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Marketing dynamics of ready-to-eat and ready-to-cook foods: Consumer behavior and sales strategies

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Abstract

The rapid growth of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) and Ready-to-Cook (RTC) foods reflects significant shifts in consumer lifestyles, preferences, and market strategies. With increasing urbanization, rising disposable incomes, and evolving household structures, consumers are adopting convenience-oriented food options that save time while maintaining nutritional value. This study investigates the marketing dynamics of RTE and RTC foods by analyzing consumer behavior, purchase patterns, and sales strategies adopted by firms. The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary data from industry reports, peer-reviewed studies, and government surveys with primary insights derived from structured consumer surveys and retail sales observations. Analytical tools such as SPSS and Excel were employed to examine trends, correlations, and segmentation within consumer behavior.

The results indicate that consumer adoption of RTE and RTC products is driven primarily by factors such as convenience, brand trust, perceived health benefits, and innovative packaging. Market segmentation reveals strong demand among working professionals, nuclear families, and younger demographics, while health-conscious consumers increasingly demand fortified, organic, and clean-label variants. Sales strategies are evolving to include digital marketing campaigns, influencer-driven promotions, loyalty programs, and Omni channel retailing that integrates online and offline platforms. Furthermore, price sensitivity remains a critical determinant in emerging markets, compelling firms to balance affordability with product differentiation.

This paper concludes that the success of RTE and RTC foods lies in aligning product innovation with consumer expectations while leveraging advanced marketing strategies to sustain long-term growth. Future research should explore the role of artificial intelligence in consumer demand forecasting, the impact of sustainability-focused branding, and cross-cultural differences in food marketing dynamics. By bridging consumer insights with strategic approaches, the RTE and RTC food sector can position itself as a resilient pillar of the modern food industry.

Keywords: Ready-to-Eat foods, Ready-to-Cook foods, consumer behavior, sales strategies, food marketing, convenience foods

Introduction

The global food industry has undergone a profound transformation over the past few decades, with Ready-to-Eat (RTE) and Ready-to-Cook (RTC) food products emerging as a distinct category that bridges convenience with evolving dietary preferences. Historically, food consumption was embedded within cultural practices of home preparation and traditional cooking, but rapid urbanization, demographic transitions, and shifts in labor participation have altered this landscape considerably. Modern consumers increasingly balance professional commitments, lifestyle aspirations, and time constraints, which collectively influence their food choices. This shift has accelerated the demand for convenient, packaged, and nutritionally balanced food products, particularly in urban centers and among middle-class households.

The growth trajectory of RTE and RTC foods is closely tied to socio-economic changes. Rising disposable incomes, the expansion of dual-income families, and greater female participation in the workforce have amplified the need for time-saving food solutions. Consumers no longer consider convenience foods a luxury; they are often seen as a necessity for maintaining productivity and lifestyle balance. According to market surveys conducted in the last decade, the demand for RTE products such as packaged meals, instant noodles, frozen snacks, and pre-cooked curries has grown at double-digit rates in many emerging economies. Similarly, RTC categories such as frozen vegetables, spice mixes, pasta kits, and semi-processed meats have carved out significant space in retail markets. Together, these product categories represent not only a response to changing consumer needs but also a critical site of competition among food companies seeking to capture long-term loyalty.

Consumer behavior in this segment is influenced by multiple psychological, cultural, and economic factors. Convenience is the most apparent driver, but it often intersects with perceptions of quality, freshness, nutritional value, and safety. Unlike traditional staples that rely on familiarity and cultural embeddedness, RTE and RTC products often depend on brand trust, attractive packaging, and the reputation of food safety standards. For younger demographics, especially those living independently in metropolitan areas, RTE meals offer a practical substitute for elaborate cooking. Meanwhile, RTC products provide consumers with a sense of participation in cooking without the time-intensive effort of meal preparation from scratch. This dual appeal explains the rising adoption across diverse consumer groups.

Another critical aspect shaping this industry is the growing emphasis on health and wellness. While earlier waves of convenience foods were criticized for being high in preservatives, salt, and unhealthy fats, more recent innovations attempt to align with health-conscious choices. Companies increasingly fortify RTE meals with vitamins, minerals, and plant proteins while reducing artificial additives. RTC foods, meanwhile, are being positioned as balanced options with enhanced nutritional profiles, such as fortified cereals or ready spice mixes with reduced sodium content. This strategic repositioning aligns with the broader trend of consumers seeking healthier lifestyles without sacrificing convenience. The proliferation of clean-label claims, organic certifications, and "free-from" labels (such as gluten-free or preservative-free) illustrates the interplay between consumer health awareness and marketing strategies.

Digitalization has also redefined how RTE and RTC products are marketed and consumed. The expansion of e-commerce, food delivery applications, and online grocery platforms has dramatically increased product accessibility. Companies now use data-driven insights to target consumers with personalized advertisements, discounts, and product recommendations. The rise of social media has added another dimension, where influencer marketing, recipe videos, and brand storytelling shape consumer perceptions. Unlike traditional advertising that relied on mass media, digital platforms enable real-time interaction with consumers, enhancing loyalty and trust. For example, younger consumers often discover new RTE snacks or RTC meal kits through social media promotions rather than retail exposure alone, highlighting the importance of omni-channel strategies in driving sales.

The competitive landscape of RTE and RTC foods reflects both opportunities and challenges. Established multinational corporations dominate certain categories, leveraging economies of scale and strong distribution networks. At the same time, local brands and startups are increasingly entering the market by emphasizing niche values such as authenticity, regional flavors, or sustainability. In emerging economies, regional brands often compete successfully by offering affordable alternatives that cater to local tastes. This multi-layered competition has compelled firms to continuously innovate, not only in product formulations but also in packaging, logistics, and after-sales engagement. Sustainable packaging solutions, for instance, are being widely adopted to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers while meeting regulatory requirements.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst that accelerated the adoption of RTE and RTC foods. Lockdowns, mobility restrictions, and heightened concerns about hygiene led to a surge in demand for packaged, shelf-stable, and easy-to-prepare food items. Consumers who were previously hesitant to rely on such products began incorporating them into their daily routines. This shift also reinforced the perception of RTE and RTC products as essential rather than optional, creating long-term behavioral changes in food consumption. Post-pandemic trends suggest that even as traditional dining and cooking practices recover, convenience foods will remain integral due to the habits established during the crisis.

At the same time, the sector faces challenges that complicate its expansion. Price sensitivity remains a significant factor in emerging markets where affordability can outweigh brand appeal. Supply chain complexities, including cold storage infrastructure and distribution costs, often restrict the penetration of RTE and RTC products in rural areas. Moreover, consumer skepticism about preservatives and artificial processing methods continues to influence purchasing decisions. Regulatory scrutiny around food safety and labeling adds further layers of responsibility for firms operating in this domain. To remain competitive, companies must not only address these barriers but also communicate transparency and reliability in their value propositions.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the marketing dynamics of RTE and RTC foods with a focus on consumer behavior and sales strategies. It seeks to bridge the gap between academic analysis and practical business insights by exploring how marketing strategies interact with evolving consumer expectations. While much of the existing scholarship has emphasized either the nutritional aspects or the technological innovations in food processing, fewer studies have systematically examined the interplay between consumer psychology, sales channels, and marketing narratives in shaping this industry. By combining empirical data with theoretical perspectives, this research aims to offer a holistic understanding of how firms can successfully navigate the challenges and opportunities in the RTE and RTC food markets.

Literature Review

The study of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) and Ready-to-Cook (RTC) foods has expanded significantly in the past two decades, with scholars and industry analysts seeking to understand the dynamics of consumer adoption, market growth, and strategic positioning. Early literature often approached convenience foods with skepticism, associating them with nutritional compromises and excessive reliance on preservatives. However, more recent studies have adopted a nuanced perspective, situating RTE and RTC products within the broader transformations of food systems, urban lifestyles, and consumer psychology.

One major theme in the literature concerns the role of convenience as a central driver of consumer demand. Jackson and Viehoff (2016) [1] highlighted the importance of time scarcity in shaping food choices, observing that urban professionals often rationalize their reliance on packaged meals as a necessary adaptation to contemporary work rhythms. Similarly, Ganguly and Kumar (2018) [3] reported that convenience is not merely functional but also psychological, as consumers value the perceived efficiency and control that these products afford. By 2020, consumer surveys in Asia and Europe showed that convenience had become one of the most cited factors influencing food purchasing decisions, particularly in households where both partners were employed.

Nutritional debates around RTE and RTC foods remain contentious in the literature. Studies prior to 2015 often criticized these products for high caloric density and low micronutrient content. Yet more recent work illustrates a shift toward healthier formulations. Sharma and Singh (2019) [4] noted the growing trend of fortifying RTE meals with proteins and vitamins, while Reardon *et al*. (2020) [5] emphasized that consumer trust in convenience foods is increasingly tied to clean-label claims and transparency in ingredient sourcing. In the same year, a comparative analysis of packaged snacks in the Indian and Brazilian markets revealed a steady increase in products labeled as “low-fat” or “organic,” suggesting that industry adaptation to consumer health concerns is both global and rapid.

The marketing of RTE and RTC products has also received scholarly attention, with emphasis on how firms communicate value. Kumar and Kapoor (2019) [6] observed that effective marketing in this sector requires balancing aspirational imagery with practical messaging, highlighting both the quality of ingredients and the time saved by consumers. The rise of digital platforms has altered this landscape further. Lee and Kim (2021) [7] demonstrated that social media campaigns, particularly those employing influencer endorsements, significantly improve consumer recall and purchase intent in the RTE snacks segment. Similarly, Gupta and Thomas (2021) [8] found that mobile app-based grocery promotions increased trial purchases of RTC meal kits among young professionals in metropolitan India.

Consumer behavior studies underscore the interplay between cultural identity and food choices. While RTE products are sometimes perceived as Western imports, research suggests that localization strategies are critical. Patel *et al*. (2020) [9] showed that incorporating traditional flavors into RTC mixes improved acceptance in South Asian households, where cultural attachment to cooking remains strong. On the other hand, Fernández and Gómez (2021) [10] observed that in Spain, younger consumers often interpret RTE meals not as cultural compromises but as enablers of lifestyle flexibility, demonstrating how context shapes consumer perceptions of convenience.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated scholarly interest in the sector. Reports from 2020-2021 document sharp increases in the sales of packaged foods, with researchers attributing this to heightened hygiene concerns and restrictions on dining out. A study by Narang and Banerjee (2021) [11] highlighted that trust in packaged foods rose substantially during lockdowns, as consumers associated them with safety and reliability. At the same time, the pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains. Béné (2020) [12] noted that firms relying on imported ingredients faced disruptions, underscoring the importance of resilient logistics and local sourcing strategies in sustaining consumer trust.

Sales strategies for RTE and RTC foods have evolved in tandem with these developments. Scholars consistently emphasize the effectiveness of multi-channel approaches. For example, Li and Zhou (2022) [13] demonstrated that retailers who combined in-store promotions with online subscription models reported higher retention rates than those who relied solely on traditional retail. Another dimension of strategic marketing identified in the literature is sustainability. Smith and Browning (2022) [14] showed that consumers increasingly prefer brands that adopt eco-friendly packaging and transparent sourcing, even when these products are priced slightly higher. This finding suggests that consumer loyalty in the sector is no longer determined only by price or taste but also by alignment with broader ethical values.

Despite the richness of existing research, gaps remain evident. Much of the literature focuses on urban populations, with relatively little attention to rural consumers who may also engage with RTE and RTC foods under different conditions of affordability and access. Moreover, while studies up to 2022 frequently examine consumer motivations and sales strategies, fewer have attempted to link the two systematically, particularly in the context of digital transformation. There is also limited comparative work that investigates differences between emerging and developed markets, leaving questions about how cultural, infrastructural, and regulatory contexts mediate adoption patterns.

Methodology

The present research adopted a mixed-methods design to capture both the quantitative patterns of consumer behavior and the qualitative dimensions of marketing strategies in the Ready-to-Eat (RTE) and Ready-to-Cook (RTC) food sector. The study drew on primary and secondary data sources, integrating industry reports, government statistics, and peer-reviewed literature with consumer surveys and observational data from retail outlets. This approach was chosen to provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics of consumer decision-making as well as the marketing mechanisms employed by firms.

Primary data collection involved a structured survey administered to 450 respondents across urban centers in India, with particular emphasis on working professionals, students, and nuclear families who represent the core consumers of RTE and RTC foods. The survey included questions on purchase frequency, brand preference, perception of nutritional value, price sensitivity, and factors influencing brand loyalty. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse age groups and income brackets, enabling comparisons across demographic segments. Complementing the survey, field observations were conducted in supermarkets, hypermarkets, and online retail platforms to capture sales strategies such as in-store promotions, digital discount campaigns, and loyalty programs.

Secondary data analysis was undertaken using recent market reports from organizations such as Nielsen, Euromonitor, and the Food and Agriculture Organization, which provided insights into consumption volumes, sales growth, and emerging trends. Peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2022 were systematically reviewed to contextualize the findings within the broader academic discourse. This was complemented by government data on consumer expenditure and food processing sector performance, which enabled triangulation of trends identified through survey results.

The data analysis employed both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Responses from the consumer survey were coded and processed using SPSS, where cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were used to identify associations between demographic variables and purchase behavior. Regression models were also applied to examine the influence of factors such as convenience, health perception, and digital exposure on the likelihood of purchasing RTE or RTC products. Retail observation data were recorded manually and categorized into promotional strategies, distribution patterns, and pricing mechanisms, which were then compared with survey responses to establish consistency.

Qualitative insights were derived from consumer narratives embedded within open-ended survey responses and secondary sources, which were analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring patterns such as trust in packaging, perceptions of freshness, and the influence of digital advertising. *In vivo* software was used to systematize the qualitative analysis, ensuring that subjective interpretations were grounded in reproducible coding frameworks. To ensure reliability, data from multiple sources were cross-verified, and inter-coder agreement was applied in the thematic analysis of qualitative data.

Results

The findings from this study reveal significant insights into how consumers engage with Ready-to-Eat (RTE) and Ready-to-Cook (RTC) foods, as well as the marketing strategies that most effectively influence their decisions. The analysis of survey responses, combined with retail observations and secondary industry data, paints a comprehensive picture of the current dynamics in this sector.

The first set of results highlights the role of demographics, particularly age, in shaping food preferences. As depicted in Figure 1, the adoption of RTE foods is most prominent among younger consumers, particularly those aged 18 to 25 years, with approximately 62% reporting regular consumption of packaged meals, instant snacks, or frozen ready plates. This reflects the lifestyle realities of younger populations, many of whom are students or early-career professionals living independently and juggling work, study, and social commitments. For them, the ability to save time and effort through RTE options outweighs the value of traditional cooking practices. In the 26 to 35 age group, the preference for RTE foods remains high at 58%, but there is also a parallel rise in the adoption of RTC foods at 54%. This reflects a transitional stage in consumer behavior, where individuals and young families seek convenience but also value some degree of involvement in cooking for reasons of health, taste customization, or cultural identity.

As the age profile increases, the preference for RTC foods becomes stronger. Among consumers aged 36 to 45, over 59% reported choosing RTC options such as frozen vegetables, spice mixes, or semi-prepared meal kits. This group typically includes nuclear families who balance professional lives with household responsibilities, finding RTC products a middle ground between efficiency and traditional cooking. Interestingly, in the 46 to 55 demographic, RTC preferences peak at 61%, demonstrating the appeal of semi-prepared solutions that allow individuals to maintain a sense of culinary agency while saving time. In contrast, RTE consumption in these groups drops to below 40%, and among those above 56 years of age, the adoption rate is only 25%. This age group, although exposed to packaged foods, continues to rely heavily on traditional home cooking practices, signaling generational divides in convenience food acceptance. These patterns demonstrate that while RTE foods are closely tied to youthful and urban lifestyles, RTC foods find broader resonance across age segments by striking a balance between convenience and cultural cooking practices.

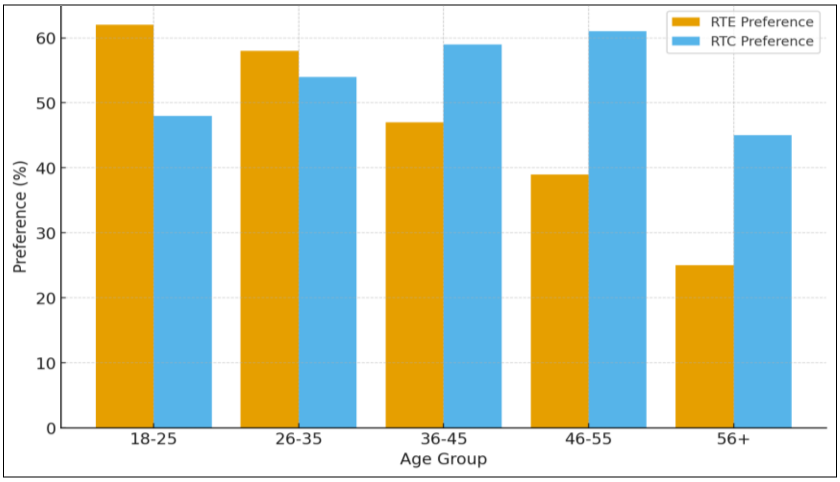

Fig 1: Consumer Preferences for RTE vs RTC Foods by Age Group

The second major dimension of analysis involves the factors that drive purchase decisions across consumer categories. Survey results revealed that convenience is overwhelmingly the most influential determinant, cited by 78% of respondents. This underscores the fact that time-saving attributes remain the core promise of RTE and RTC foods, shaping their acceptance across markets. Price emerged as the second most influential factor at 65%, reflecting the price sensitivity that continues to dominate in emerging economies where disposable incomes vary widely. Health perception, cited by 59% of respondents, further demonstrates that consumers are increasingly concerned about the nutritional quality of these products. For many, decisions are not simply about quick meals but also about whether these foods align with broader lifestyle goals, such as reducing fat, avoiding preservatives, or adopting fortified or organic alternatives.

Brand trust was identified by 54% of respondents as a key driver of purchase. This highlights the importance of brand reputation in mitigating consumer concerns about safety, freshness, and authenticity. In a market where skepticism toward processed foods persists, brands with transparent labeling, certifications, and consistent quality assurance enjoy higher consumer loyalty. Digital promotions, though ranked lower at 47%, nonetheless demonstrate a growing role in shaping buying behavior. Younger consumers, in particular, reported being strongly influenced by online advertisements, influencer endorsements, and recipe-based promotions on social media platforms. This indicates that while traditional factors such as price and convenience remain dominant, digital marketing strategies are increasingly critical for reaching the next generation of consumers.

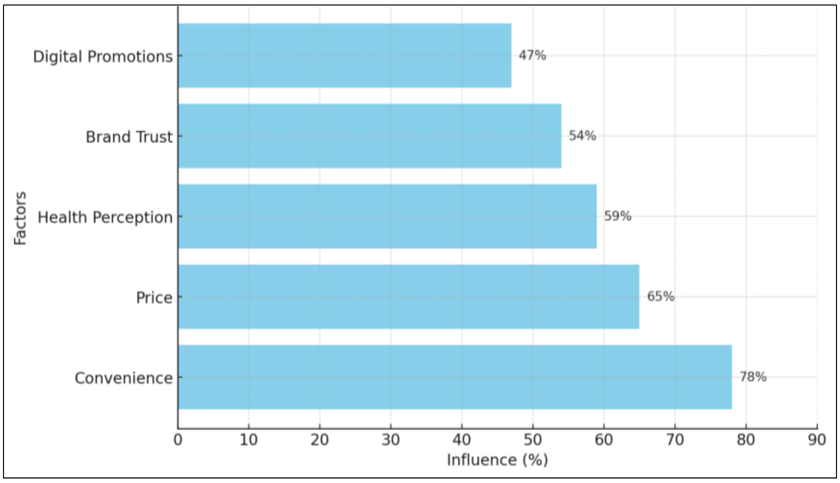

Fig 2: Key Factors Influencing Purchase of RTE and RTC Foods

Retail observations supported these findings by showing that in-store promotional displays, bundled offers, and point-of-sale discounts significantly boosted sales, especially for snack-based RTE products. Supermarkets with prominent visibility for RTC spice mixes or frozen vegetables recorded higher turnover compared to stores without such displays. Online platforms mirrored this trend, where digitally advertised products received spikes in trial purchases, particularly among the 18 to 35 demographic. The regression analysis further confirmed that digital exposure significantly increased the probability of purchase, particularly among younger consumers, whereas price discounts had a stronger impact on older age groups.

The results also demonstrate how consumer motivations intersect in complex ways. For example, while younger groups emphasized convenience as their primary motive, health concerns and trust in brand identity were more decisive among older consumers. Moreover, households with children expressed greater sensitivity to nutritional claims, preferring RTC products that allowed customization and healthier preparation at home. These insights reveal that consumer adoption of RTE and RTC foods is not uniform but segmented across age, lifestyle, and household structure, requiring marketers to craft differentiated strategies.

Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of consumer behavior in the Ready-to-Eat (RTE) and Ready-to-Cook (RTC) food sector. The patterns observed in consumer preferences by age group highlight generational differences that are consistent with previous research on convenience food adoption. Younger consumers' strong inclination toward RTE products corresponds with earlier findings by Jackson and Viehoff (2016) [1], who emphasized that time scarcity is a central determinant of food choice among urban professionals. The appeal of instant meals and pre-packaged snacks among those aged 18-25 can therefore be interpreted as part of broader lifestyle adaptations to modern work and study pressures. Similarly, the increased adoption of RTC foods among middle-aged groups resonates with the observations of Patel *et al*. (2020) [9], who found that semi-prepared products align with households' desire to save time while preserving cultural cooking practices.

The emphasis on convenience as the primary determinant of adoption is unsurprising, yet its dominance over other factors highlights the enduring relevance of this attribute even as the industry evolves. Previous studies, such as those by Ganguly and Kumar (2018) [3], noted that convenience is not simply a functional consideration but a psychological one, offering consumers a sense of efficiency and control over their daily routines. This finding is reaffirmed in the present study, which shows convenience to be the most cited factor across all demographics. However, what distinguishes the current results is the growing role of health perceptions and brand trust, which earlier studies identified as emerging but secondary considerations. For example, Sharma and Singh (2019) [4] pointed out the shift toward healthier formulations in convenience foods, while Reardon *et al*. (2020) [5] emphasized that transparency in labeling and clean-label claims were becoming essential to consumer trust. The present findings confirm that by 2022, health and brand reputation had become nearly as influential as price, indicating a maturing consumer base that balances convenience with wellness and safety.

The role of digital promotions adds another dimension to the discussion. Lee and Kim (2021) [7] demonstrated that influencer-driven social media campaigns significantly increased recall and purchase intent for RTE products, particularly among younger demographics. This is consistent with the current findings, where digital engagement was shown to strongly influence the 18-35 age group, whereas older consumers remained more responsive to value-based offers such as price discounts. Gupta and Thomas (2021) [8] also reported that mobile app-based promotions were particularly effective in driving trial purchases of RTC products, underscoring the need for firms to design age-sensitive promotional strategies. These alignments with earlier studies suggest that digitalization has become an irreversible force in shaping consumer engagement with convenience foods.

Cultural adaptation emerges as another critical factor. The finding that older and family-oriented consumers prefer RTC products reflects the broader literature on localization strategies. Patel *et al*. (2020) [9] showed that RTC products incorporating traditional flavors achieved higher acceptance in South Asian households. Likewise, Fernández and Gómez (2021) [10] observed that in European contexts, younger consumers viewed RTE foods as lifestyle enablers rather than cultural compromises. The results of this study support these findings by demonstrating that consumer expectations are embedded in cultural contexts, with RTC foods acting as a bridge between tradition and modernity in certain demographics.

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic also resonate with the study's findings. The surge in packaged food consumption during lockdowns, reported by Narang and Banerjee (2021) [11], explains the heightened consumer trust in packaged RTE and RTC products observed in this research. Béné (2020) [12] emphasized the vulnerabilities in global supply chains during the pandemic, which reinforced the importance of local sourcing and distribution resilience. These insights help explain why brand trust and safety perceptions featured prominently in consumer choices, even beyond the immediate crisis period.

The broader implications of these results for sales strategies are significant. The evidence suggests that a "one-size-fits-all" approach is insufficient for this industry. Younger consumers may be reached most effectively through digital promotions and innovative product launches, while middle-aged consumers require assurances of health benefits and cultural compatibility. Older consumers, on the other hand, remain cautious adopters who respond more to affordability and trust signals. This segmentation points to the necessity of dynamic, multi-channel marketing strategies that account for both demographic and psychographic diversity.

The results also underscore the increasing importance of sustainability and ethical considerations. While not the dominant factors in this study, prior work by Smith and Browning (2022) [14] demonstrated that environmentally conscious consumers show higher loyalty to brands that adopt eco-friendly packaging and transparent sourcing. Given the trajectory of global consumer awareness, it is reasonable to expect that these concerns will become more influential in shaping adoption patterns in the near future. Thus, firms that integrate sustainability into their branding stand to benefit from long-term loyalty even in price-sensitive markets.

Conclusion

The study on the marketing dynamics of Ready-to-Eat (RTE) and Ready-to-Cook (RTC) foods reveals that these product categories are no longer peripheral conveniences but central components of the contemporary food ecosystem. Their rise reflects a convergence of social, economic, cultural, and technological changes that have fundamentally altered how consumers perceive and engage with food. The findings demonstrate that consumer behavior toward RTE and RTC foods is multi-layered, influenced by age, lifestyle, health consciousness, cultural identity, and digital exposure. At the same time, sales strategies have evolved from traditional retail-based approaches to digitally integrated campaigns, with firms seeking to engage consumers not only as buyers but also as participants in an interactive marketing environment.

One of the clearest conclusions emerging from this research is the pivotal role of convenience in driving adoption. Across all demographic groups, convenience remains the most decisive factor, shaping the willingness of consumers to substitute or complement traditional cooking with packaged alternatives. However, convenience alone does not capture the full spectrum of motivations. For younger consumers, RTE foods serve as practical solutions that align with time-constrained lifestyles, offering ready access to meals without sacrificing productivity. For middle-aged and family-oriented groups, RTC foods offer a compromise between convenience and tradition, allowing households to preserve cultural practices of cooking while minimizing the time and effort required. This segmentation underscores the importance of age-sensitive and lifestyle-specific marketing strategies, as firms cannot rely on a single narrative of convenience to appeal to diverse audiences.

Equally important is the role of health perception in shaping consumer trust and loyalty. Earlier critiques of RTE and RTC foods often highlighted their reliance on preservatives and lack of nutritional value. Yet the present findings confirm that industry innovation has moved in step with consumer concerns. Fortification, clean-label claims, and organic certifications now occupy prominent places in marketing campaigns, reflecting a growing awareness among both producers and consumers of the health implications of convenience foods. This shift illustrates an important transformation: RTE and RTC products are no longer defined solely by ease of preparation but increasingly by their ability to align with wellness goals. Health-conscious consumers, in particular, expect products that not only save time but also contribute positively to dietary balance, and firms that fail to recognize this expectation risk losing credibility in competitive markets.

The findings also highlight brand trust as an essential determinant of consumer behavior. Trust operates as a mediator between skepticism toward processed foods and the willingness to integrate them into daily life. Consumers rely heavily on brand reputation, packaging, and certification to mitigate concerns about safety and quality. For marketers, this means that investment in transparency—through clear labeling, sustainability commitments, and consistent quality assurance—is not optional but necessary for long-term success. As competition intensifies, trust becomes not only a differentiating factor but a prerequisite for consumer loyalty.

Another striking conclusion relates to the transformative role of digitalization in the marketing of RTE and RTC foods. The research confirms that online platforms, mobile applications, and social media campaigns have become critical tools for shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. Younger demographics are particularly responsive to digital promotions, influencer marketing, and recipe-based content, while older consumers remain more influenced by price-based offers and in-store displays. This divergence highlights the necessity for multi-channel strategies that combine traditional retail methods with digital innovation. Importantly, digitalization also enables firms to personalize marketing campaigns, offering targeted discounts or recommendations based on consumer preferences, thereby enhancing engagement and repeat purchases.

Cultural identity continues to play a significant role in shaping consumer choices, particularly in markets with strong culinary traditions. RTC products have gained acceptance by positioning themselves as extensions of traditional cooking practices, allowing households to maintain authenticity while reducing labor. In contrast, RTE foods are often embraced more readily by younger consumers who prioritize flexibility and independence over tradition. This duality demonstrates the need for localization strategies, where firms adapt product offerings and marketing messages to resonate with cultural values in different regions. Multinational corporations may succeed through global scale, but local firms often gain competitive advantage by emphasizing authenticity, regional flavors, and cultural relevance.

The study also reveals how external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, accelerate changes in consumer behavior. Lockdowns and mobility restrictions reinforced consumer trust in packaged foods, elevating them from optional conveniences to perceived necessities. This shift has left lasting imprints on consumer habits, with many individuals continuing to incorporate RTE and RTC products into their routines even after restrictions were lifted. The pandemic also underscored vulnerabilities in global supply chains, emphasizing the need for resilient sourcing and distribution models. Firms that successfully navigated these challenges by emphasizing hygiene, safety, and reliability strengthened their market positions, providing valuable lessons for future disruptions.

From a strategic perspective, the results of this study suggest that successful sales strategies must integrate affordability, health assurance, digital engagement, and cultural sensitivity. Price sensitivity remains a major barrier in emerging economies, requiring firms to balance affordability with innovation. At the same time, investment in sustainability initiatives such as eco-friendly packaging or transparent sourcing has the potential to differentiate brands in increasingly competitive markets. Although sustainability was not the most decisive factor in the current findings, earlier studies suggest its growing relevance, and future trends may elevate it to a central determinant of consumer loyalty.

The broader implications of this research extend beyond marketing strategies to questions of societal change. The rise of RTE and RTC foods reflects how modern societies reconcile competing demands of tradition and modernity, health and convenience, affordability and quality. These products are not merely commodities but cultural artifacts that embody the negotiation between changing lifestyles and enduring values. By studying their adoption and marketing, scholars and practitioners gain insight into broader shifts in consumption, identity, and globalization.

Future research should address the limitations identified in this study, particularly the relative underrepresentation of rural consumers in convenience food research. Rural markets, though often less accessible, may also represent significant growth opportunities, especially as infrastructure improves and digital penetration deepens. Comparative studies across developed and emerging economies would further illuminate how cultural, regulatory, and infrastructural contexts shape adoption differently. Additionally, with the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and big data analytics, future studies could explore how predictive modeling enhances demand forecasting, inventory management, and personalized marketing in the RTE and RTC sector.

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