the promotion of the RTE food. Market modern retail can help in growing significant demand for categories such as RTE, as modern trade helps in building visibility and awareness for such categories.

The Research Model

Given the preceding discussion, Figure 1 depicts the conceptual construct to study the domain of Ready to eat Food Perception, Food Preferences and Food Choice

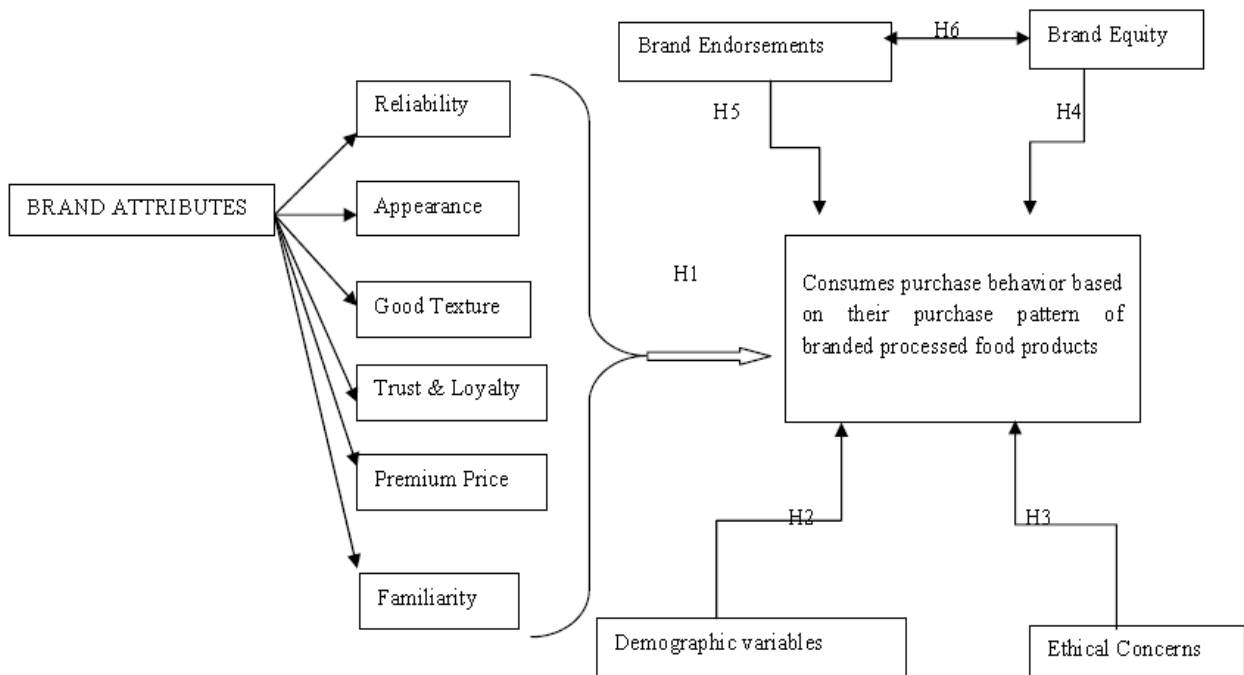


Fig. 1: Research framework

Brand Attributes vs Consumer Purchase Behavior of Food

Aaker & Keller models describes Brand attributes and its hierarchy (Kumar, 2011). There are some key variables considered to determine brand attributes are quality, appearance, good texture, trust, loyalty, premium price and awareness- (Steptoe, Pollard & Wardle, 1995). The

commonalities in brand often reminds consumer to go for brand and here we tested this in the scenario of food purchase. Brands will simplify choices and associations of brands often pop-ups in consumer mindset and drives them to purchase. There may be one or multiple factors in brand attributes determine purchase decision. In other sense, each consumer are unique and go by their own set of decision

making based on their conceived character of brands (Fearne & Lavelle, 1996). Brands may portray different things with different consumers and at the end each attributes drives sales. Attitude is also one of the key factor in choosing brands based on the attributes (Foxall & Bhate, 1992)

Demographic Variables vs Consumer Purchase Behavior of Food

Demography variables will form a significant factor in this current study on consumer behavior. It offers way for sound conclusion on consumer behavior (Ahlgren, Gustafsson & Hall, 2006). As we pointed out earlier, Indian consumers' food habits and purchase patterns are unique in nature so we decided to include demography as one of the variables in consumer behavior. Even major studies in consumer behavior are taken demographic dividends are one of the key determining factors in the study especially when the study is tuned towards commodities.

Ethical Concerns vs Consumer Purchase Behavior for Food

Ethics often not considered as an important variable in purchasing brands, but our literature survey pointed out that, when it comes to food products, people often considers ethics in choosing the product. This point is evident in the case of Patrick De Pelsmacker, Wim Janssens, Ellen Sterck, Caroline Mielants 2005, where ethically labeled coffee is preferred by consumers. Ethics in the other hand testify the emotional content of an individual. Labelling the product like eco and bio-labels is least preferred by consumer when compared with ethical branding of a product. Fair trade label fixed on the product is preferred by many consumer, the results shown. The results are common across different socio-demographic groups. Responsibilities exhibited by companies over environment and people, will trigger positive response of purchase (Anselmsson & Johansson, 2007). Providing proof of the company responsibility will bring loyal consumers to that product. There is a positive correlation between company ethical practices and consumer response. If the consumer commitment increases, the ethical burden of the company also increases (Story & Hess, 2010). Labelling is one of the major influential factor in going for purchasing product (Davies & Wright, 1994). Brands endorsed with trustworthy labels often fits well with purchase behavior of consumers.

Brand Equity vs Consumer Purchase Behavior for Food

Brand equity analysed from financial point of view is common in management research, whereas consumer based brand equity also evolved as a concept, along with financial based brand equity. Brand Equity will also be helpful in extending brands to new horizons and will bring loyal consumers, if positioned in a right way. It also brings down advertisement cost and gives confident to enter into new sector if parent brand positioned properly (Pitta & Katsanis, 1995). Brand Equity can be studied by the parameters like Brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand trust and brand loyalty. Brand equity is considered as macro term and below it fits all kind of parameters to evaluate such brand capacity and its performance (Kumar, Dash & Purwar, 2013). Purchase attitude and loyalty determines brand equity performance. Even its tough to

quantify brand equity performance, its possible to find empirical evidence to measure the length and breadth of brand equity performance. Trust breeds loyalty and contributes to brand loyalty. It is argued the said two parameters didn't decide on brand equity but performs mediating role (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alema'n, 2005).

Brand Endorsements vs Consumer Purchase Behavior for Food

Brands endorsed by different previous achievements have weightage in driving sales. For Example "Kodak-The official film of the 1996 Olympics", "Ford-The bestselling truck in America" is the way products are exhibited to consumer to stimulate purchase. There is a positive sign towards brand endorsements and purchase behavior (Dean, 1999). Naming of country-of-origin in the products strives consumer purchase behavior. Foreign labels are well received as trustable brands when compare with local origin (Kinra, 2006). Brand image is constituted by brand endorsements. Different endorsements suitable to that product will find positive influence on purchase intention. Brand endorsements in food products, will give positive influence to purchase. This instill confidence in the mind set of consumers. Even if its endorsed by origin and other ethnic popularity, will find trigger in sales of that product (Guercini & Ranfagni, 2013).

Brand Endorsement vs Brand Equity for Food

Even both the variables constitute different activity on consumer behavior, comparing these two will make aware of how one variables contributes to another variable or vice versa. Brand endorsement will act as sub-factor when compare with brand equity. The macro term defined here is brand equity. Brand endorsement will sow trust and breeds loyalty in the consumer mind and in turn improves brand equity performance. brand equity and trust are consistently the most important antecedents to both behavioral and attitudinal forms of customer loyalty (Taylor, Celuch & Goodwin, 2004). There is an hierarchical comparison between brand association with brand equity in Aaker's brand equity Model. Brand equity and associations promote brand extension in a positive way and reduces advertisement expenditure of a company (Pryor & Brodie, 1998). In the case of mergers brand equity and endorsement will contribute growth of a company. If the brands are national and private brand, then each brand used to contribute either companies towards growth (Vaidyanathan, 2000). Brand is a major factor and can be achieved by establishing relationship between endorsement, loyalty and value. Brand will become great asset if the merger of variables keeps in momentum with the consumer preference (Wood, 2000).

The Connection between Food Preferences and Food Choice

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, several factors affect our food choices. Therefore, the process connection food preferences and food choice is not straight forward and explicable. According to Wądołowska et al.(2008) food preferences interact with different food choice factors (such as advertising, functional, health, price, sensory and socio-cultural) and socio demographic features of the consumer (such as age, economic condition,

education, gender, region of residence and size of the place of residence), which again interacts with the frequency of food intake (Wądołowska et al., 2008). It has been shown that people who have different food choice motives differs in preferences for selected food products (Wądołowska et al., 2008). Food choice remains a complicated area of study and consumers' choices are affected by a great variety of factors as previously mentioned. The actual decision making process remains somewhat unclear, partly because of its complexity but also due to the food choice process multifaceted nature. In addition, the fact that it is of interest to several disciplines contributes to its complexity since all disciplines may approach the matter from different point of views, thus illuminating different processes.

Conclusion

From the literature available on the food perception, preference and choice for ready to eat convince food, it was found that the consumer purchase brands mostly on the parameters of trust and safety. These two parameters build long term association with the brands. Even though there are other factors people considers while choosing ready to eat food, trust and safety are become the vital parameters to purchase ready to eat food products. Brand endorsements, brand ethical concerns, brand attributes are have little impact on purchase intention. Hence, it can be concluded that, there are several factors affect our food choices (such as advertising, functional, health, price, sensory and socio-cultural) and socio demographic features of the consumer (such as age, economic condition, education, gender, region of residence and size of the place of residence). So interesting empirical study can be carried out across the different regions, types of ready to eat food and other categorical variables based on conceptual frame work given in figure-1. Bivariate or multivariate study can be done by taking few variables or all variables given in this framework.

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