

The New Indian Middle Class Consumption Preference towards Convenience Foods – A Grounded Theory Approach

Ms. Amandeep Kaur

Research Scholar,
Amity University
New Delhi

Dr. Garima Malik

Assistant Professor III,
Amity University

Ms. Nidhi Sharma

Assistant Professor,
RDIAS

Dr. Ruhee Mittal

Assistant Professor,
RDIAS

Abstract

The social and economic transformation of India has been closely linked with the rise of new middle class. As citizens of India continue to climb the economic ladder, the composition of their spending will change considerably. Although the middle class episode is a widely investigated topic within a wide range of research fields such as sociology, political sciences, anthropology, the current study concentrates on the new middle class in the context of an important Emerging Market for Convenience foods. Convenience food consumption is one of several new trends in eating read as active opposition to industrialized food provision. Certainly, the bulging of India's middle class has some features of a process of Westernization. The demand for western-style convenience foods is growing around the world, especially in the India, a likely result of the modernization of our middle class and their food consumption patterns. This study examines the factors determining consumer behavior of the new middle class towards convenience foods in Delhi. The study used grounded theory to obtain insight into the rising middle class preference for convenience foods through interviews with 24 individuals and used these data to propose a model of new middle class convenience foods consumption.

Keywords: Convenience Food, Middle Class, Preference, Consumer behaviour.

Introduction

The concept of middle class is not recent. The rise of the middle class was observed as an episode in the late 1980s. Estimates of the size, extension, and effect of this middle-class vary, depending in part on definitions and bifurcations of variable markers such as “discretionary income,” education, and social identity. The definition we adapt in this study pertaining to the new middle class includes the households that have gained significant disposable income and have experienced significant lifestyle changes since the market liberalization reforms which commenced in the 1991 (Mehmet Mithat Uner & Aybegum Gungordu). Middle class can be categorized through economic and social aspects. Economists debate the actual levels of income that describe the middle class from those above and below them. Some include all those who are just above the poverty line — those who can spend around US\$ 2 per day in many developing countries (all values are PPP) (Furness, Scholz, Guarin, 2012). More specifically, Middle class, defined as households with disposable incomes from Rs 200,000 to 1,000,000 a year comprises about 50 million people, roughly 5% of

the population at present but the size and features of the Indian middle class requires focus for several reasons; India possesses a sixth of the world's population and therefore its middle class constitutes a considerable portion of the global workforce as well as a significant market for final products. And according to McKinsey Global Institute report, By the year 2025, 41% of Indians will be middle class, making a population of 583 million individuals. The study also shows that the share of total consumption by the middle class will grow up to 59% in 2025 (KS Oils 2008). Finally, the growth and consumption habits of the middle class serve as a useful measurement of how living standards in India are changing. Hence, it seems essential to develop a rigorous method for identifying the Indian middle class changing consumption pattern.

However, in the examination of changing tastes and consumption practices in India, one change which has only been touched upon till now, is the increased consumption of convenience foods, especially western-style convenience foods, including meals away from home and processed and pre-packaged products for home use. Rapid urbanization and changes in social and cultural practices among new middle class have altered the food habits of the community. Thus, the composition of average household consumption has been moving away from basic necessities to discretionary items (Beinhocker et al. 2007).

Rising of New Middle Class

There is no authored definition of the middle class in India. The middle class cannot be just categorized in an income group, but also a political and social class and a consumer market. Thus, measuring this demographic group can yield varying results. Irrespective of which estimate is used, it is imperative to keep a proper perspective on the potential of the middle class (Saxena, Lanzeni, Mayer 2010). The marking of the Indian middle class in recent years symbolizes its dominant existence in the economy. To foreign investors and government officials, the middle class is a potential market and a testimony to the country's economic progress. From a place known for its village-republics and agrarian communities, India began to be constructed around its cities and its vibrant and mobile middle classes (Jodhka & Prakash 2011). The rising Indian middle class and their consumption will drive the consumer goods market in the future. Advertising and media flicks have contributed to the building of an image of a "new" Indian middle class, one that has left behind its dependence on severity and has seized an open India that is at speed with broader processes of globalization (Fernandes, L. 2000).

The discursive boundaries of the new middle class are thus constituted by a shift in the aspirations, standards and direction of the new middle class. As the member of Marketing Club in my college, I interviewed the students who put it succinctly, the distinction lies in a way that has transformed the middle class outlook and preference. We certainly like brands as we want to be a part of this world. From fashion to food, education to entertainment, everywhere we see things that have international perspective. See the brands of clothes, students wear in college, the cars they drive, the entertainment channels they talk about, it clearly shows that new middle class becomes a sign of the promise of a new national model of development but with global outlook that will allow India to join the process of economic globalization.

Middle class division has always been market segmentation variable but rise of New Indian Middle Class and its consumption patterns towards convenience foods have never been concluded.

Convenience foods consumption

Changes in lifestyle have resulted in an on-going process of nutrition change among India's new middle classes (Lohr and Dittrich 2007). The preferences for dietary are changing and numerous new dietary habits have emerged. One of the trends associated with globalization and greater affluence of the middle classes is the increasing popularity of convenience foods or ready to eat dishes (Osswald and Dittrich 2012). According to an article, there has been a major shift in food habits in the metropolitan cities, about 86% of households prefer to have instant food due to steep rise in dual income level and standard of living, convenience, and influence of western countries, according to a survey undertaken by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham).

Indian households like to cook food which gives convenience and can be easily purchased. Processed food and taste habits are no exception to this. The food industry has been very successful in replacing fresh and healthy food from consumers' diet with processed food (Srinivasan and Shende 2015).

The preference of convenience food is determined with most commonly available and purchased convenience products. Defining Convenience foods says it refers to fully or partially prepared foods in which a significant amount of preparation time, culinary skills or energy inputs have been transferred from the home kitchen to the food processor and distributor (Candel, 2001; Costa et al., 2001).

Table 1.1 Convenience food categories used in the study (adapted fromKok, 2003)

Categories	Input by food industry	Product readiness	Consumers input
A	Fully prepared	ready to eat	consumed as purchased
B	Fully prepared	ready to eat	requiring only mild heating
C	Partially/fully prepared	needs additional ingredients e.g. milk or hot/boiling water or salad dressing	after mixing or cooking are ready to eat
D	Partially prepared	minimally prepared for cooking	full cooking of some or all of their components

Convenience in this context is conceptualized as consisting of not only on saving time but also energy and the transference of culinary skills which relate to basic and complex convenience foods. This paper investigates the critical factors that facilitate convenience food consumption preference by the new Indian middle class.

On searching the literature on middle class consumption patterns, we found several motivations for a fresh investigation of the key factors that leads to new Indian middle class preference for convenience foods. First existing studies largely based on quantitative data that are unable to uncover the deeper issues identified by the interpretive method that emerge from grounding the research in data (Kumbhar 2013).

As the two researchers of this paper resided in North-west Delhi at the time of the study and had access to emerging region of Delhi having most of the middle class people – Rohini region – we elected to study the topic in the Delhi context.

New Middle Class Consumption Practices for Convenience Foods : Literature Review

The New Indian Middle Class has modern aspirations. Since the nineties those have changed formats and are directing towards demand for refinement, specialty and convenience. As Indian consumers are becoming more affluent and this is influencing both lifestyle and diet in India. This rapidly-growing level of affluence provides consumers with the means, and often the desire, to purchase a wider variety of foods and consumer goods—a marked change from only decades ago when availability and supply were controlled by government. Now, the increase consumption of convenience foods among ht new middle class is viewed as a sign of modern living. Several authors

suggested the numerous factors that identify the new middle class consumption behaviour towards convenience foods. We summarize few researches and pave way for our contribution to it.

(Carrier and Kalb 2015) identified that the aspirational status of global convenience foods, associated with new-middle class public spaces such as shopping malls, force mothers to adapt to increasingly international dietary patterns. In a case of rising upper-middle-class families, global commodity consumption has become very much part of what being middle class defines, and food knowledge indicates cosmopolitanism.

(Kaur and Singh 2013) in their study mentioned that the society with food combining lifestyle, trend for both spouses working and healthy food concept has emerged with Indian economy and Indian culture going global since last decade of twentieth century. During these years, global food giants have been able to construct a huge consumer base among middle class in India. In new Indian middle class, people now-a-days are cooking less traditional food and members of the family are often eating Processed Food. Even more, the frequency of eating such packaged or processed foods has been rising with the much importance of convenience, time saving and a relative decline in traditional food and eating habits.

(Jabir, Sanjeev and Janakiraman 2010) in their study emphasized the preferences of the middle class consumers clearly indicate their priority for cleanliness/freshness of food products followed by price, quality, variety, packaging, and non-seasonal availability. The consumers' preference of marketplace largely depends on the convenience in cooking as well as purchasing at the marketplace along with the availability of additional services, attraction for children, basic amenities and affordability.

(Lange and Meier 2009) stated that it is mostly the upwardly-mobile middle class with their increasingly changing lifestyles and consequently evolving preferences and tastes who enjoy the fruits of retail revolution. The middle class consumers already enjoy the adequate income to meet their basic food needs and thus instead, they want to 'higher value' items in terms of variety and quality. Since, having more single working youth, nuclear families, working mothers, and generally faster-paced, mobile, metropolitan lifestyles, India's new middle class is increasingly prepared to spend on eating out, ready-to-eat food and experimenting with alternative cuisines and more diverse food and beverage products. In their study, they also found out that as a result of increasing necessity and affordability, the mindset of people are changing and a new perception that packaged is hygienic and high quality is resulting in rapidly growing sales of branded and packaged food.

Zweig's (2006) definition of the "middle class" connotes some sense of lifestyle reflected in stable employment and the ability to consume an array of goods and services beyond the just minimum for survival, albeit through ever-increasing consumer debt.

DeVaults's (1991) studied that the categorization of class in consumption choices pointed out that the new middle class assert their identity by rejecting the values of the old working class. These new middle classes attempt to demonstrate a class-based identity by making the dispositions of their class visible. This could mean "viewing food preparation and eating as aestheticized leisure activities rather than chores"

Methodology

Research design and sample selection

The present study is conducted using qualitative approach as it aims to investigate and describe the changing consumption patterns specifically with respect to food habits of the new middle class and eventually develop a theoretical model in relation to the convenience food available in the markets. More specifically, a focus group interview approach to gain an insights on the opinion of the consumers towards convenience foods in more depth and meanings attached with their responses, rather than sampling expressing them at a superficial level as may be done through questionnaire methods (Eves and Dervisi, 2005, Breakwell et al., 2006, Kim et al., 2009).

Focused groups and individual interviews were conducted in order to gain in-depth insights into consumer perception towards convenience foods. These groups may not be fully

representative of the entire target population, but it is ensured that results could illustrate possible variations within the Delhi city and provide some level of generalization. Thus this study adopted a grounded theory research design to analyze the data collected by means of individual and focus group interviews (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Grounded Theory approach extensively used in social science researches. Silayo and Speece (2004) also examined the influence of packaging on purchasing decisions using grounded theory.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) postulated the idea of Grounded Theory (GT) out of an urgent need in the field of social research to discover theories as opposed to merely testing existing theories. Grounded Theory is defined as qualitative research technique which uses a systematic set of process to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This technique is primarily used for deriving new theory about a phenomenon keeping aside the speculations and presumptions to the about the actual process and focusing on respondent's reality (Glaser, 1995). Therefore, it will help researchers in creating a theoretical model, give conceptual labels to the data and place interpretations on the data in the fields of new middle class and convenience foods.

The study aimed to lay emphasis buying behavior of the new middle class. Therefore for the purpose of research those participants were considered who were lying in new middle class category and were mainly involved in the purchase of convenience foods. In this study working professionals and businessman are considered and specifically those people were searched who are frequently buying convenience foods. These participants were identified on the basis of criteria-based snowball sampling technique. In snowball sampling technique the referrals from the initial subjects are used to generate additional subjects (Breakwell et al., 2000). For example, once interviewed, participants were asked whether they knew of any others with the required characteristics. Further only those women were interviewed who were purchasing convenience foods on regular basis.

Interview and Data analysis

For the purpose of collecting data, researchers conducted moderated (one of the researchers observed the individual and group interviews with the females residing in the North-west region of Delhi. The current study first interviewed 5 women for conducting individual in-depth semi-structured pilot interviews in August, 2015. These pilot interviews were of 30-50 minutes and aimed at identifying key issues and factors influencing the purchase of convenience foods.

These pilot interviews lead to the development of the questions which were used in the main phase of data collection.

On the basis of pilot interview, the initial interview questionnaire was revised and finalized. The final questionnaire consisted of 14 questions plus the introductory question which were about the demographic profile of the respondents. The questionnaire consists of open ended questions and was divided into three different sections. The first section described the demographic profile of the respondents such as age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, number of children and income level. The second section, the respondents were asked main reasons for purchasing convenience foods; the impact of changing lifestyle and westernization on their purchase decisions and has their disposable income increased over the past few years and does it influence their buying behavior. The third section focus on their shopping experience about the convenience foods such as what qualities/ingredients/nutrition content you look for while buying these convenience foods; with who do you like to go for shopping (husband, parents, kids or friends); what are your view regarding a good life; how does these ready-to-eat food contribute to that idea; what are the advantages/disadvantages for purchasing these products.

During the main fieldwork, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the open-ended questionnaire key. A series of 12 individual interviews and 3 group interviews (each consisting 4 members) were conducted. In all the interviews semi-structured and open ended questions were asked to encourage free flow of thoughts so that new issues

can emerge form exploration. These interviews were approximately of 30- 50 minutes and took place between September, 2015 and December, 2015. The participants were not known to the researcher's earlier, this also prevented in developing any pre-conceived notion about the research and researcher influence on the response will be minimal. The interviewees were promised that their individual identity will not be disclosed anywhere while reporting the data.

Researchers recorded the interviews and took a note of all the interactions. The interview data was analyzed using three step approach for grounded theory suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). In the first stage, overall scanning of the interview data was done to obtain a broad understanding about the data. In the second step, the interviews were read carefully and the main factors influencing the purchase of convenience food were extracted from the data. In the last step data analysis and coding work was done manually.

Demographic Profile of the respondents

Table 1.2 summarizes the demographic profile of the chosen candidates. Among the 24 respondents, 9 of the interviewees were male and 15 interviewees were female. Majority (17) of the respondents was married and their ages ranged from under 24 to 54 years. The respondents has mixed educational level, majority of them had completed their post-graduation and were working in good companies. The income range of the respondents lies between 3 Lac to 15 lac.

Table 1.2: Demographic profile of the respondents

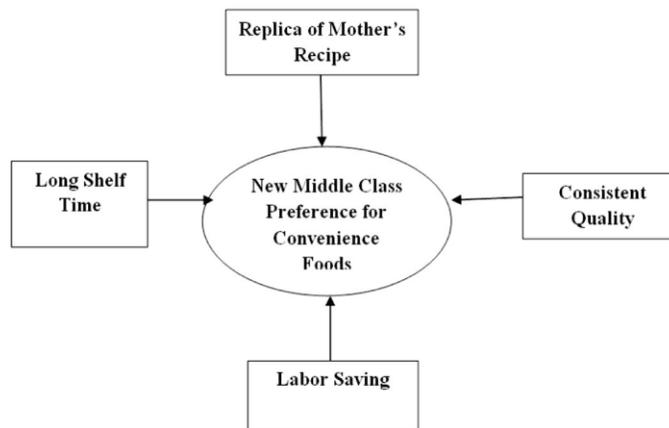
No.	Sex	Marital Status	Age	Education	Occupation	Income (in per annum)	No. of Children
1	M	Married	25-34	PG Degree	Business	Greater than 10 Lac	2
2	F	Married	45-54	UG Degree	Service	Approx. 5.4 Lac	2
3	F	Married	25-34	PG Degree	Business	8-9 Lac	1
4	F	Single	35-44	PG Degree	Service	6-7 Lac	0
5	M	Married	45-54	UG Degree	Business	15 Lac	0
6	F	Single	35-44	PG Degree	Service	3.54 Lac	1
7	M	Single	Under 24	UG Degree	Service	5.4 Lac	0
8	F	Married	25-34	Vocational Course	Service	4 Lac	3
9	M	Single	Under 24	UG Degree	Business	8-9 Lac	1
10	M	Married	25-34	PG Degree	Service	7 Lac	2
11	F	Single	25-34	UG Degree	Service	6 Lac	0

12	F	Married	25-34	PG Degree	Business	5-6 Lac	2
13	M	Married	45-54	PG Degree	Business	14-15Lac	2
14	F	Married	25-34	PG Degree	Service	7 Lac	2
15	F	Single	35-44	UG Degree	Service	9 Lac	0
16	F	Married	25-34	PG Degree	Business	4 Lac	3
17	M	Married	35-44	Vocational Course	Business	7-8Lac	2
18	F	Married	35-44	PG Degree	Business	5Lac	2
19	F	Single	25-34	PG Degree	Service	4Lac	0
20	F	Married	25-34	PG Degree	Service	4.5 Lac	2
21	F	Married	45-54	PG Degree	Business	5.5 Lac	1
22	M	Married	25-34	Vocational Course	Business	3.2 Lac	1
23	M	Married	45-54	UG Degree	Service	3.8 Lac	1
24	F	Married	25-34	UG Degree	Service	5 Lac	2

Factors contributing to Consumption Preference for Convenience Foods by the New Indian Middle Class

In this section, we first describe the theoretical framework and then will discuss the themes from the analysis result.

Figure 1



At the top of Figure 1, the framework shows that for all those single youth working in cities away from home requires taste of the home made foods which are in variety based on their region they belong to and of course healthy and easily digestible. The fact that the convenience foods provides consistent quality and once can check its ingredients, flavor and other detailing on the packaging of the product makes it more preferable for health conscious people. The entire process related to convenience foods purchasing, preparation, consumption and cleaning up is so labor saving that makes this class of people to move to more frequent usage of convenience foods products. And finally, since our working class buy grocery once a week or month, purchasing such packaged foods can be stored easily in cupboard and freezer for long time without any harmful effects on the content inside.

Next, we discuss each component of the framework showing how the interview supported the identification of each component.

Replica of Mother's Recipe

I am residing in North Delhi for last 8 years and working in IT consultant firm nearby. I belong to South India and have a different taste and preference for foods which are though available outside but do not give me satisfaction of my mother's hand made delicacies. I can hire a cook since I am earning good but again I feel that taste has always been missing. I have started using this brand of instant foods 5 years back that is easy for me to prepare my own choice of food with my childhood developed taste.

The above comment was supported by the research that identifies convenience foods as those that are “fully or partially prepared foods in which a significant amount of preparation time, culinary skills, or energy inputs have been transferred from the home kitchen to the food processor and distributor.” Their approach zeroed in on products where manufacturers and marketers added convenience features to foods that did not have to be undertaken or added at home by homemakers but this is again giving the taste of the original taste of the food (Traub and Odland 1979).

Consistent Quality

I got married 2 years back and since my mother was working, we at times used to prepare instant packaged foods when some uninvited visitor was there. Now I am living in a nuclear family and have to manage both my job and home. I like the way that the taste and quality of the food has remained same till now. And since my husband is pre diabetic, I can easily check the contents and the amount of the same in the mixture in order to avoid his future health related problems.

In the previous studies also, it was found out that though the shopping experience is shared by all the members in the family but the most of the decisions are taken by female members in the family. Calorie content, Packaging, fibre contents were form the major influential factors in deciding the products. Most of the consumers are diabetic conscious or have some other problems and want to avoid fat and high calorie products. Many of them are working for long duration hours so they are choosing less oily products to keep the stress level at minimum. The details shown in the package are on the key purchase decision made by the clients (Vijayabaskar and Sundaram 2012).

Labor Saving

Me and my husband work in Gurgaon as software engineers and we both are on support for our clients day and night. Managing kitchen and preparing food everyday cannot be a part of our lifestyle. Quite a time we used to order food from outside or visited restaurants often but this was impacting our family's health and my child started disliking eating same things again and again. Resorting to convenience foods was the need of our family. Since I could save time for chopping, grinding spices, cleansing vegetables and utensils, I could save a lot of effort as well. And I could see the minimum mess created because of ready to eat foods.

The above comments highlights that due to the increasing number of nuclear and double income families, long working hours are the major reason for purchasing these products. The easy to cook, convenience, satisfaction,

usefulness and saving of time are the major reasons for purchasing convenience products (Dohare 2015).

Long Shelf Time

We use to buy grocery once a month as a part of culture in our family since we all are working. I and my wife holds number of instant prepared meals of different variety of cuisines so that we cannot rush during weekdays and can also enjoy week ends too. The best part is every detail is on packet and these can last long on shelves for more than 6 months.

Convenience food is designed for a long shelf life, so that they can be stored for a long time. Convenience foods can also be defined as foods prepared to save consumers time in the kitchen and reduce costs due to spoilage and by using economies of scale. These foods require minimum preparation, typically just heating, and are packaged for a long shelf life with little loss of flavor, nutrients and its taste over time (Simelane 2008).

Conclusion

The last decade has seen a remarkable growth in the new middle class segment in India and so has the manufacture of convenience food industry grown in the last few years. Convenience food is available in a variety of forms which may include products like pre-cut vegetables, bottled and canned products, frozen meat and snacks, ready to cook or ready to serve foods and many more. Current study was aimed to find out the factors determining consumer behavior of the new middle class towards convenience foods in Delhi, In this study, the proposed model was theorized through inductive method of grounded theory approach. The individuals from new middle class were interviewed individually or in groups to obtain insight into the factors responsible for their increased preference for convenience foods. This study, then, discovered that the factors such as Consistent Quality, Labor Saving, Long Shelf Time and Replica of Mother's Recipe responsible for increased consumption of convenience food among new middle class.

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