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A study on consumer perception and purchasing behaviour towards ready-to-eat food among students and parents in Colombo district, Sri Lanka

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The demand for food across the world has changed drastically with consumers moving away from traditional food in favour of convenience foods such as ready-to-eat (RTE) food. This study aimed at performing a comprehensive analysis on the consumer purchasing behaviour and perception towards RTE food products available in Sri Lanka. The present study was carried out with randomly selected school-adolescents aged between 11 and 19 years (n=93) and parents of school-children aged between 6 and 10 years (n=72) using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The data were analysed using descriptive and nonparametric inferential statistics. The respondents had purchased RTE food less often than expected. There was no statistically significant relationship between the mother's employment status and the frequency of purchasing RTE food ($p > 0.05$). Expecting a variation in foods was the main motive for the respondents to purchase RTE food (>50%) while convenience was the second (>18%). Major factors that determined the respondents' choice of RTE food were taste, brand, nutritional value and quality. Students frequently showed concern about taste (52%) while parents sought nutritional value (61%) and quality (60%). The majority (51%) of parents never or rarely allowed their children to involve in decision-making process when purchasing RTE. Conversely, school-adolescents tend to make their own decisions (78.4%) while male students had a higher frequency than the females ($p < 0.05$). However, most students (48%) and parents (72%) were not satisfied with the existing RTE food due to many health-related concerns. The majority liked to spend Rs.100-200 per healthy meal and Rs.50-100 per healthy snack, which represent the usual prices of meals and snacks in the market. However, there was no significant relationship between the price that parents are willing to pay for a healthy meal and their monthly family income ($P > 0.05$). In conclusion, future RTE food manufactures need to emphasize nutritional value, healthiness, price and the taste of their products.

Keywords: Purchasing behaviour, ready-to-eat food, consumer perception, decision making

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