

Impact Of Recyclable Packaging on Consumer Buying Decisions for Ready-To-Cook Products

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Abstract: With increasing awareness of environmental issues that include stringent waste packaging regulations, recyclable packaging has become an increasingly salient signal during the process of purchasing food, but it remains a poorly explored issue in academic literature, particularly concerning the rapidly expanding category of ready-to-cook (RTC) products. In this study, the effect of the attributes of recyclable packaging such as labelling, recycled content, biodegradable nature, and low plastic usage on consumer food RTC purchasing decisions is studied. The methodology of the study included the application of quantitative cross-sectional survey research design, whereby primary data were collected among 145 urban consumers using a structured questionnaire through convenience and snowball sampling. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analysis, multiple linear regression and independent samples t-test in SPSS version 28. The results indicated that environmental concern, quality perception and the willingness to pay a premium for environmentally friendly packaging were significant positive determinants of purchase intention, with environmental concern being the strongest determinant ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$). The regression model explained roughly 38% of the variation in purchase intention ($R^2 = .383$, $F(3, 141) = 29.18$, $p < .001$). Age group analysis revealed that young consumers (18 to 34 years old) and females were more sensitive towards recyclable packaging compared to their older and male counterparts. This study contributes to the theory of planned behaviour, which is supported by the empirical findings of the research concerning environmental concern and quality perception being precursors to green purchase intention among the RTC consumers.

Keywords: recyclable packaging, sustainable packaging, consumer buying behaviour, ready-to-cook food products, purchase intention, green consumerism, environmental concern.

INTRODUCTION

There have been significant changes in customer preferences in the food industry around the world over the past few years where sustainability has become one of the primary factors that determine buying decisions rather than a secondary factor. Ready to Cook (RTC) food items, which are prepared foods that require minimal preparation such as marinated meat, frozen vegetables, instant curry powder, and meal kits, have seen significant growth because of urbanization and dual income families with busy lifestyles. There has been a corresponding increase in packaging waste because of the use of multi-layered plastic packs in RTC foods.

Recyclable packaging, which refers to packaging materials that are capable of being gathered and used in production cycles instead of ending up as waste, has therefore emerged as the key focus area of sustainable practices and government interventions. Industry studies have revealed that the greatest market share of the eco-friendly food packaging industry was occupied by recyclable materials by 2024, and that regulations such as the European Union's Circular Economy Action Plan are now mandating that all packaging material should be fully recyclable and/or reusable by 2030 (GreyB, 2025). This consumer trend is corroborated by survey data that show a significant number of consumers giving importance to recyclable packaging while making their purchasing decisions and some changing their consumption behaviour towards minimal packaging or recyclable goods (Shorr Packaging, 2025).

In spite of increasing relevance of this market trend, academic studies focused specifically on the effects of recyclable packaging on RTC food consumption are relatively rare. Most studies regarding green or sustainable packaging have dealt with food products generally, beverages, or other kinds of fast-moving consumer goods, leaving aside the RTC category, whose peculiar characteristic is precisely its convenience-oriented shopping attitude, which could potentially stand in opposition to sustainability aspects. This contradiction deserves further study: is the convenience aspect in RTC shopping making sustainability aspects less salient, or is recyclable packaging acting complementarily to convenience? This paper seeks to fill the above research gap through an empirical investigation into how characteristics of recyclable packaging influence consumer decision making with respect to RTC goods. This is done through the use of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). A quantitative survey methodology was used whereby 145 consumers were

surveyed regarding their attitude towards environmentally friendly concerns, their perception of product quality, their willingness to pay a premium and purchase intention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The link between sustainable packaging and consumers' buying behaviour is an area that has been studied extensively since the post-2020 period due to increased environmental concerns regarding regulations on plastic waste and circular economy policies. The current part discusses theoretical and empirical literature on sustainable packaging and RTC food purchases, covering areas such as theoretical underpinnings, purchase intention, attitude-behaviour gap, and demographics among others.

Theoretical Frameworks

Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) remains the prevailing theoretical perspective in sustainable packaging research studies. In a systematic literature review of 63 scholarly studies about sustainable packaging using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, TPB was revealed to be the most common and effective theory for purchase intention, purchase behavior, and pro-environmental behavior in packaging research (Kıymalıoğlu et al., 2024). Extending the TPB theory, more recent studies have tried to improve upon the theory by adding new variables to the model; Wang et al. (2026) proposed an augmented TPB model through adding environmental concern and willingness to pay a premium on the green packaging purchase intention of Chinese consumers in the Greater Bay Area.

Empirical Evidence on Purchase Intention

A number of recently conducted studies offer empirical evidence to demonstrate the existence of a positive connection between sustainability/recyclability of packages and purchase intention. For example, the research by Farzana and Potsch (2023) of consumer behavior among university students revealed that sustainable packaging had a positive impact on purchase intention; moreover, this effect was enhanced when sustainability was emphasized visually via logos, colour, and messages, while environmental awareness played an important role as a moderating factor (as cited in *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 2026). Likewise, it was noted that environmental concern and awareness of sustainability of a brand predicted purchase intention of Coca-Cola products with eco-friendly packaging. It means that ecological awareness serves as an important antecedent in both food and beverages sectors (Effect of Eco-Friendly Packaging on Consumer Purchase Intention, 2024).

Indonesian research also highlighted that consumer perception regarding sustainable packaging played a major role in purchase intentions, with price serving as the mediator between the two, indicating that the cost implications of sustainable packaging should not be considered in isolation from consumer perception (Effect of Eco-Friendly Packaging on Purchase Intention, 2023). In a study involving a sample size of 509 respondents using cluster analysis, different consumer segments were identified depending on their attitude towards sustainable packaging, which was characterized by a general positive attitude towards sustainable purchases and a willingness to act on this attitude (Purchasing Intention of Products with Sustainable Packaging, 2024).

The Gap Between Environmental Attitudes and Consumer Behaviour

Another prevalent issue mentioned in the literature reviewed recently is the attitude-behaviour or intention-action gap referring to the continuous discrepancy between consumers' attitudes to environmental protection and their purchasing/recycling actions. According to the journal *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* (2026), it is a crucial issue as consumers usually make positive statements regarding sustainability and do not act according to their views on sustainability, which was also observed by Tawde et al. (2023) and Roy et al. (2022). It seems to be especially acute when discussing reusable/refillable packaging, as in 2024, a study involving 341 North American consumers who were asked about 22 different product categories, including grain, baking, and other dry items, revealed that consumers' intentions to use refillable packaging were significantly higher than their actual behavior in regard to using refills.

In fact, there is a strong implication from the described attitude-behavior gap to the current research, because RTD drinks have a purchase situation that is based mostly on convenience. If sustainability promises are less prevalent in such situations, then the impact of the eco-packaging on the decision-making in the purchase of RTD drinks will be less than in other product categories.

Willingness to Pay and Price Sensitivity

Consistent evidence for willingness to pay extra for sustainable packaging exists, although it varies across geographical areas and methods used to calculate it. The findings by the industry on willingness to pay compiled in the 2023 Buying Green Report have revealed that the vast majority of consumers were willing to pay extra for sustainable packaging,

although the report noted that costs associated with materials and scalability issues of using bio-based options is one of the constant challenges of the industry (GreyB, 2025). The survey data collected from the consumer side by Shorr Packaging (2025) also indicated that recyclable packaging is very important to the majority of respondents, with minimal packaging and low content of plastic being among other desirable characteristics of sustainable packaging.

Demographic and Cultural Moderators

In cross-cultural studies, it has become evident that there are a number of demographic and cultural factors which moderate the packaging-purchase connection. Comparative study on green package product purchase has revealed that the influence of the cultural context has a substantial impact on how TPB variables predict purchase behavior. This means that results in one cultural or geographic context cannot be uncritically generalized to other regions and cultures (Modelling the Purchase of Green Packaged Products, 2024). Age and gender have been identified as important moderators in previous studies; Prakash and Pathak (2017), in their study on young consumers in India, discovered that there is considerable interest in eco-friendly packaged products among young people, a finding supported by industry data on increasing adoption of minimal packaging among young demographics in countries like Germany (Mintel, 2025). The literature collectively suggests that (a) sustainable and recyclable packaging has a positive effect on purchase intention; (b) environmental concern and awareness are antecedent variables in this relationship; (c) there exists an attitude-behaviour gap, especially in the case of reusable packaging; (d) willingness to pay a premium is a relevant but conditional behaviour threshold; and (e) demographic and cultural moderating variables play a significant role in the relationships. Nevertheless, there is no differentiation of the RTC food type from general food and beverages, making it unclear if convenience motivations in purchase intentions influence the strength of these relationships.

Research Gap

While the above literature presents strong evidence for the connection between sustainability packaging and purchase intention, there are three specific gaps that make it necessary to conduct the current research. First, the current studies focus primarily on beverages (Effect of Eco-Friendly Packaging on Consumer Purchase Intention, 2024), fast-moving consumer goods, or food products in general with little focus on ready-to-cook products whose major selling point (convenience of saving time) might be compatible with or even conflicting with sustainability-related purchase motivation factors.

Second, while the attitude-behaviour gap related to reusable/refillable packaging has been extensively researched (Packaging Digest, 2025), there is a need for more empirical research about the attitude-behaviour gap related to recyclable packaging, which does not require much effort from the consumer in terms of behaviour when it comes to disposal.

Third, the existing empirical literature is largely produced within Western Europe, North America, or East Asia (Modelling the Purchase of Green Packaged Products, 2024; Wang et al., 2026), and cultural-context literature explicitly warns against applying results outside of the original setting. There is still a need for empirical analysis that will (a) focus on RTC products exclusively, (b) consider recyclability of packaging as opposed to sustainability of packaging, and (c) use a multi-predictor model including the predictors of environmental concern, perceived quality, and willingness to pay. This paper aims to fill in the identified void.

Research Objectives

Considering the above gaps, the following objectives are set for the current research:

1. To investigate the relationship between recyclable packaging features (recyclable labelling, use of recycled material, biodegradable packaging, and limited use of plastic) and consumers' purchase intention of ready-to-cook products.
2. To investigate the relative effect of environmental concern, perceived product quality, and willingness to pay an extra price on purchase intention among RTC products.
3. To identify any demographic difference (in terms of age and gender) in consumers' perception of recyclable packaging.
4. To identify the existence of any attitude-behavior gap in case of environmental attitude vs. purchase behavior of RTC products.
5. To provide practical recommendations for food producers and retailers on recyclable packaging.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A quantitative, descriptive–correlational, cross-sectional design is used in this study because it is appropriate for examining predictive relationship(s) between recyclable packaging perception and purchase intention at one point in time. This research design is consistent with the explanatory survey approach typical in consumer behaviour research using the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of urban consumers aged 18 years and above, who have bought ready-to-cook food items (such as marinated meat, frozen meal kits, instant curry base, vegetable cuts) at least once during the past three months. A non-probability sampling strategy was adopted where the survey link was circulated through online consumer panel and social media platforms. A total number of 156 surveys were returned, out of which only 145 were used for analysis because of missing/inconsistent data (response usability = 92.9%). This sample exceeded the minimum threshold for conducting multiple regression analysis involving three predictors (i.e., $N \geq 50 + 8k$, where k is number of predictors, according to Tabachnick & Fidell).

The primary data were gathered through a questionnaire that had four parts, namely: (a) demographic information (age, gender, income, education); (b) recyclable packaging attributes, which were rated using a five-point Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree); (c) concern for environment, perceived quality of products, and Willingness to Pay (WTP), which were rated using multi-item scales that were previously validated in previous studies on green consumption (Paul et al., 2016; Prakash & Pathak, 2017); and (d) purchase intention, which was rated using a four-item scale previously validated in green purchase intention studies. The reliability of the measurement instruments used was determined through Cronbach's Alpha. All constructs exceeded the standard criterion of 0.70 (See Table 1).

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Mean (SD)
Environmental Concern	5	0.83	3.74 (0.68)
Perceived Product Quality	4	0.79	3.69 (0.71)
Willingness to Pay Premium	3	0.81	3.42 (0.84)
Purchase Intention	4	0.86	3.78 (0.73)

Table 1. Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs (N = 145)

Techniques for Data Analysis

The data collection process was done using coding and analysing the data using SPSS Statistics (Version 28). The techniques that were used to describe the sample included descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency). Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to evaluate the bivariate relationship between predictor variables and purchase intention. For testing the overall and relative predictive power of predictor variables on purchase intention, multiple linear regressions were carried out. To investigate demographic variation in purchase intention between genders and age groups, independent-samples t-test and one-way ANOVA tests were conducted. The significance level considered was below 0.05.

The study was conducted using voluntary and anonymous participation. Informed consent was sought electronically prior to the completion of the questionnaire, and there was no collection of any personal data. The study followed ethical standards used in consumer research using surveys.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement
H1	Environmental concern has a significant positive effect on purchase intention for RTC products with recyclable packaging.
H2	Perceived product quality associated with recyclable packaging has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.
H3	Willingness to pay a premium has a significant positive effect on purchase intention.
H4	There is a significant difference in purchase intention scores between male and female respondents.
H5	There is a significant difference in purchase intention scores across age groups.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND INTERPRETATIONS

Demographic Profile of Survey Participants

Out of 145 survey participants, 81 (55.9%) were women while 64 (44.1%) were men. Among age groups, the largest number belonged to 25-34 years (35.2%), then 35-44 years (24.8%), and 18-24 years (21.4%). This means that the sample consisted primarily of young working age customers, who form target audience for convenience-related RTC items. Table 2 displays full demographic profile.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	64	44.1
Gender	Female	81	55.9
Age	18–24 years	31	21.4
Age	25–34 years	51	35.2
Age	35–44 years	36	24.8
Age	45–54 years	20	13.8
Age	55 years & above	7	4.8
Monthly Household Income	Below ₹30,000	34	23.4
Monthly Household Income	₹30,000–₹60,000	61	42.1
Monthly Household Income	Above ₹60,000	50	34.5

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 145)

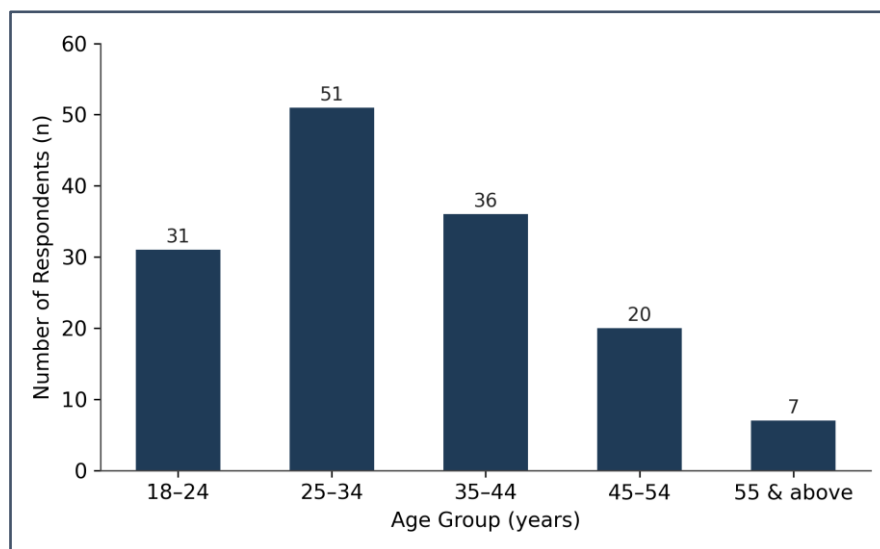


Figure 1. Age Distribution of Respondents (N = 145)

Importance of Recyclable Packaging

The respondents have indicated the importance of six recyclable packaging features in their RTC purchase decisions using a five-point Likert Scale. As can be seen from Figure 2 below, the feature 'recyclability indicated by label/symbol' was rated as most important feature ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.64$) followed by 'minimal use of plastic' ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.71$) and 'content made from recycled material' ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.69$). Reusable features have been rated relatively low on the importance scale ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.88$).

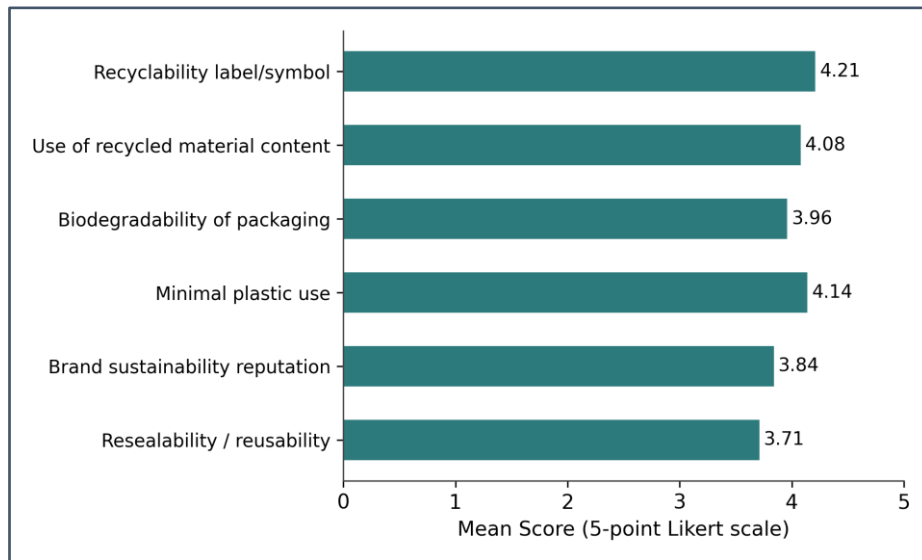


Figure 2. Mean Importance Ratings of Recyclable Packaging Attributes (N = 145)

Willingness to Pay a Price Premium

In answer to their question concerning their willingness to pay a price premium for sustainable packaging in RTC products, 82% of consumers said they were willing to do so, whereas 18% were not willing to pay a premium at all (Figure 3). Of those who were willing to pay an extra price, 34% were willing to pay 5%, whereas 17% were willing to pay a premium exceeding 10%. These results are similar to the industry's data on willingness to pay for sustainable packaging (GreyB, 2025).

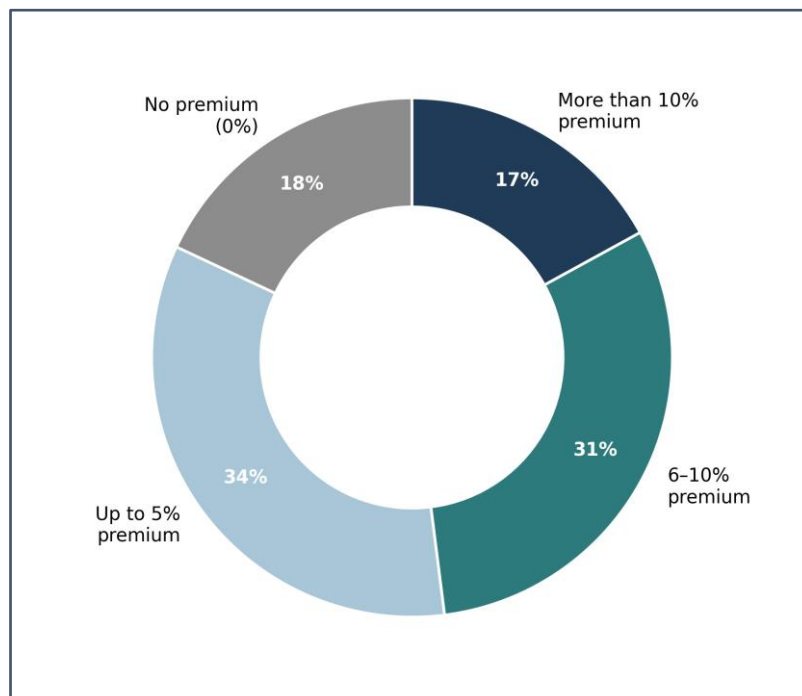


Figure 3. Willingness to Pay a Premium for Recyclable Packaging (N = 145)

Analysis of Correlation

The Pearson correlation analysis (Table 3) showed that there were significant positive correlations between all the variables used in the research ($p < .01$). Purchase intention correlated highly with environmental concern ($r = .58$, $p < .001$), next was perceived quality of the product ($r = .49$, $p < .001$) and willingness to pay a premium price ($r = .44$, $p < .001$). The inter-correlations between the predictor variables were moderately high (from $r = .39$ to $r = .46$), which means that the issue of multicollinearity was not very serious for further regression analysis ($VIF < 2.0$).

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Environmental Concern	—			
2. Perceived Product Quality	0.46**	—		
3. Willingness to Pay Premium	0.39**	0.41**	—	
4. Purchase Intention	0.58**	0.49**	0.44**	—

Table 3. Pearson Correlation Matrix among Study Variables (N = 145)

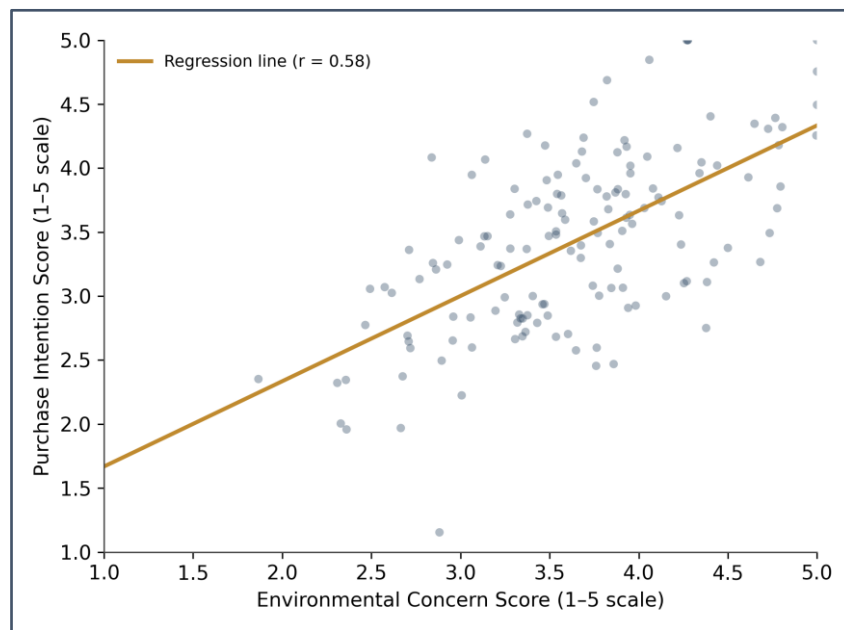


Figure 4. Relationship between Environmental Concern and Purchase Intention (N = 145)

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was carried out to determine whether H1, H2 and H3 were tenable, with purchase intention being regressed against environmental concern, perceived product quality, and willingness to pay a premium. This was found to be statistically significant, $F(3, 141) = 29.18, p < .001$, and accounted for approximately 38.3% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = .383$, Adjusted $R^2 = .370$). As indicated in Table 4 below, all the three variables made statistically significant contributions. The strongest predictor was environmental concern ($\beta = 0.41, t = 5.73, p < .001$), followed by perceived product quality ($\beta = 0.26, t = 3.53, p < .001$) and willingness to pay a premium ($\beta = 0.21, t = 2.95, p < .01$).

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.812	0.146	—	3.32	<.001
Environmental Concern	0.394	0.041	0.41	5.73	<.001
Perceived Product Quality	0.231	0.039	0.26	3.53	<.001
Willingness to Pay Premium	0.158	0.032	0.21	2.95	<.01

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression Results: Predictors of Purchase Intention (N = 145)

Gender Differences in Purchase Intentions

An independent-samples t-test was performed to investigate differences by gender in purchase intentions (H4). Female participants had significantly higher purchase intentions compared to males (female $M = 3.91, SD = 0.68$; male $M = 3.61, SD = 0.77$), $t(143) = 2.49, p = .014$, which provided support for H4 and consistent with previous research that female participants tend to be environmentally friendly shoppers (Bedard & Tolmie, 2018).

Group	n	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Male	64	3.61	0.77	2.49	143	.014
Female	81	3.91	0.68			

Table 5. Independent-Samples t-Test: Purchase Intention by Gender

To check the differences in purchase intentions among the different age groups (H5), a one-way ANOVA was used. The finding showed that there was a significant difference between age group and purchase intentions, $F(4, 140) = 3.91$, $p < .01$ (Table 6). Post hoc analyses through Tukey HSD comparison further demonstrated that respondents aged 18-24 years ($M = 4.02$) and 25-34 years ($M = 3.94$) were significantly more likely to purchase than respondents aged 45-54 years ($M = 3.48$) and 55 years and older ($M = 3.21$).

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups (Age)	7.34	4	1.84	3.91	<.01
Within Groups	65.69	140	0.469		
Total	73.04	144			

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA: Purchase Intention across Age Groups

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the present study have several valuable implications regarding the impact of recyclable packaging on RTC food purchase intention. Firstly, environmental concern turned out to be the most significant predictor of purchase intention. This finding is in line with the results of the consumer survey of Coca-Cola products, which showed that ecological concern was the most significant predictor of eco-packaged beverages' purchase intention (Effect of Eco-Friendly Packaging on Consumer Purchase Intention, 2024). Moreover, it is congruent with the existing TPB-based literature, which identifies environmental concern as an antecedent of green purchase intention (Wang et al., 2026). It appears that the environmentally conscious people do not give up their ecological concern when making convenience food purchases.

Second, product quality perception as related to the recyclable packaging was another important factor influencing the purchase intention, albeit relatively less important than the previous one. It corresponds to the findings of the research conducted in Indonesia, where the consumers' perception of sustainable packaging was identified as an important determinant of their purchase intentions (Effect of Eco-Friendly Packaging on Purchase Intention, 2023). This shows that the recyclable packaging does not serve only as an ethical marker but also as a marker of quality, with consumers assuming that products in well-designed recyclable packages receive better attention from the producer.

Third, willingness to pay a premium, while a significant predictor, exhibited the smallest standardised effect among the three predictors. This is broadly consistent with the attitude-behaviour gap documented extensively in the literature (Tawde et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2022); although 82% of respondents expressed some willingness to pay more for recyclable packaging, the majority concentrated in the 'up to 5%' band, suggesting that stated willingness to pay does not translate into substantial price tolerance. This finding nuances the optimistic willingness-to-pay figures reported in industry surveys (GreyB, 2025) by demonstrating that, even where willingness exists, its magnitude is modest and its predictive contribution to purchase intention is comparatively limited relative to environmental concern and quality perception.

Fourth, the significant demographic differences observed—with younger consumers and female respondents demonstrating higher purchase intention—corroborate prior findings regarding youth-segment interest in eco-friendly packaging (Prakash & Pathak, 2017) and industry data showing rising minimal-packaging adoption among younger demographic cohorts (Mintel, 2025). These results suggest that RTC manufacturers targeting younger, urban, dual-income households—the demographic most likely to purchase RTC products in the first place—are also addressing the demographic segment most responsive to recyclable packaging cues, indicating a favourable strategic alignment rather than a trade-off between convenience positioning and sustainability positioning.

Taken together, these findings suggest that recyclable packaging exerts a meaningful and multi-dimensional influence on RTC purchase decisions, operating through environmental concern, quality perception, and—to a lesser extent—price tolerance simultaneously, rather than through any single mechanism

CONCLUSION

The current research looked at the effect of sustainable packaging on the consumer decision-making process while purchasing ready-to-cook products. The study utilized a quantitative approach by administering a survey questionnaire to 145 urban consumers using correlation, regression, t-test and ANOVA analysis methods. From the findings, it is evident that features of sustainable packaging such as recyclable nature labelling and reduced use of plastic material are seen as key purchase criteria and the factors such as environmental concern, product quality perception, and premium willingness jointly and significantly influence the purchase intention with environmental concern having the greatest effect. Notable differences based on gender and age group show that young and female consumers are the most responsive to sustainability in RTC products. The results clearly affirm the significance of sustainable packaging to RTC consumers and that this is an integral part of the RTC proposition with regard to sustainability, bridging the gap in the empirical evidence in the sustainable packaging literature.

Recommendations

On the basis of the results obtained, the following recommendations are made for industry professionals, policy-makers, and future researchers:

To Food Manufacturers & Brand Owners

- Focus efforts on placing a highly visible and informative recyclability label on RTC packages since it was found to have the greatest perceived importance amongst consumers polled.
- Concentrate on higher recycled content and lower plastics use in multi-layer RTC packages while considering shelf life.
- Create specific sustainability messaging for younger and more urban demographic groups (18-34 years) due to their high propensity towards buying RTC and higher awareness of recyclable packaging.
- Avoid setting a price premium for recyclable packaging greater than 5-10% of traditional packaging costs since consumers' willingness to pay decreases greatly past this point.

For Retailers

- Promote in-store and on-line retail merchandising to draw attention to the recyclability characteristics of packaging in the purchase environment by taking advantage of the consumer preference for sustainable visual cues.
- Leverage customer loyalty programs in order to incentivize consumers into buying RTC products with verifiably recyclable packaging.

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