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Food Acceptability among Consumers: a Study done on West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The current study helps us to not only understand the cultural backgrounds of food habits of the local people residing in West Bengal but will also help in encouraging sustainability through healthy eating habits, by reducing diseases spread through digestive infection, and towards the state's financial growth. This study bridges a crucial gap in understanding the food behaviour of diverse communities within West Bengal, offering region-specific insights into eating habits. The present research work focuses on finding the factors specific to West Bengal and to discover which factor(s) influence the eating habits of local people. A total of 364 face-to-face interviews, consisting of a Lickert scale-based self-reported questionnaire were conducted on the residents of West Bengal. Several methods were used to analyse the data, such as exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and Path Analysis in structural equation modelling (SEM). These methods ensured the accuracy and validity of the findings, allowing for in-depth interpretation of consumer behaviour patterns. Confidence level at 95% had been chosen for the current research work. Given the outcome of the analysis, it can be determined that the economic condition, acculturation, attitude and self-control behaviour have significant direct influences on food acceptability behaviour. The results of the present work will aim to assist entrepreneurs to develop strategies for the future that will be useful in preparing effective menu planning, and menu pricing. It will also help the consumers in developing sustainable healthy eating habits.

KEYWORDS: Food Acceptability, Attitude, Acculturation, Economical Condition, Structural Equation Modelling, Consumer Behaviour.

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INTRODUCTION

Besides fulfilling our hunger needs and providing nourishing properties, food performs countless functions e.g. promoting growth, repairing cells, regulating body processes, and protecting against infections (1). Non-nutritional functions, on the other hand, are linked to society, culture, and emotions. Examples include sharing food at social gatherings to build relationships, a mother preparing food for a sick child, or consuming '*prasad*' (food offered to gods in temples) (1).

The term ‘eating habits’ indicates the steps that people undertake daily while selecting which food to consume and when. E.g., how the food items are selected, then prepared, then served, and finally consumed (2-4).

As we grow up, our taste buds grow, so the choice of food also evolves over time. According to (5) at birth, we all rely on the same breast milk, but as we grow into childhood, our diets become vastly different. This scrutiny indicates that despite the fact that we all have similar physical needs, our food choices vary widely. Various factors influence decisions on what to eat, when to eat, how to eat, and what to avoid. Earlier studies proved that various sociodemographic factors also influence the changing nature of our food habits.

(3) mentioned a person’s age significantly influences his/her dietary behaviour. The food choices also vary in accordance with the gender. (6) mentioned that as males are more muscular, whereas females prefer to maintain womanly appearance, thus food choices also differ. Eating habits are regulated by the people’s native origin to some extent. According to (7) urbanized people are more likely to have unhealthy eating habits than rural residents.

In connection to religious influences on eating habits, (8) mentioned that religion not only influences the choice of food ingredients purchased, but also influences how the food shall be prepared. Numerous studies indicated that heritage and cultural background significantly influence eating habits (9). In context to Indian scenario, traditional customs largely dictate food acceptance. Studies by (2,10) emphasize that socio-cultural factors mostly shape regional food preferences in India.

People often overeat or under eat specific foods, influenced by preferences, knowledge, or food availability. (7) highlighted that knowledge is crucial factor in shaping eating habits. Education increases awareness of a food’s nutritional value, health benefits, and proper cooking methods, leading to healthier eating habits (9).

Previously numerous researchers highlighted that people's economic condition and food consumption behaviour are deeply connected (11-13). In the Indian context, (14) highlighted that underprivileged communities, particularly in rural areas, suffer from undernourishment due to an inability to afford necessary food. They tend to consume low-quality, repetitive meals with limited variety and often reduce the number of daily meals; however, wealthy and urban residents have better eating habits (15,16). This clearly bears the evidence that financial condition strongly influences dietary habits.

Family members who want us to have continued good health, restrict us from consuming unhealthy foods. This shows that family and relatives positively influence our eating habits (6,17).

Considering the previously conducted research articles, it has been comprehended that people's dietary behaviour is dependent on multiple factors that are always changeable. Universally, numerous research works had been carried out with the aim of finding the determining factors of food acceptability. However, in India, especially in eastern region such studies are very rare. Thus, the state of West Bengal (one of the Indian states) had been chosen for the present research work.

The state colloquially had been divided into 2 different parts: *North Bengal* - which comprises divisions of Jalpaiguri and Malda together, and *South Bengal* - which comprises divisions of Presidency, Medinipur and Burdwan (18).

The demographic characteristics of both the regions are distinctly different. The North Bengal region is situated in the mountainous Himalayan Region, whereas the remaining part of Bengal is situated in the wetlands of the Ganges River. (19) mentioned the local people residing in the areas at the highest altitude (above 2500 meters) e.g. Singalila Ridge (20) often face reduced rainfall; and harsh, dry, chilly winters. With limited access to mechanized farming equipment, hilly people depend more on traditional hill farming, animal husbandry, and agroforestry for their daily needs. Thus, cultivation of rice is replaced with climate-resistant cereals like barley, bajra, and also more meat-based products than fresh vegetables. Whereas people residing in areas at lower altitudes e.g. Medinipur (21) usually face sub-tropical, high humidity, excessive rainfall, and high temperature during summer, hence, in the plains, people primarily rely on rice, fresh fruits, vegetables, seafood, and meat (19).

The state has an estimated population of 10 crores, making it the 4th most-populated Indian state (22). A significant portion of West Bengal's population consists of native Bengali people, typically identified by two colloquial terms within the Hindu community. "*Ghoti*" refers to those who lived in West Bengal before the partition of India, while "*Bangal*" describes people who migrated from the eastern part of Bengal (now Bangladesh) to India after the partition (23). Minority communities comprise the people from Bihar, Odisha, the Marwaris, and a few tribal groups e.g., Paliya, Santals, and Sabars who are scattered throughout the state. However, the rugged and mountainous regions in North Bengal are heavily inhabited by Sherpa, Gorkha, Nepali, and Rajbonshi (another tribal group) communities (24). The diverse population and varying traditional beliefs across communities significantly influence dietary behaviour. Food culture and dietary patterns in West Bengal are also heavily influenced by intermarriage systems between the 2 communities: Ghoti and Bangal (23). Towards the North (especially in the Eastern Himalayan Region), dietary habits are unique. People's traditional beliefs about their health, preserving nature, following the principles of Buddhism, climate, and difficult geographical conditions play an influential role in shaping eating habits. Preserving foods for later use (fermentation, air drying), steaming – the most preferred cooking method, and over-reliant on traditional foods to heal sickness bears evidence of cultural influences (19).

The major portion of the state's economy comes from agricultural practices, fish farming, steel plants, etc. Even though it is evident (22) that the state's economic development is constantly on the rise, in reality per capita earnings and per capita expenses in West Bengal are much below compared to other developing states in India, approximately 20% people live below the poverty line and consume much below the recommended dietary allowance (RDA) level.

Considering the above, it is proved that multiple factors influence the eating behaviour of the residents of the state of West Bengal. Most of the studies stressed more on investigating the health and nourishment status of the people residing in the state (19,25), and only a few studies have explored the factors motivating changes in people's dietary behaviour. Given the gaps in existing research, there is a clear need for a comprehensive study covering the entire region of West Bengal.

The present study focuses on identifying the factors that are specific to West Bengal and to find out which factor(s) have a major influence on the eating habits of local people.

In the current study, the researchers used 3 theories to build the framework: Consumer Culture Theory (CTT), Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), and Acculturation Theory. Each theory is based on certain key aspects. In order to describe CCT (26) mentioned personal identity, brand image, cultural background of the marketplace, and personal belief system – are the key features that determine the spending behaviour of the consumer. In connection to the Acculturation Theory (27) highlighted that the interchange of cultural backgrounds due to acculturation also influences people's consumption behaviour. According to TPB theory, people's behaviour is shaped by 3 distinct features: behavioural attitude, normative anticipations from others, and perceived behavioural control (28).

The key aspects of the three theories focus on the cognitive side of human behaviour. To build a comprehensive framework, common features from these theories were merged, highlighting connections between factors and food acceptance behaviour. Additionally, intention is identified as a behavioural component moderating cause-and-effect relationship. Applying the TPB theory, (29) showed that positive intention is strongly influenced by attitude, normative expectations, and perceived behavioural control. (28) demonstrated that acceptance intention mediates the link between several factors and actual behaviour. Therefore,

in this study, acceptance intention is considered a mediating variable.

Reviewing the past literature, it is acknowledged that building a theoretical framework and proposed research model considering only the above theories may not be enough. Additionally, other constructs will also help strengthen the model. Considering the above discussion, for the current study researchers assume that all the characteristics under CCT, Acculturation Theory, TPB, and financial condition influence the user's intention to follow sustainable eating habits (30). Subsequently, acceptance intention influences people's actual dietary behaviour. Therefore, the following hypotheses (H1 – H9) are suggested. Please refer to Figure 1.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study focuses on finding the factors that influence most on food acceptance behaviour, emphasizing on economic condition, cultural background, attitude, and emotional control towards food acceptance. Intention to accept food is considered as a mediator. A cross-sectional survey was conducted from December 2023 to March 2024, with 364 participants aged between 18–60 years, and varied economic backgrounds (daily wage workers, servicemen, businesspeople, homemakers) from different districts of West Bengal. A self-reported questionnaire comprising 35 questions was constructed based on similar studies done in previous years (17,30). The questionnaire was divided into 2 parts: Demographics and Factors influencing eating behaviour. Data had been pilot tested. Three questions had been removed due to low alpha value. Reliability value is > .7. Data collection involved cluster random sampling technique. The population was divided into categories e.g. age (17-30; 31-50 and 51-70 years), education level and religion. In order to ensure transparency and authenticity in data collection, an informal consent letter (on an organization letter-pad) signed by researchers was shown to the participants, and the purpose of the study also had been verbally explained. After they agreed to participate, a printed questionnaire was handed over.

Data Analysis and Results

SPSS software version 26 and AMOS software version 22 were used for the analysis purpose, and p-value < 0.05 has been considered statistically significant.

Descriptive Statistics

Out of the total, male participants were higher N=300 (82.4%) and female participants were N=64 (17.6%). Most of the respondents were graduates or had completed master's degrees, and they all lived in city N = 204 (56%). Hindus were most educated compared to Muslims and Christians N = 194 (53%). A tabular presentation of demographic information is displayed in the Table 1.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

While designing the questionnaire, the maximum questions were adopted from earlier studies; however, some questions were developed by the researchers. Thus, in order to understand how the newly developed questions merge into adopted questions, EFA has been applied on 33 statements. Table 2 shows the reliability of analysis of each factor. The factors were extracted based on the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and Eigen values >1. The loadings which had values higher than 0.5 were chosen for the current study. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test of sphericity tests results were .954 (> 0.60) and significant (p value < 0.05). Based on the EFA analysis, 6 factors had been extracted: Attitude, Acculturation, Economical Condition, Self-control Behaviour, Acceptance Intention and Food Acceptability Behaviour.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Furthermore, the association between all the constructs were evaluated with the help of CFA. Model fitness was confirmed (X^2 = 936.065, DF = 480, X^2 / DF = 1.950, p value < 0.05, CFI = .947, TLI = .942, IFI = .947, and RMSEA = .051).

Evaluation of Validity

The table 3 illustrates each construct has average variance extracted (AVE) value > 0.5, that indicates all the observed variables under each construct successfully converge together into a latent variable, thus it is interpretated the convergent validity for the current CFA is achieved, and discriminant validity was confirmed as the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) value is lower than AVE.

Path Analysis

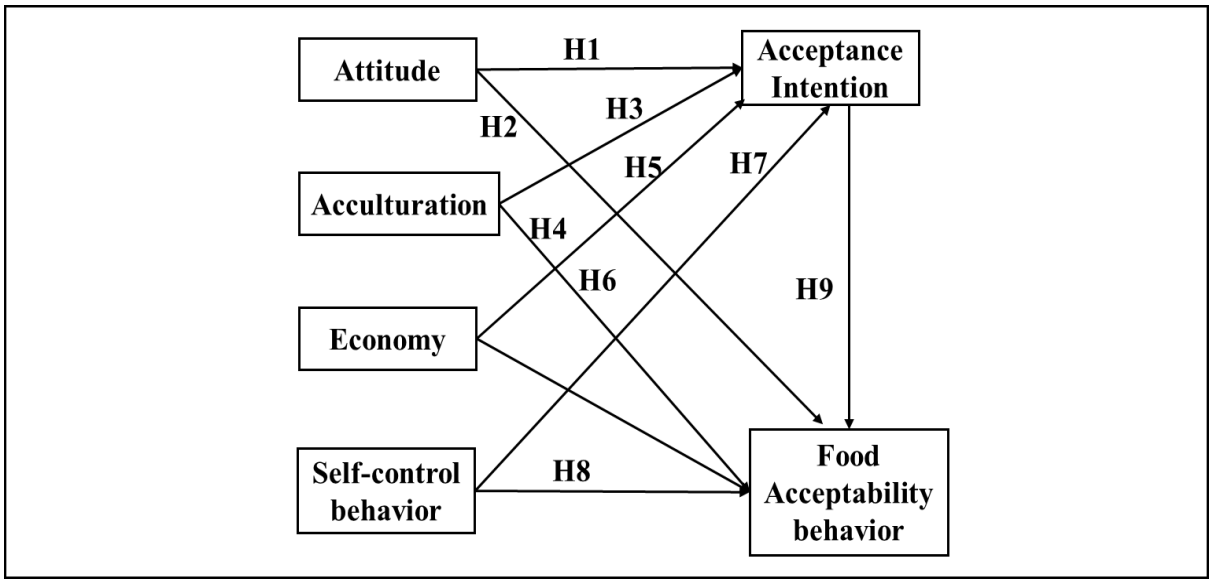
Path Analysis in Structural Equation Modelling was used to analyse the relationships between independent and dependent variables. The independent variables—attitudes, acculturation, economic condition, and self-control behaviour influence food acceptance behaviour through the mediating variable, acceptance intention. Figure 2 shows the path analysis diagram, and Table 4 shows the results of the anticipated hypothesis in a comprehensive manner.

RESULTS

The survey findings reveal economic condition, acculturation, attitude, and self-control behaviour have direct positive relationship with food acceptability. The standardized estimates ranged between 0.145 to 0.381, and the critical ratio (CR) values for all the hypotheses (except H1 and H3) ranged between 2.010 to 4.753, which is higher than 1.96. And the significance values apart from H1 and H3, for all the regression paths are less than 0.05. That indicates economic and knowledge to food acceptability behaviour (H2), acculturation to food acceptability behaviour (H4), attitudes to food acceptability behaviour through acceptance intention (H5), attitudes to food acceptability behaviour (H6), self-control behaviour to food acceptability behaviour through acceptance

intention (H7), self-control behaviour to food acceptability behaviour (H8), and acceptance intention to food acceptability behaviour (H9) are accepted.

Figure 1:



Theoretical Framework

Figure 2: Indirect and Direct Effects

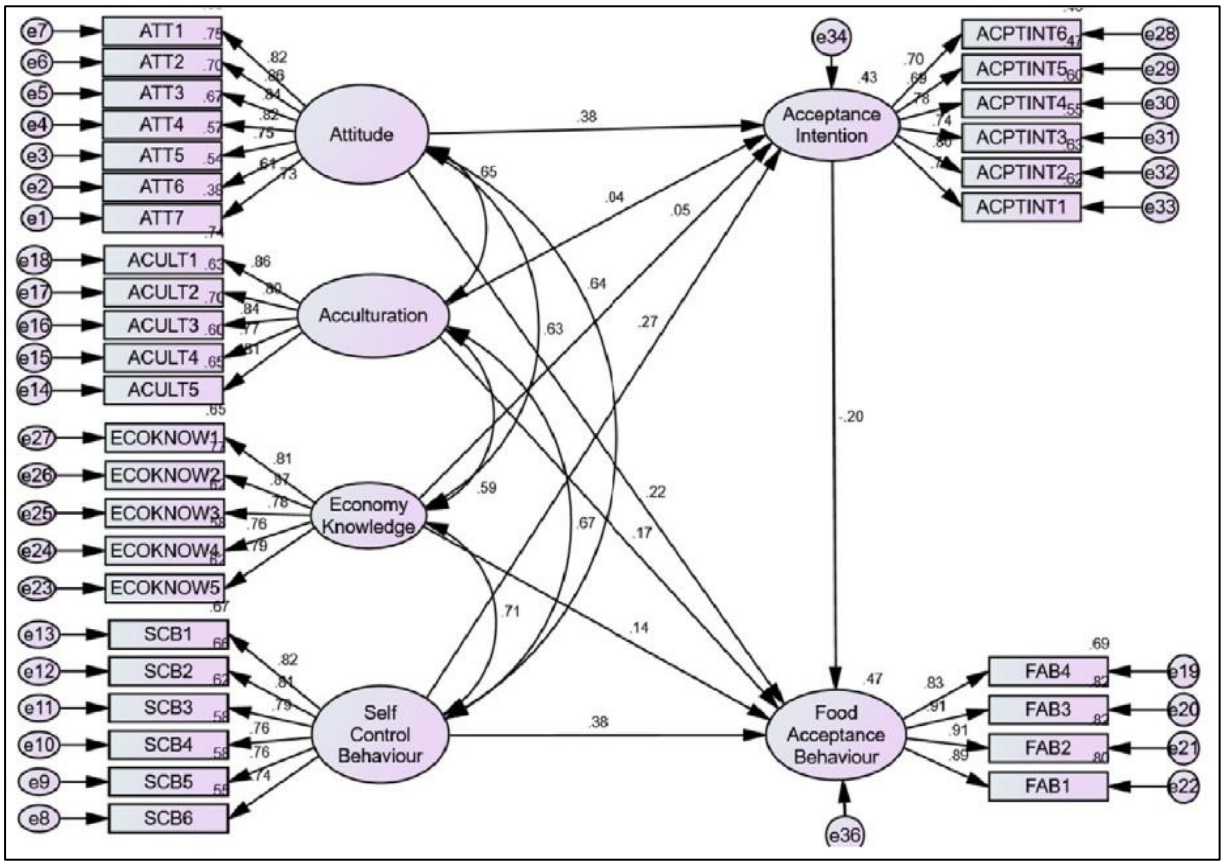


Table 1 summarizes the **demographic characteristics** of the study participants (N = 364). The majority of respondents were **male (82.4%),** while only **17.6% were female**, indicating a gender imbalance in the sample. In terms of **age**, nearly half of the participants (48.6%) were between **30–40 years,** followed by **26.1% aged 40–50**, and **19.8% aged 20–30,** with very few under 20 (0.8%) or over 50 (4.7%). The sample was predominantly **Hindu (93.4%),** with small representations from the **Muslim (5.8%)** and **Christian (0.8%)** communities. Regarding **education, 43.4% had completed 12th standard or lower, 40.9% were graduates,** and **15.7% held a master's degree,** reflecting a diverse educational background. In terms of **residence**, most respondents (89.6%) lived in **urban (city) areas,** while only **10.4% were from villages,** indicating a strong urban representation in the sample. Overall, the demographic profile suggests a mostly urban, middle-aged, male, and Hindu population with varied educational attainment.

Table 1: **Demographic Characteristics**

Demographic Info	(N)	%
Gender		
Male	300	82.4
Female	64	17.6
Age		
Less than 20 years	3	0.8
20 years - 30 years	72	19.8
30 years - 40 years	177	48.6
40 years - 50 years	95	26.1
Above 50 years	17	4.7
Religion		
Hindu	340	93.4
Muslim	21	5.8
Christian	3	0.8
Education		
12th std or lower	158	43.4
Graduate	149	40.9
Masters	57	15.7
Residence		
City	326	89.6
Village	38	10.4

Table 2 presents the **reliability analysis** of the constructs used in the study, assessed through Cronbach's alpha (α). All six constructs demonstrate high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The values range from 0.883 (Acceptance Intention) to 0.934 (Food Acceptance Behaviour), indicating that the items within each construct reliably measure the same underlying concept. Notably, Attitudes (α = 0.912), Acculturation (α = 0.908), Economical Condition (α = 0.900), and Self-control Behaviour (α = 0.902) all show excellent reliability, further confirming the consistency of the measurement scale. Overall, the high reliability scores across all constructs suggest the questionnaire items are dependable and suitable for further analysis.

Table 2: **Reliability Analysis**

Constructs	Items	α
Attitudes	7	.912
Acculturation	5	.908
Economical Condition	5	.900
Self-control behaviour	6	.902
Acceptance Intention	6	.883
Food acceptance behaviour	4	.934

Table 3 presents the assessment of **convergent and discriminant validity** for the constructs used in the study. Convergent validity is supported as all constructs exhibit Composite Reliability (CR) values above 0.70 (ranging from 0.884 to 0.935) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating internal consistency and that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators. Discriminant validity is confirmed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, where the square root of the AVE (diagonal values in bold) for each construct is greater than its Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) and greater than the correlations with other constructs (off-diagonal values). For example, the square root of AVE for FAB is 0.884, which is higher than its correlation with any other construct. Similarly, all other constructs show a similar pattern, indicating that the constructs are distinct and measure different underlying concepts. Thus, the data demonstrates both strong convergent and discriminant validity, supporting the robustness of the measurement model.

Table 3: Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Factors	CR	AVE	MSV	ECO	ATT	SCB	ACULT	FAB	ACPTINT
ECO	.901	.647	.507	**.804**					
ATT	.916	.610	.423	.629	**.781**				
SCB	.903	.609	.507	.712	.642	**.781**			
ACULT	.909	.666	.445	.588	.650	.667	**.816**		
FAB	.935	.782	.389	.554	.544	.624	.554	**.884**	
ACPTINT	.884	.561	.370	.504	.608	.574	.494	.308	**.749**
ECO: Economical Condition; **ATT:** Attitudes; **SCB:** Self-control behaviour; **ACULT:** Acculturation; **FAB:** Food acceptance behaviour; **ACPTINT:** Acceptance Intention									

The hypothesis testing results indicate a mixed set of outcomes regarding the significance, direction, and mediation effects. Among the nine hypotheses (H1–H9), six were statistically significant (H2, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8, and H9) with p-values below the standard threshold of 0.05, indicating acceptance of these hypotheses. H2, H4, H6, and H8 showed positive and significant relationships, suggesting strong direct effects. H5 and H7, while also significant, demonstrated partial mediation, implying that an intervening variable plays a role in these relationships. H9 showed a significant negative direct effect, indicating that the independent variable negatively influences the dependent variable without mediation. On the other hand, H1 and H3 were rejected due to non-significant results ($p > 0.05$), with no mediation effects observed. H1 and H3 also showed negligible and negative estimates, suggesting weak and unsupported relationships. Overall, the results highlight the presence of both direct and partially mediated pathways in the model, with stronger support for positively significant effects (Table 4).

Table 4: Results of Effect Analysis

Hypothesis	Estimate	SE	Sig	Critical Ratio	Effect	Results	Mediation
H1	-.010	.058	.503	.670	No	Rejected	No mediation
H2	.145	.078	.044	2.010	Yes	Accepted	
H3	-.008	.054	.586	.544	No	Rejected	No mediation
H4	.172	.072	.012	2.506	Yes	Accepted	
H5	-.076	.074	.000	4.753	Yes	Accepted	Partial mediation
H6	.220	.100	.003	2.984	Yes	Accepted	
H7	-.055	.068	.002	3.146	Yes	Accepted	Partial mediation
H8	.381	.096	.000	4.578	Yes	Accepted	
H9	-.203	-.292	.001	-3.221	Yes	Accepted	Direct effect

DISCUSSION

The current study identified important factors influencing food habits in West Bengal, based on past literature and theories. Analysis revealed six factors, including four independent variables: Economic Condition and Knowledge, Acculturation, Attitudes, and Self-Control Behaviour. The study examined their direct and indirect impacts on food acceptability, with acceptance intention as a mediator, testing nine hypotheses and drawing the following conclusions.

First, economic condition directly influences food acceptability behaviour i.e. 14.5%, and the influence is significant; however, the indirect relationship between economic condition and food acceptability behaviour is very low -.010; moreover, the p-value is > 0.05, thus it bears the evidence that the food pricing and financial status directly influences food acceptability behaviour, and the acceptance intention does not play a mediating role.

Second, acculturation directly influences food acceptability behaviour i.e. 17.2%, and the influence is significant, however, indirect relationship between acculturation and food acceptability behaviour though acceptance intention is very low -.076, and not significant. Hence, it can be interpretated that a person's dietary behaviour changes as he/she comes across new culture.

Third, the result revealed, there is a mediating relationship exists between attitude and food acceptability behavior but the direct influence is at extreme. The variable directly influences food acceptability behavior approximately 22% ($p < 0.05$), while the indirect impact was very low (-0.076, $p > 0.05$). This implies, in most cases, people's food acceptance behaviour is primarily shaped by their attitude, however, intention to accept food depends on whether the person's attitude is positive or negative.

Fourth, self-control behaviour contributes most influences on food acceptability. The direct influence is 38%, and the path is also significant. On the contrary, the indirect impact of self-control behaviour on food acceptability behaviour is very low -.055, but the path is significant. Thus, it is clear that self-control behaviour directly and indirectly influences food acceptability behaviour. This indicates that people mostly choose food based on personal preferences, with decisions driven by self-control over their thoughts and actions.

Considering the above discussion, it is confirmed that the impact of direct influence tends to reduce due to presence of a mediator e.g., direct impact of economic condition on food acceptability behaviour is .145. On the contrary, in the presence of acceptance intention, direct impact reduces to .134. Correspondingly, acculturation reduces from .172 to .164; self-control behaviour reduces from .381 to .326, and attitude reduces from .220 to .144. The results of the present work assist the entrepreneurs to develop strategies that will be useful to prepare effective menu planning, and menu pricing. More importantly, it will also help consumers develop sustainable healthy eating habits. The present research work has certain limitations which have been mentioned below. *First*, the data collection process included development of Lickert Scale-based self-reported questionnaire. Lickert Scale only provides numerical data, making a thorough understanding of people's perceptions difficult. Thus, for future studies, meeting people with sufficient time in hand, and conducting in-depth interviews will bring better results. *Second*, the factors like climatic impact, sensory appearances of food, and time constraints regarding food preparation and consumption were not included in the present research work. *Third*, the study was conducted in only select districts of West Bengal. Similar studies can be conducted in other districts or other states. *Fourth*, all the independent variables jointly explain only 47% variance. Thus, for future research work, there is scope for a greater number of independent variables to be included so that a more comprehensive picture can emerge of the evolving Food Acceptability of the people of West Bengal, and at large, the people of India.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated key factors influencing food acceptability behaviour among consumers in West Bengal, incorporating economic condition, acculturation, attitude, and self-control behaviour into a structural model. The findings demonstrate that these factors significantly affect food choices, both directly and indirectly, with acceptance intention acting as a mediating variable in select cases. Among all the factors, self-control behaviour exhibited the strongest influence on food acceptability, followed by attitude and acculturation. Although economic condition showed a direct impact, its mediated effect through acceptance intention was negligible. The research contributes valuable insights for policymakers, public health experts, and the hospitality industry by highlighting region-specific drivers of food choices. These insights can support the design of targeted interventions, pricing strategies, and awareness programs to promote healthy, sustainable eating habits. Additionally, the study enriches academic understanding by integrating theoretical perspectives from the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Consumer Culture Theory, and Acculturation Theory. While the study offers meaningful contributions, limitations such as reliance on self-reported data and limited geographical coverage suggest the need for further research. Future studies could explore additional influencing factors and expand to other Indian states for broader applicability.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Soumen Mukherjee: Development of the Concept, Visualization, Project administration
Subrata Routh: Methodology, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Writing the Original Draft

Ethics Approval

This study does not have ethical committee approval. However, all participants provided informed consent prior to their participation, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

Data Availability Statement

This statement does not apply to this article.

Abbreviations

TNU – The Neotia University
SPSS – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

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