

Research on the influence of consumer psychological factors on purchase intention of prefabricated food

Wai Nga Leong^{1,a,*}, Xiaotian Xu^{1,b}

¹*Faculty of Business, City University of Macau, Macau, China*

^a*wnleong@163.com*, ^b*846847716@qq.com*

^{*}*Corresponding author*

Keywords: Prefabricated food; Conformity behavior; Perceived value; Risk perception; Purchase intention

Abstract: The increased demand for prefabricated food among customers in China has led to further development of the industry. Due to different consumer types between business and customer, there are significant differences in the influencing factors of their purchase intentions. This paper attempts to use the psychological factors of consumer groups when purchasing prefabricated food as an entry point to discuss the influencing factors, thus to deeply understand the Consumers' needs. The research found that consumers' conformity has an impact on perceived value and purchase intention. Consumers usually use the selections of the majoritarian as a reference while purchasing prefabricated food, a rapidly developing new consumer product. In addition, the majority of people's evaluations on prefabricated food influence consumers' perceived value of the product. Secondly, the paper found that consumers' risk perception of prefabricated food has a moderating effect on the purchase process. In other words, if consumers have certain opinions on the risk perception of prefabricated foods, it will affect their purchase intention.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the demand market for prefabricated food has entered a rapid growth period. From 2020 to 2023, the Chinese prefabricated food market has been increasing at a high growth rate of over 20% annually, making it one of China's important industries.[1] Prefabricated food refer to finished or semi-finished food made from one or more agricultural products as the main raw materials, using standardized assembly line operations, through pre-processing (such as cutting, stirring, pickling, rolling, shaping, seasoning, etc.) and/or pre-cooking (such as stir frying, deep frying, baking, boiling, steaming, etc.), and pre-packaged.[2] From the demand analysis, although the prefabricated food market was used to mainly dominated by the Business(iiMedia Consulting, 2023), however, since 2020, the market group of prefabricated food has expanded from Business to Customers catalyzed by the COVID-19, and the Customer market has begun to become an important component of prefabricated food. According to Baidu Index, the search popularity of prefabricated food has been on the rise since 2020, and in recent years, with the continued dependence of consumers on convenient food demand, the search popularity has continued to grow. Prefabricated food demand is certainly rising as prefabricated food consumption becomes more widespread and common. This can help both

supply and demand grow, making the industry's growth more sustainable.

Although Chinese consumer habits have gradually formed in this field, the prefabricated food market has reached 420 billion yuan in 2022, with the Business market accounting for 80% and the Customer market accounting for 20%, according to the Chinese Digital Consumption Report on Prefabricated Food in 2023.[3] From this, it can be seen that the scale of Chinese Prefabricated Food in Customer market still needs to be strengthened. As a result, China has bright future potential for the prefabricated food industry.

At this point, in addition to aiming to improve the taste and quality of the Business market, it is also vital to tap into the immense development space of the Customer market and explore its limitless possibilities, which is a significant and self-evident task. According to iiMedia Consulting's Report on the Research Report on the Development Trends of China's Prefabricated Food Industry in 2022, food safety is one of the top issues that consumers believe the prefabricated food industry should address. [4] As a new type of catering food, food safety is essential. Food safety issues concern not only food, but also manufacturing, packaging, and distribution processes. According to the Big Data Research and Consumer Behavior Survey Data on China's Prefabricated Food Industry in 2022[5], the industry is now experiencing challenges such as a lack of standard specifications, information asymmetry, large price swings, and low brand awareness. These factors influence product quality, food safety, enterprise profitability, and consumer purchasing intentions. In brief, one of the determining elements is consumers' risk perception of prefabricated food during the purchasing process.

The promotion of prefabricated food is closely linked to the rapid development of China's new media industry. The convenience of online shopping has led consumers to rely on major online platforms, and the sales channels of prefabricated food have therefore combined online and offline channels. According to the White Paper on China's Prefabricated Food Industry in 2023 released by the Qianzhan Research Institute, 69.8% of consumers have the purpose of "convenience and quick" when purchasing prefabricated food [6]. Therefore, when making further development strategies for the Customers' market, in addition to increasing publicity to help consumers to learn more about prefabricated food, it is also necessary to meet consumers' convenience and efficiency, so as to increase consumers' recognition of prefabricated food's functional value. However, with the emergence of online shopping, the factors that affect consumers' purchasing behavior have also changed. In this context, in addition to the easy access of shopping, consumers are influenced by online limited-time promotions, online reviews, and other factors that have contributed to their impulsive consumption behavior. The conformity behavior of online shoppers is most visible throughout the online purchase process, particularly during live streaming. The retail methods of major enterprises in the prefabricated food industry will cooperate with major internet celebrities to launch online shopping, which will stimulate consumers' psychological conformity. Therefore, the conformity behavior of prefabricated food consumers during the purchasing process is also one of the influencing factors.

Understanding the changing demands of the consumer market can help businesses develop effective strategies. As a result, a thorough awareness of the behavioral process characteristics of consumers purchasing prefabricated food, as well as a clear understanding of their psychological behavior can better promote the development of prefabricated food in China. Due to the multiple factors that influence consumer psychology, this study attempts to explore the impact of consumer conformity behavior, risk perception, and perceived value on purchase intention, and analyze whether these factors directly or indirectly fluctuate consumer purchase intention.

2. Research Hypothesis and Model Construction

Purchase intention refers to the tendency of an individual to take positive actions towards a certain commodity or service at a specific time and in a specific situation. It is manifested as the subjective willingness to own a certain item and to take practical actions to meet one's own needs. This tendency is affected by various factors, including personal cognition, emotional attitudes, social environment and marketing strategies. [7] Consumer behavior believes that the influence of personal cognition is multifaceted, and in the process of online consumption, consumers are easily influenced by the social environment and adjust their personal cognition, that is, they rely on the judgment of relevant groups to change their original cognition. In addition, the perception of product value is influenced by the consumer's personal cognition. When consumers evaluate the value of a product, they base it on their own cognition. There is a close relationship between them.

2.1 Research on the Relationship between Conformity Behavior and Purchase Intention

Conformity behavior is defined as following others' choices or over-relying on public opinion while neglecting one's own unique insights. [8] With the rise of online buying, experts have begun to focus on the conformity behavior of online shoppers. Huang & Chen [9] discovered in their 2006 study of internet consumption abroad that when the overall opinion of a product is positive, buyers may disregard their own requirements and preferences in favor of purchasing based on the public's evaluation. Looking back to Chinese research, the rise of the Internet in 2010 drew scholars to make research, and many studies have found similar scenarios. Scholars such as Jiang Liu et al. (2012) [10], Geng Zhou et al. (2013) [11], Yongming Zhu, and Jiaxin Huang (2020) [12] said that conforming behavior has a positive impact on consumers' willingness to buy. Nowadays, online shopping has long become the primary method for consumers to make purchases, and impulse consumption has become the actual habit of certain irrational customers. This consumption behavior will have an indirect effect on customer demand for product value. According to the Askci Consulting Co.,Ltd [13], among the numerous C-end sales channels, new retail channels such as fresh food e-commerce, social e-commerce, and community group purchasing are developing rapidly. Consumers purchase online during their fragment time to save a lot of personal time. Because new media marketing is prone to insufficient information disclosure, buyers will rely on previous reviews to choose products. Based on the following, this study believes that conformity behavior will influence consumer purchasing decisions.

This study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Conformity behavior has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention.

2.2 The mediating role of perceived value

As a consumer product, consumers will inevitably consider perceived value when purchasing prefabricated food. Consumer perceived value is dynamic, involving a trade-off between perceived benefits and costs, and changes over time and in different situations. [14] Perceived value is one of the core elements in studying consumer purchasing intention. When purchasing a product, consumers will make corresponding decisions based on their own product valuation. According to the SOR theory, consumers actively evaluate products and respond to external information. The organism in it refers to the individual's psychological state, such as the consumer's perceived value. Salam et al (2003) [15] pointed out the importance of consumer conformity behavior to perceived value. Xiao-Liang Shen et al (2015) [16], Yang Ka et al (2021) [17] and other scholars have corresponding research results.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: Conformity behavior has a significant positive correlation with perceived value.

In existing research, many scholars found that when consumers' perceived value at the time of purchase increases, so does their purchase intention. Chong Wang et al. (2007) [18] took online shopping as the research object and empirically analyzed that perceived value has a positive impact on purchase intention. Chubing Zhang et al. (2017)[19] conducted an online shopping survey and found that they tried to study a number of different types of consumer goods, but the results were similar: as consumers perceive the value of a product or service to increase, their desire to purchase the product or service also increases. At the same time, studies by Khandelwal et al. (2018) [20] and Jia Liu et al. (2021) [21] also conducted corresponding results. Ying Tian (2022) [22] confirmed that perceived value mediates the willingness to consume again when they use fresh food services.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: Perceived value has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention.

H4: Perceived value plays a mediating effect between conformity behavior and purchase intention.

2.3 The regulating effect of risk perception

Risk perception is becoming increasingly profound since it represents people's attitudes and instinctive judgments about risks. In a broader sense, risk perception also includes people's overall risk assessment and their reactions. Both physical and mental variables influence risk perception, which is determined by the cognitive subject's conditions and capacities. [23] Research on risk perception is primarily focused on tourism, finance, and social public events, with fewer studies on food consumption. However, because there is an asymmetry in information disclosure during the preparation process for prefabricated food, this perception is crucial to people's decisions and actions. In recent years, merchant sales methods have merged online and offline operations. While online shopping might be convenient, it also involves certain risks. As a result, consumers' risk perceptions will influence their purchase decisions. Xiang Sun et al. (2005) [24] investigated the causes of consumer risk perception in e-commerce. Weizhong Hu (2008) [25], Zhenhong Qi et al. (2010)[26], Yingheng Zhou and Jia Zhuo (2010)[27], Min Li and Zhengying Dong (2014)[28], and Zhe Niu et al. (2019)[29] Scholars have also investigated the role of consumer risk perceptions in the purchasing process. Yaqing Cheng et al. (2022) [30] investigated the importance of risk perception in food consumption, whereas Yanlong Shi (2022) [31] investigated the relationship between customer risk perception and trust.

Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H5: Risk perception has a moderating effect on the relationship between conformity behavior and purchase intention.

H6: Risk perception mediates the relationship between perceived value and purchase intention.

3. Research data results and analysis

Based on the above assumptions, this study uses questionnaire survey as the research method. According to the China Prefabricated Food Digital Consumption Report 2023 [32], Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai will remain in the top tier of the country's prefabricated food digital consumption in 2022, while Guangdong Province be the second tier. According to the previous reports, the regional distribution of consumption has always been the same. However, Guangdong Province has always been the province with the largest permanent population in China, and with huge consumer market. Moreover, according to the China's Prefabricated Food Industry Index Province Ranking [33] report, the mature industrial chain of prefabricated food in Guangdong Province and the strong policy support have enabled Guangdong Province to continue to top the list. Cantonese food culture has a profound foundation, and Guangdong consumers have highly strict requirements for food. Today,

China is promoting the high-quality development of the prefabricated food industry. For this reason, this study uses Guangdong consumers as the survey object. In addition to effectively understanding consumers' attitudes towards prefabricated food, it can also discover the problems that need to be addressed in currently, providing further insights for the development of prefabricated food.

The questionnaire survey for this study was conducted from December 1, 2023 to May 1, 2024, with a total of 823 questionnaires distributed. The survey subjects were consumers who currently live in Guangdong Province and have experience in purchasing prefabricated food. The survey results showed that there were 735 valid questionnaires, with a questionnaire validity of 89.3%.

3.1 Descriptive analysis

From the valid questionnaires collected, it was found that the consumer characteristics were mainly as follows:

(1) Male respondents accounted for 42.5%, and female respondents accounted for 57.5%, indicating that the main consumers of prefabricated food are mostly women, which is consistent with most current reports.

(2) In terms of age distribution, respondents aged 18 to 30 accounted for 48%, followed by respondents aged 31-40, accounting for 33.7%; This shows that most consumers who purchase prefabricated food are young and middle-aged people. This data is consistent with the relevant content of the 2022 Prefabricated Food Annual Consumption Report [34] released by JD Supermarket and Blue Shark Research Institute.

(3) In terms of occupation, more than half (59.5%) are employed, followed by students (20.5%), and third are home workers (10.8%); this shows that more than half of the consumers have work experience and relatively stable income, which is also in line with the Big Data Research and Consumer Behavior Survey Data on China's Prefabricated Food Industry published in 2022 [5].

(4) According to one of the questions in the questionnaire survey, "Monthly frequency of purchasing prefabricated food", the main focus is on "average of more than 5 times per month" (35.8%) and "average of more than 10 times per month" (35.8%), and there is no "zero purchase frequency". It is inferred that the respondents have daily experience in purchasing prefabricated food, which can provide reference value for the research content of this study.

3.2 Empirical analysis

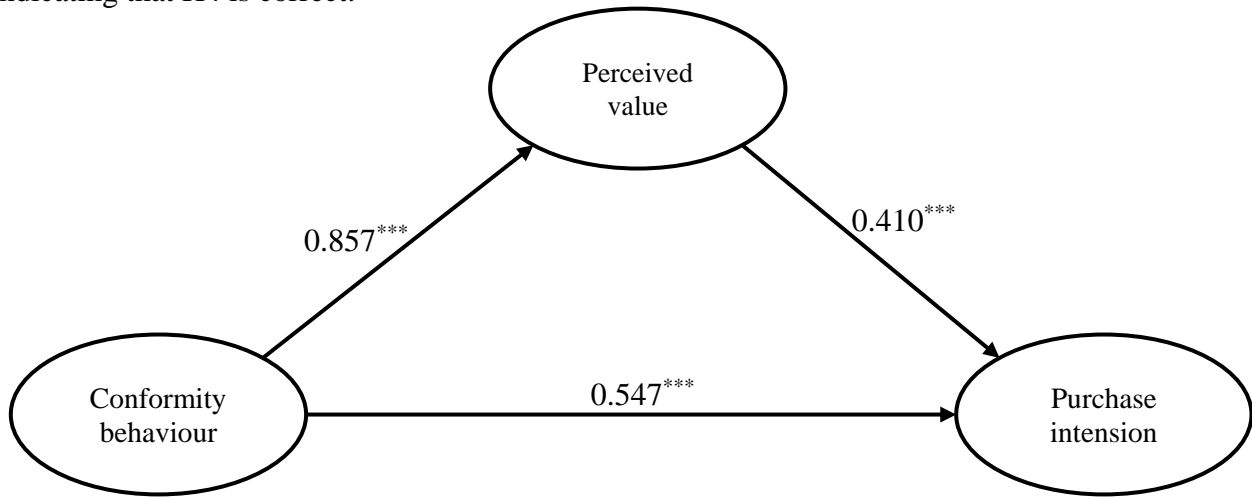
This study mainly uses SPSS and AMOS to conduct narrative analysis, reliability analysis, confirmatory response analysis, convergent validity and structural equation modeling on the collected valid questionnaires to test the hypotheses of this study.

The reliability and validity analysis of the survey data showed that the combined reliability (CR) in each dimension of the questionnaire was higher than 0.6, the average variation extracted (AVE) was higher than 0.5, and the factor loading was higher than 0.5, which was significant. Therefore, the reliability and convergent validity of the scale were good. For the confirmatory factor analysis in the model, the results are as follows:

3.2.1 Verification of hypothesis and mediation effect

As shown in Figure 1, conformity behavior has a significant positive correlation with perceived value, indicating that H1 of this study is valid; conformity behavior has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention, indicating that H2 is true; perceived value has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention, indicating that H3 is correct; perceived value has a mediating effect between conformity behavior and purchase intention, and is a partial mediator,

indicating that H4 is correct.



Note: This study omits the observed variables and residual terms for paper neatness

Note: † p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Figure 1: Structural equation model of conformity behaviour, perceived value and purchase intention

On the other hand, this study summarizes the model's fit test standards and results as shown in Table 1. In Table 1, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), root mean square residual (RMR), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), normed fit index (NFI), non-normative fit index (NNFI), comparative fit index (CFI), relative fit index (RFI), incremental fit index (IFI), parsimonious normed fit index (PNFI), parsimonious goodness-of-fit index (PGFI) and sample number (CN) all meet the standards; only the chi square test (χ^2/df) and the root mean square error of the approximation (RMSEA) fail to meet the standards. From the above data, it can be seen that the sample model fit is acceptable.

Table 1: Sample suitability test standards and results

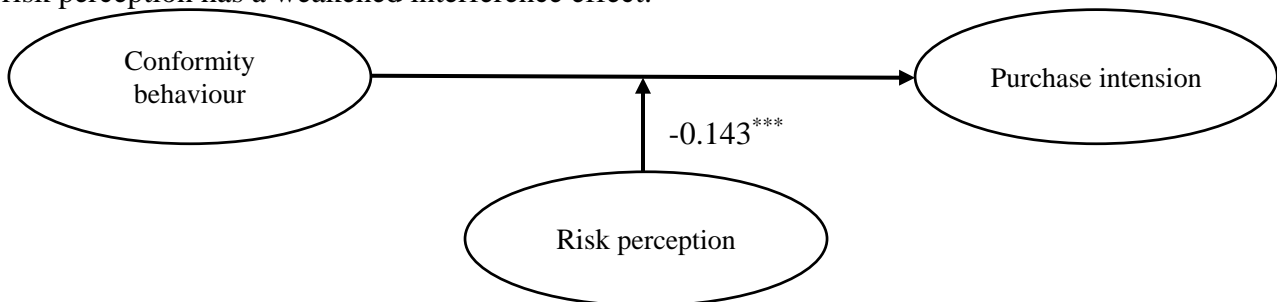
Statistical test		Standard value	Results	Reach the standard
Absolute GFI	χ^2	the smaller the better	266.831	-
	χ^2/df	between 1~5	6.508	No
	GFI	> 0.9	0.935	Yes
	AGFI	> 0.9	0.896	Yes
	RMR	< 0.08	0.032	Yes
	SRMR	< 0.08	0.030	Yes
	RMSEA	< 0.08	0.087	No
PGFI	NFI	> 0.9	0.958	Yes
	NNFI	> 0.9	0.952	Yes
	CFI	> 0.9	0.965	Yes
	RFI	> 0.9	0.944	Yes
	IFI	> 0.9	0.965	Yes
Simplified adaptation indicators	PNFI	> 0.5	0.714	Yes
	PGFI	> 0.5	0.581	Yes
	CN	> 200	735	Yes

Note: This standard value is based on the proposed by Hairs, Anderson, Tatham and Black (1998). However, some studies have pointed out that when the GFI, AGFI, NFI, NNFI, CFI, RFI and IFI are

greater than 0.8 (Wu & Wang, 2006; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Dabija & Băbuț, 2013; Zhao, Xue & Yang, 2015; Qasem, Abukhadijeh & AlAdham, 2016; Gao & Liu, 2016; Kwahk & Park, 2016; Ghasemzadeh & Maraashi, 2016; Chiu, Chen & Chen, 2017; Abbasi, 2017), it is a good fit, in other words, it is up to standard.

3.2.2 Hypothesis and interference effects verification

As can be seen from Figure 2, risk perception has a significant negative correlation with conformity behavior and purchase intention, indicating that H5 of this study is true. In other words, risk perception has a weakened interference effect.



Note: This study omitted the observed variables and residual terms for simplicity

Note: † p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Figure 2: The interference effect of risk perception on conformity behavior and purchase intention

It can be seen from Table 2 that risk perception has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention, conformity behavior has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention, and risk perception with conformity behavior has a significant negative correlation with purchase intention. In other words, risk perception has a weakened interference effect.

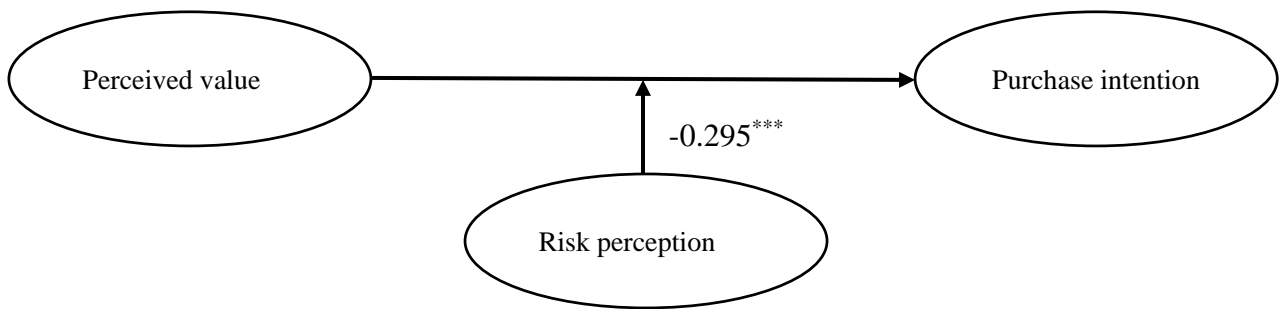
Table 2: Interference effect analysis of risk perception on conformity behavior and purchase intention

	Regression Weights	Standardized Regression Weights	<i>p</i>
risk perception→purchase intention	0.530	0.432	***
conformity behavior→purchase intention	0.964	0.806	***
risk perception×conformity behavior→purchase intention	-0.029	-0.143	***

Note: † p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

3.2.3 Hypothesis and interference effect verification

It can be seen from Figure 3 that risk perception has a significant negative correlation between perceived value and purchase intention, indicating that H6 is correct. In other words, risk perception has a weakening interference effect.



Note: This study omits the observed variables and residual terms for brevity

Note: † p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Figure 3: Interference effect of risk perception on conformity behavior and purchase intention

It can be seen from Table 3 that risk perception has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention, perceived value has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention, and risk perception × perceived behavior has a significant negative correlation with purchase intention. In other words, risk perception has a weakening interference effect.

Table 3: Analysis of the interference effect of risk perception on conformity behavior and purchase intention

	Regression Weights	Standardized Regression Weights	<i>p</i>
risk perception→purchase intention	0.660	0.451	***
perceived value→purchase intention	1.247	0.760	***
risk perception×perceived value→purchase intention	-0.074	-0.295	***

Note: † p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

3.3 Results analysis of the structural equation model test

Based on the above test results, the hypotheses of this research are as follows:

Conformity behavior has a significant positive correlation with perceived value. It can be concluded that consumers' conformity behavior will affect consumers' psychology, which will affect consumers' evaluation of the product value. Specifically, consumers believe that when most people choose prefabricated food, it increases consumers' trust in the product, which increases consumers' perceived value of the product.

Conformity behavior has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention. That is, consumers' purchasing psychology will be affected by external factors. When consumers observe that people around them have higher evaluations of a product, they are more inclined to purchase the product, thereby increasing purchase intention.

Perceived value has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention. Perceived value has a significant positive correlation with purchase intention. It shows that consumers' psychological perception will drive consumers' purchasing psychology.

Risk perception has a significant negative correlation between conformity behavior and purchase intention. Although conformity behavior will affect consumers' purchasing psychology, consumers' risk perception of prefabricated food will weaken the above influence. That is to say, generally speaking, consumers will be motivated to purchase by the purchasing behavior of other consumers. However, if the consumer has a higher risk perception, the consumer may be more cautious in

evaluating the product information, and in this process, the consumer will be less cautious about the product dependence on conformity behavior.

Risk perception has a significant negative correlation between perceived value and purchase intention. As mentioned before, consumers' evaluation of products will affect consumers' purchasing psychology; however, during this process, if consumers have a risk perception of prefabricated food, the impact between the two will be weakened.

4. Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, this study found that when consumers buy prefabricated food, their willingness to buy is not only affected by perceived value, but also by conformity behavior and risk perception. According to the questionnaire collected in this study, the consumer group of prefabricated food is mainly under 40 years old, among which there are relatively more young people. In addition to requiring individuality, this group's consumption characteristics also have higher requirements for quality. Especially for prefabricated food as food, if they need to get rid of the "seasonal attribute" and develop into daily consumer goods, in addition to maintaining the novelty of the product, they need to pay more attention to the product quality.

This study believes that consumers' conformity behavior plays a vital role. However, according to peopleyun.cn [35], from November 2022 to April 2023, the neutral reputation of prefabricated food accounted for 76.41%. When consumer satisfaction is average, it is easy to lead to consumer deviation, that is, it is difficult to expand the C-end consumer market. In this study, the respondents maintained a relatively agreed attitude towards "Do you think prefabricated food is quick and convenient to prepare?"; but they questioned "Do you think the preservation technology of prefabricated food can keep the food fresh as before?" Most respondents believe that the freshness of prefabricated food is very important. It is found that the freshness of prefabricated food does not meet the high requirements of Guangdong consumers. In addition, the results of the question "Do you think the prefabricated food you buy are nutritious" are not ideal. The food safety is a hot topic for consumers. Although the reputation has been significantly improved in 2023, the negative comments are still concentrated on the food safety of prefabricated food. According to the survey conducted by Haibao News, 86% of the respondents are concerned about the health issues of prefabricated food. The main concerns of the respondents about the food safety of prefabricated food are "too many additives", "the raw materials are not fresh enough", "fear of cancer", etc. Therefore, consumers currently have a high acceptance but a low satisfaction of prefabricated food, which makes it difficult to meet the needs of consumers. In short, it means that when consumers buy prefabricated food, they will be affected by their concerns about potential risks.

In this regard, this article proposes the following development suggestions.

Continuing to enhance the reputation with the help of Internet promotion. Companies need to be good at using live streaming platforms to plan infectious content, make full use of short video marketing methods to stimulate consumers' desire to buy, or use live streaming marketing methods to enrich purchase channels, and eliminate consumers' concerns through online interaction. This study found that in addition to being concentrated in young people, the consumer group of prefabricated food is also mostly female. Therefore, companies can focus on implementing precision marketing for the above consumer groups. At the same time, companies should also promote more types of prefabricated food and try to expand the market for other consumer groups. According to the survey results, consumers trust the evaluation of friends or relatives around them more. Therefore, companies need to enhance consumers' memory of products, and cultivate consumers' recognition through repeated purchases, so as to bring about automatic and beneficial promotion, thereby establishing good reputation communication and stimulating consumers' conformity behavior.

Strictly following industry standards and achieve standardized production. Since 2022, the prefabricated food industry has ushered in a "standard trend" [35]. Most are group standards, but they are all guiding and influential indicators. Companies should use this self-discipline to constrain each internal production link and strictly produce in accordance with the corresponding standards. As prefabricated food are still in the initial development stage, a stable industry has not yet been formed. At present, the prefabricated food industry is seriously homogenized, with low industry concentration and mostly small enterprises, which has caused consumers to worry about food safety. In this regard, enterprises must ensure their product quality and reduce the business loss during the food production process in order to face the challenges of fierce competition. For prefabricated food to develop towards quality, enterprises need to establish a strict internal quality management system, increase food quality management of each partner, and ensure the freshness and quality safety of ingredients throughout the production process. In addition, enterprises can hold a number of open visits and inspections to demonstrate the transparency of the company's production process, so that visitors can have an in-depth understanding of the production process of prefabricated food, which will help build consumers' trust and satisfaction with the products, and is also a way for enterprises to strictly control product quality.

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