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Consumption of Ready-Made Meals – Will Young Households Change Dietary Trends? Evidence from Poland

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Abstract:

Purpose: *The aim of the study was to identify differences in the consumption of ready-made meals across selected household age classes in Poland between 2015 and 2023. The analysis focused on three dimensions: the share of households purchasing ready-made meals, the average real level of household expenditure on this category of food, and the share of these expenditures in total food expenditure. Expenditure levels were examined for all households, separately by age class, and restricted to households that actually purchased ready-made meals. Incorporating the COVID-19 pandemic period made it possible to assess and compare the effects of this crisis on ready-made meal consumption across the analyzed household age classes.*

Design/Methodology/Approach: *The study was based on unpublished microdata from the Household Budget Surveys (HBS) conducted by the Central Statistical Office (CSO) in Warsaw, Poland, covering the years 2015–2023. Each annual survey included a representative sample of approximately 30,000 households. Household age classes were distinguished according to the age of the household head (reference person).*

Findings: *The results indicate a continuous and substantial increase in the share of Polish households purchasing ready-made meals over the analyzed period. At the beginning of the study period, every second household reported purchasing ready-made meals. The highest share of consumers was observed among the youngest household age class (up to 30 years), at 65%, while the lowest share occurred in the oldest age class (over 70 years), at 42%. Although in most age classes the increase in interest in ready-made meals exceeded 20 percentage points, this threshold was not reached in the youngest and oldest classes. By 2023, nearly three-quarters of Polish households were purchasing ready-made meals. The youngest households continued to show the strongest interest (over 84%), while the oldest showed the weakest (just under 60%). The findings suggest that young households play a particularly important role in the diffusion of ready-made meal consumption and may contribute to lasting changes in dietary patterns in the future, whereas adoption in older age classes is slower and more conservative.*

Practical Implications: *Understanding the food consumption behavior of young households is particularly important for shaping future consumption patterns. The growing interest in ready-made meals among younger generations may signal lasting changes in dietary models and in the structure of food demand. The results may be useful for both food producers and*

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distributors, enabling them to tailor product offerings, pricing strategies, and marketing communication to the differentiated needs of younger and older households.
Originality/Value: *The analysis of consumption behavior based on household microdata by age class contributes to a better understanding of consumption changes observed at higher levels of data aggregation, namely at the national level. It also enhances insight into the mechanisms through which demographic changes affect consumption patterns.*

Keywords: *Ready-made meals, food expenditure, consumption trends, young households, household age class.*

JEL Code: *D1, D12, E21.*

Paper type: *Research article.*

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1. Introduction

Rapid economic and social development, together with the widespread adoption of new technologies, has created new challenges in labor markets while simultaneously accelerating the pace of everyday life in many countries, including Poland. As a result, consumers are increasingly seeking convenient solutions in their daily lives, including quick and easy ways to prepare meals.

Advances in production technologies and organization have enabled producers to introduce an increasingly diverse range of more palatable products, thereby further stimulating demand. Owing to innovations in packaging and storage methods, ready-made meals are now perceived not only as convenient solutions but also as products that meet quality and safety standards.

The literature (Grzega, 2015; Walerysiak-Grzechowska, 2024) identifies young consumers as being more inclined to purchase new food products and to adopt more modern consumption patterns. This is also confirmed by survey research conducted by Czernyszewicz *et al.* (2022) among young respondents (up to 25 years of age), which showed that more than half of the surveyed purchasers (58%) bought food products labeled as “new products.”

Ready-made meals and convenience food are commonly classified as innovative food products. For this reason, analyzing household consumption behavior by household age class is particularly important. Growing interest in ready-made meals may signal lasting changes in dietary models, especially among younger generations, who will play a key role in shaping the future structure of food demand. The results of this study may therefore be useful for both food producers and distributors, as they can support the adaptation of product offerings, pricing strategies, and marketing communication to the differentiated needs of younger and older households.

The aim of the study was to identify differences in the consumption of ready-made meals across selected household age classes in Poland between 2015 and 2023. The analysis focused on the share of households purchasing ready-made meals, the average real level of household expenditure on this food category, and the share of these expenditures in total food expenditure.

Expenditure levels were examined for all households, separately for each age class, and with a restriction to households that actually purchased ready-made meals. Incorporating the COVID-19 pandemic period into the analysis made it possible to compare the effects of this crisis on ready-made meal consumption across the analyzed household age classes in Poland. Existing studies have so far differentiated ready-made meal consumption by household age class only to a limited extent, particularly with respect to changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study conducted by the authors aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Was demand for ready-made meals among young households in Poland higher than in older household age classes between 2015 and 2023?

RQ2: During the analyzed period, was the growth in demand for ready-made meals in younger household age classes stronger than in older ones?

RQ3: During the COVID-19 pandemic and following the lockdown measures introduced in Poland, did demand for ready-made meals decline in the analyzed household age classes?

2. Literature Review

Ready-made meals were previously perceived by consumers primarily as food of inferior quality—highly processed and of low nutritional value. However, as noted by Janowicz *et al.* (2018, p. 38), "*the growing nutritional awareness of potential consumers does not allow producers to select ingredients at random, particularly preservatives and additional substances such as colorants, flavorings, and similar additives, which are not always welcome on product labels.*"

Contemporary consumers, on the one hand, have increasingly limited time for meal preparation and therefore expect food to be quick and easy to prepare; on the other hand, they also want meals to be both tasty and healthy. Consequently, the use of ready-made meals and broadly understood convenience food may facilitate the preparation of nutritious, palatable, and relatively healthy meals at home, while simultaneously addressing time constraints.

In the literature, ready-made meals are often treated as part of the broader category of "convenience food," which includes products requiring limited time and effort in preparation, such as heat-and-serve dishes or ready-to-eat meals. The concept of convenience food is broader than that of ready-made meals, as it encompasses not only complete meals (ready to consume or requiring only basic thermal processing, such as reheating, boiling, or baking), but also semi-processed products that facilitate meal preparation (Report "Gotowi na dania gotowe?", 2020; Mojka, 2012).

The findings of Andrzejewska and Białasiewicz, published in the report Time for Innovation (2010), pointed to a rather traditional ready-made meal market in Poland, dominated by heat-and-serve dishes such as beans, stuffed cabbage rolls, meatballs, or tripe soup. Polish consumers also showed strong interest in meals that are time-consuming to prepare at home, such as dumplings.

At present, consumer preferences are increasingly shifting toward food of ecological origin and products with favorable dietary attributes (Łusiak and Sobczak, 2025), which is likely to drive further changes in the ready-made meal market in the near future. In response to these evolving preferences, the contemporary food industry and retail chains have been intensively expanding their convenience food offerings, including ready-to-eat meals (Geeroms *et al.,* 2008; Olsen *et al.,* 2010). In the context of socio-economic change and an increasingly fast-paced lifestyle, ready-made meals have become a popular dietary solution for many consumers worldwide.

In international research, ready-made meals and convenience food have for many years been the subject of extensive analysis, particularly in relation to lifestyle changes, urbanization, and the rising labor market participation of women. It has been observed that growth in demand for ready-made meals is strongly associated with time constraints, the increasing number of single-person households, and greater social mobility (Buckley *et al.,* 2007; Costa *et al.,* 2001). As noted by Brunner and van der Horst (2012), consumers of ready-made meals do not constitute a homogeneous group; differences arise from age, family situation, education, and attitudes toward health and nutrition. The authors highlight the growing importance of "health convenience food," understood as products that combine convenience with high nutritional value.

This trend is also confirmed by Jackson and Viehoff (2016), who observe that consumers increasingly expect convenience food to deliver not only taste and time savings, but also alignment with health-oriented and ethical trends, such as plant-based diets, local sourcing, or a low content of chemical additives.

Consumer preferences and behavior in the purchase of food products are shaped by a variety of determinants. The primary group of factors influencing consumer trends consists of economic variables, such as income, inflation, economic growth, and the unemployment rate (Kwasek, 2015; Borowska *et al.,* 2020).

Equally important are non-economic factors, particularly demographic determinants (Grzega, 2015; Malesa and Malesa, 2017), including the household age class defined by the age of the household head, household size, and household composition, also referred to as the biological type. As emphasized by Dudek (2010), incorporating demographic variables into demand modeling makes it possible to explain the heterogeneous nature of household consumption patterns. This is especially relevant in the context of the changing demographic profile of consumers in Poland, which is expected to have a significant impact on food demand.

As highlighted by Walerysiak-Grzechowska (2024), the stages of the family life cycle play a fundamental role in shaping consumption expenditure decisions, particularly with respect to food, clothing, and household equipment. Referring to the findings of Radivojević and Vasić (2012), the author notes that the key factor determining household characteristics associated with the life cycle—such as household size or the presence of children—is the age of the household head.

According to Grzega (2015), "*younger households, as well as those that include children and youth of school and university age, are more inclined to purchase modern goods and services,*" which contributes to the modernization of their consumption patterns. These conclusions are of particular relevance to the analysis of demand for ready-made meals, which can be viewed as an example of modern consumer goods.

Research by Petrovici and Ritson (2006) likewise shows that younger age groups are more inclined to experiment with new products, including ready-made meals, particularly in developing and transition economies such as Poland. In turn, Nørgaard *et al.* (2007) observed that younger households with children are the most frequent users of ready-made products, treating them as a means of reconciling domestic responsibilities with paid employment.

Ready-made meals are no longer associated exclusively with low-quality food and have acquired a new position in consumer perceptions. The growing importance of health-related, environmental, and demographic factors has influenced both how these products are perceived and how they are consumed. Despite the substantial body of research on convenience food, there remains a lack of detailed studies that account for differences in consumption preferences across household age classes, particularly in the context of changes observed in Poland after 2015. The analyses presented below are intended to help fill this research gap.

3. Methodology

The assessment of the financial situation of households drew on individual, non-identifiable microdata from the Household Budget Surveys (BBGD) conducted by the Central Statistical Office (GUS) in Warsaw from 2015 to 2023. Each year, these surveys covered over 30,000 households.

The primary units of analysis were households, with the main classification criterion being the household age class, defined by the age of the reference person. Six age classes were distinguished:

- up to 30 years of age,
- 30–40,
- 40–50,
- 50–60,
- 60–70,
- over 70 years.

Particular attention was paid to the youngest age class (households in which the reference person was 30 years of age or younger), which was treated as a potential driver of change in convenience food consumption patterns.

The scope of the analysis covered three basic dimensions of demand for ready-made meals: the share of households reporting expenditures on ready-made meals, the real monthly per capita level of expenditure on ready-made meals, and the share of expenditures on ready-made meals in total food expenditure (excluding non-alcoholic beverages). Demand for ready-made meals was therefore operationalized using these three indicators, which were analyzed both for the total population of households and separately for each identified age class.

In analyzing expenditure levels on ready-made meals, in addition to the total population of households, a subset of households that actually incurred expenditures on this category of food (purchasers of ready-made meals) was also distinguished, and the intensity of consumption was examined separately within this group.

Real monthly per capita expenditures were adjusted for price level changes over the study period, enabling comparisons over time in terms of constant purchasing power. The data analysis employed descriptive statistical methods, including measures of central tendency (weighted means) and measures of change dynamics (absolute and relative changes, as well as average annual growth rates).

4. Research Results and Discussion

At the beginning of the study period, in 2015, expenditures on ready-made meals were recorded in every second household. By 2023, ready-made meals were consumed by nearly three-quarters of households in Poland, representing an increase of 21.8 percentage points compared with 2015. At the outset of the study period, the highest level of interest in ready-made meals was observed among the youngest households, that is, those in the up-to-30 age class, in which 65% reported purchasing this category of food. The next two positions were occupied by households in the subsequent age classes, namely 30-40 years and 40-50 years (Figure 1, Table 1).

In the following years, up to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, an increase in the share of purchasers of ready-made meals was observed in all three of these age classes, accompanied by a narrowing of differences between them. In 2019, immediately prior to the pandemic, the youngest age class continued to exhibit the highest level of interest in ready-made meals.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to a slowdown in the growth rate of the share of households consuming ready-made meals in the second and third age classes, as well as a slight decline (by 1 percentage point) in the youngest age class. As a result, the share of purchasers of ready-made meals in the three youngest age classes amounted to approximately 76%.

From 2021 onward, further growth in this phenomenon was observed in these age classes, and in 2023 the youngest households continued to record the highest share of ready-made meal consumers, at 84.4%. In Poland in the years 2015–2023, despite a steady increase in interest in ready-made meals across all identified household age classes, clear differences in the level of interest between age groups were evident.

A distinctly higher share of purchasers of ready-made meals—rising from approximately 60% in 2015 to over 80% in 2023, was observed in the three youngest age classes (up to 30 years, 30-40 years, and 40-50 years) compared with the overall population, while the lowest shares were recorded in the two oldest age classes (60-70 years and over 70 years). The age class most closely aligned with the overall average was the 50–60-year group (Figure 1).

Between 2015 and 2023, the share of consumers of ready-made meals in the youngest household age class increased by 19.4 percentage points; however, this increase was 2.4 percentage points lower than that observed for the total population of households in Poland. Over the same period, an increase in the share of households purchasing ready-made meals was also recorded in the oldest age class (over 70 years).

Nevertheless, the level of interest in this group remained markedly lower than among the youngest households. At the beginning of the study period, the difference between these two extreme age classes amounted to approximately 23 percentage points, and by 2023 it had widened by a further 2 percentage points (Table 1). In 2023, 59.8% of households in the oldest age class reported expenditures on ready-made meals.

The increase in the share of households purchasing ready-made meals was driven by both socio-economic factors and changing consumer preferences. One of the key drivers of rising demand has been the accelerated pace of life and the growing difficulty of reconciling professional and family responsibilities, particularly affecting younger households.

These groups are the most likely to seek convenient dietary solutions that enable quick meal preparation.

At the same time, rising nutritional awareness and a stronger emphasis on healthy lifestyles have compelled producers of ready-made meals to adapt product quality to evolving consumer expectations.

The reduction of excessive technological additives, improvements in raw material quality, and the introduction of variants with enhanced nutritional value have contributed to a gradual increase in consumer trust in this category of products, including among older age groups that were initially less inclined to purchase them.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ready-made meal consumption was heterogeneous. On the one hand, restrictions on access to food service establishments may have increased the importance of ready-made meals as substitutes for restaurant dining; on the other hand, the greater number of meals prepared at home may have temporarily reduced the need to rely on convenience food.

This dual effect may help explain the observed slowdown in growth dynamics or the slight declines recorded in some household age classes in 2020.

Figure 1. *Trends in the share of households purchasing ready-made meals in Poland between 2015 and 2023, by household age class*

Source: *Author's calculations based on non-identifiable microdata from BBGD (2015-2023).*

Average real expenditures on ready-made meals among all households exhibited a clear upward trend over the period 2015–2023, with a slight downturn in the final year of the analysis (Figure 2a). In 2015, monthly expenditures on ready-made meals amounted to 6.2 PLN per capita (Table 2), representing 1.3% of total household food expenditure (Figure 3a, Table 3).

Table 1. *Share of households purchasing ready-made meals in Poland between 2015 and 2023, by household age class (%)*

Year	Share of households purchasing ready-made meals (%)						
	Household age class						Total
	up to 30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	over 70	
2015	65.0	63.3	59.8	50.0	45.5	41.9	53.9
2016	68.4	68.9	63.9	55.9	49.1	45.6	58.2
2017	71.6	71.6	69.9	59.2	51.7	48.0	61.7
2018	74.1	72.0	70.8	60.0	51.8	46.4	62.0
2019	76.7	75.6	75.1	65.9	56.1	50.7	66.3
2020	75.7	76.2	75.6	67.0	56.0	51.1	66.7
2021	78.3	80.5	80.2	71.3	59.6	55.5	70.7
2022	83.1	83.3	82.1	73.7	63.3	57.7	73.2
2023	84.4	83.4	82.0	77.3	67.8	59.8	75.7
2023/2015 (p.p.)	19.4	20.1	22.2	27.3	22.3	17.9	21.8

Source: *Authors' calculations based on non-identifiable microdata from BBGD (2015-2023).*

By 2022, expenditures on ready-made meals had increased by approximately 66% compared with the beginning of the study period; however, a slight decline of around 2% was recorded in the following year. As a result, the overall increase between 2015 and 2023 amounted to 63%. In 2023, expenditures on ready-made meals for the total population of households reached 10.1 PLN per capita per month and accounted for 2.0% of total food expenditure (Figure 2a, Table 2, Figure 3a).

The level of food expenditure in Polish households was shaped primarily by income conditions, which did not deteriorate despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Głowicka-Wołoszyn *et al.,* 2024a; 2024b). This was largely due to government support measures introduced for households and enterprises. It was only after the end of the pandemic and the withdrawal of these protective measures, combined with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, that the income situation of Polish households worsened, leading to a contraction in consumer expenditures.

In the youngest household age class (with a reference person aged 30 years or younger), average monthly real per capita expenditures on ready-made meals in the pre–COVID-19 period were clearly higher than in the remaining age classes and in the total population of households (Figure 2a, Table 2). In 2015, these expenditures amounted to 8.9 PLN per capita per month, increasing to 11.1 PLN in 2019, which was respectively 44% and 31% higher than the average for all households.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a decline in expenditures on ready-made meals in the youngest household age class, while in the remaining age classes such expenditures continued to increase. As a result, in 2021 the level of expenditures on ready-made meals was the least differentiated across age classes, amounting to approximately 10 PLN per capita per month.

From 2022 onward, the most dynamic growth in expenditures on this category of food was again observed in the youngest household age class, which also recorded the highest expenditure level (11.8 PLN per capita per month) compared with other groups.

The disruption of the previously dynamic growth in expenditures on ready-made meals following the outbreak of the pandemic in the youngest households may be linked to the level and sources of income among young people. Their position in the labor market is often not yet well established, and employment frequently involves jobs that do not require extensive work experience; consequently, such positions were often among the first to be reduced during the economic shock triggered by the pandemic.

A noteworthy pattern was the second-highest ranking of the oldest household age class (over 70 years) in terms of expenditure levels on ready-made meals. A relatively high level of expenditure on this category of food, combined with the lowest share of consumers in this age class, suggests that the oldest consumers either purchased relatively larger quantities of ready-made meals or opted for higher-priced products.

This interpretation is supported by the analysis of expenditures on ready-made meals conducted exclusively among purchasers (Figure 2b, Table 2). The highest real expenditure levels among purchasers were observed in the oldest household age class, followed by the youngest households. Relatively high expenditures among consumers of ready-made meals were also recorded in the 60–70 age class (third position in the pre- and post-pandemic periods and second during the pandemic).

Higher expenditures on ready-made meals among older consumers may reflect the need to meet higher requirements regarding food products, driven for example by health conditions or preferences for organic products, which are healthier but also more expensive.

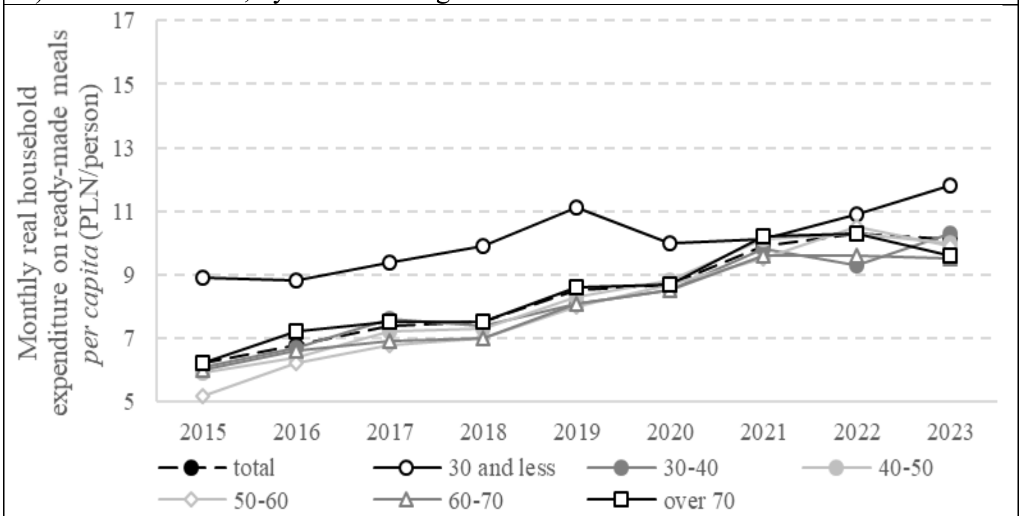
Among households that purchased ready-made meals, average monthly real per capita expenditures exhibited an upward trend until 2022, followed by a decline in 2023 (Figure 2b). For the total population of purchasing households, expenditures on ready-made meals increased from 10.9 PLN per capita per month in 2015 to 13.2 PLN in 2022, before decreasing to 12.7 PLN in 2023. This corresponds to a cumulative increase of approximately 21% by 2022 relative to 2015 and a decline of 4% between 2022 and 2023. As a result, over the entire study period, expenditures on ready-made meals among purchasers increased by 16.5%.

The increase in expenditure on ready-made meals across all age classes and for the total population of households was driven by both the level of spending among purchasers of this type of food and the extent of consumption, reflected in the growing share of households purchasing ready-made meals. In the youngest household age class (up to 30 years), both the breadth of consumption (the highest share of purchasers) and expenditure intensity (typically the second-highest expenditure level among purchasers) appear to have contributed to shaping demand for ready-made meals.

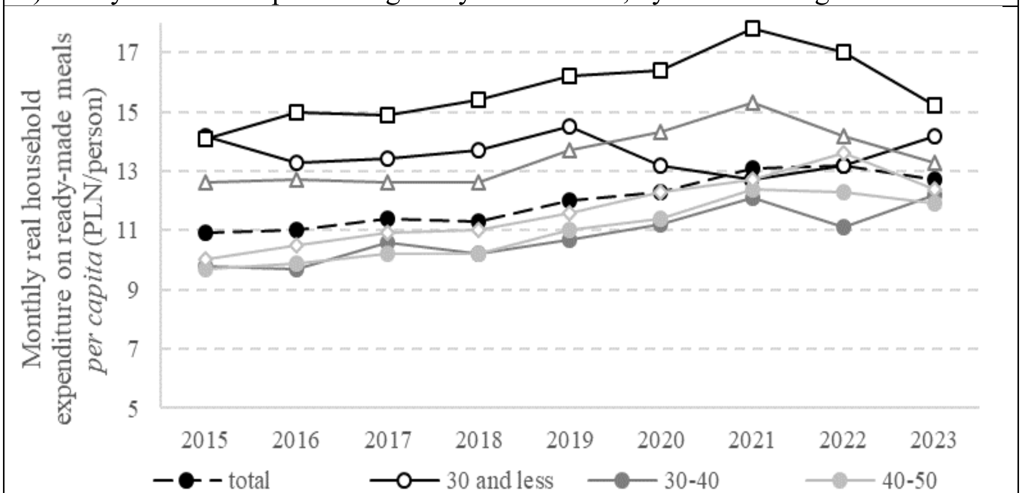
In contrast, demand for this category of food in the oldest household age class (over 70 years) was driven primarily by expenditure intensity (the highest expenditure levels among purchasers), as this group was characterized by the smallest consumption breadth (the lowest share of households purchasing ready-made meals).

Figure 2. *Monthly real household per capita expenditures on ready-made meals in Poland between 2015 and 2023, by household age class*

a) All households, by household age class



b) Only households purchasing ready-made meals, by household age class



Source: *Authors' calculations based on non-identifiable microdata from BBGD (2015-2023).*

***Table 2.** Monthly real household per capita expenditures on ready-made meals in Poland between 2015 and 2023, by household age class*

Year	Monthly real household per capita expenditures on ready-made meals (PLN)						
	Household age class						Total
	up to 30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	over 70	
All households							
2015	8.9	6.1	5.9	5.2	6.0	6.2	6.2
2016	8.8	6.7	6.4	6.2	6.6	7.2	6.8
2017	9.4	7.6	7.2	6.8	6.9	7.5	7.4
2018	9.9	7.4	7.3	7.0	7.0	7.5	7.5
2019	11.1	8.1	8.3	8.0	8.1	8.6	8.5
2020	10.0	8.5	8.8	8.7	8.5	8.7	8.7
2021	10.1	9.8	10.1	9.5	9.6	10.2	9.9
2022	10.9	9.3	10.3	10.5	9.6	10.3	10.3
2023	11.8	10.3	10.0	9.9	9.5	9.6	10.1
2023/2015 (%)	32.6	68.9	69.5	90.4	58.3	54.8	62.9
Households purchasing ready-made meals							
2015	14.2	9.8	9.7	10.0	12.6	14.1	10.9
2016	13.3	9.7	9.9	10.5	12.7	15.0	11.0
2017	13.4	10.6	10.2	10.9	12.6	14.9	11.4
2018	13.7	10.2	10.2	11.0	12.6	15.4	11.3
2019	14.5	10.7	11.0	11.6	13.7	16.2	12.0
2020	13.2	11.2	11.4	12.3	14.3	16.4	12.3
2021	12.7	12.1	12.4	12.7	15.3	17.8	13.1
2022	13.2	11.1	12.3	13.6	14.2	17.0	13.2
2023	14.2	12.2	11.9	12.4	13.3	15.2	12.7
2023/2015 (%)	0.0	24.5	22.7	24.0	5.6	7.8	16.5

***Source:** Authors' calculations based on non-identifiable microdata from BBGD (2015-2023).*

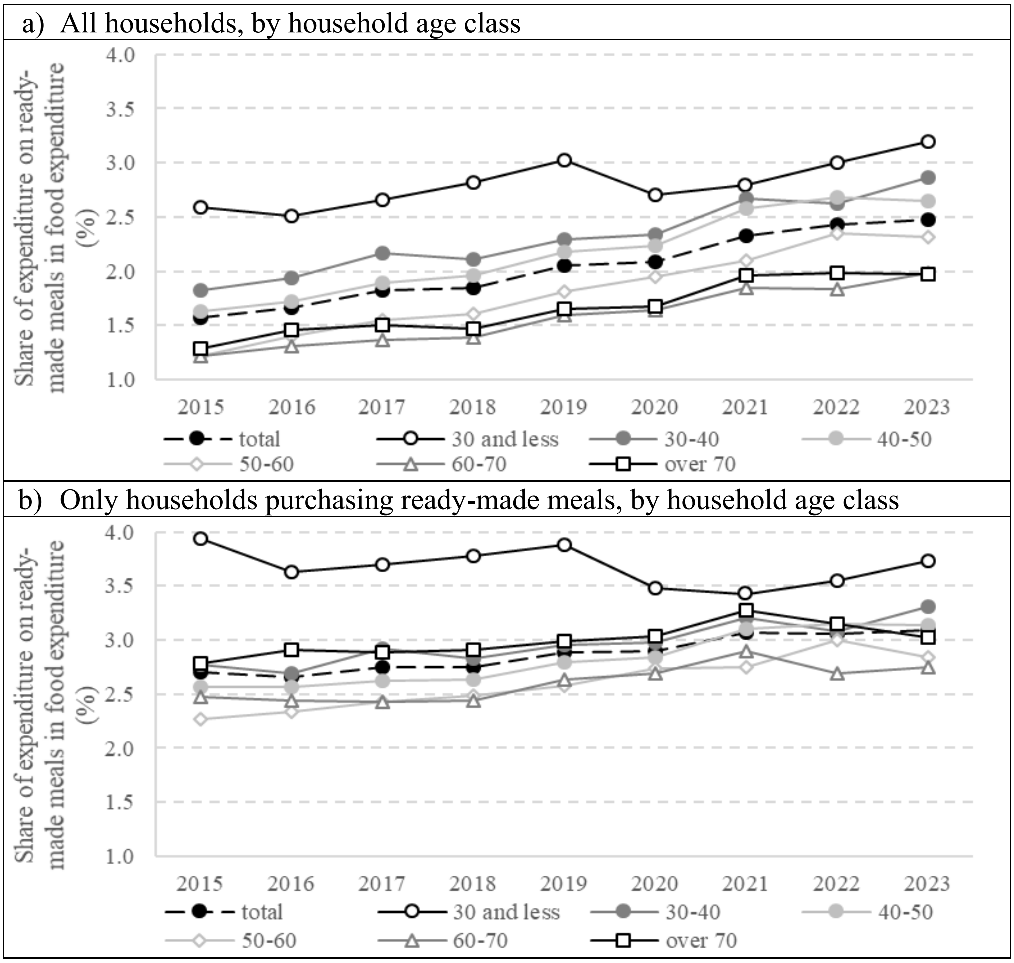
The share of expenditures on ready-made meals in total food expenditure for all households amounted to only 1.6% in 2015. Over the study period, however, a systematic—albeit modest—increase was observed, by just under 1 percentage point, reaching 2.5% in 2023. A similar magnitude of change was recorded across all analyzed household age classes. The age classes exhibited comparable rates of change: between 2015 and 2023, the share of expenditures on ready-made meals in food expenditure increased in all groups by approximately 0.6–1.1 percentage points.

In the youngest household age class (30 years and under), this share was higher by 1.3 percentage points than in the oldest age class (in 2015, it amounted to 2.6% compared with 1.3% in households with a reference person over 70 years of age). By 2023, despite increases in the expenditure shares on ready-made meals in both the youngest and oldest household age classes, this difference narrowed slightly to 1.2 percentage points (3.2% versus 2.0%).

This indicates that throughout the entire study period, the youngest households allocated a relatively larger share of their food budget to ready-made meals than the oldest households, although the gap between these groups decreased marginally over time. Thus, disparities between the youngest and oldest household age classes in terms of the share of ready-made meal expenditures in food expenditure persisted throughout the analyzed period, diminishing only slightly (Figure 3a).

When considering the share of expenditures on ready-made meals in food expenditure exclusively among purchasers of this category of food, it was found that in 2015 this share was slightly higher than in the total population and amounted to 2.7% (i.e., 1.1 percentage points more than among all households). Between 2015 and 2023, among consumers of ready-made meals, the share of expenditure on these products in food expenditure increased by only 0.4 percentage points, reaching 3.1%.

Figure 3. *Share of expenditures on ready-made meals in total food expenditure among households in Poland between 2015 and 2023*



Source: *Authors' calculations based on non-identifiable microdata from BBGD (2015-2023).*

Although a systematic increase in this share was observed among purchasers of ready-made meals, its pace was slower than that recorded for the total population of households. As emphasized earlier, the faster growth in the overall level of expenditures on ready-made meals among all households, compared with the growth observed among purchasers only, was driven primarily by the rapidly expanding consumption breadth (an increase in the share of households purchasing ready-made meals) and to a lesser extent by changes in expenditure levels among existing consumers.

Table 3. *Share of expenditures on ready-made meals in total food expenditure among households in Poland between 2015 and 2023, by household age class*

Year	Share of expenditures on ready-made meals in food expenditure (%)						
	Household age class						Total
	up to 30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	over 70	
All households							
2015	2.6	1.8	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.6
2016	2.5	1.9	1.7	1.4	1.3	1.5	1.7
2017	2.7	2.2	1.9	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.8
2018	2.8	2.1	2.0	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.8
2019	3.0	2.3	2.2	1.8	1.6	1.7	2.1
2020	2.7	2.3	2.2	1.9	1.6	1.7	2.1
2021	2.8	2.7	2.6	2.1	1.9	2.0	2.3
2022	3.0	2.6	2.7	2.4	1.8	2.0	2.4
2023	3.2	2.9	2.6	2.3	2.0	2.0	2.5
2023/2015 (p.p.)	0.6	1.0	1.0	1.1	0.8	0.7	0.9
Households purchasing ready-made meals							
2015	3.9	2.8	2.6	2.3	2.5	2.8	2.7
2016	3.6	2.7	2.6	2.3	2.4	2.9	2.7
2017	3.7	2.9	2.6	2.4	2.4	2.9	2.7
2018	3.8	2.8	2.6	2.5	2.4	2.9	2.8
2019	3.9	3.0	2.8	2.6	2.6	3.0	2.9
2020	3.5	3.0	2.8	2.7	2.7	3.0	2.9
2021	3.4	3.2	3.1	2.8	2.9	3.3	3.1
2022	3.5	3.1	3.1	3.0	2.7	3.1	3.1
2023	3.7	3.3	3.1	2.8	2.7	3.0	3.1
2023/2015 (p.p.)	-0.2	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.3	0.2	0.4

Source: *Authors' calculations based on non-identifiable microdata from BBGD (2015-2023).*

Analyzing differences in the share of expenditures on ready-made meals in total food expenditure among purchasers by household age class reveals that, throughout the entire study period, relatively the highest values were consistently recorded in the youngest household age class (with a reference person aged 30 years or younger). In 2015, this share amounted to 3.9%, whereas in the oldest age class (over 70 years) it stood at 2.8%.

By 2023, the share of expenditures on ready-made meals in food expenditure among purchasers in the youngest class declined slightly (by 0.2 percentage points) to 3.7%, while in the oldest households it increased marginally (by 0.2 percentage points) to 3.0%. This indicates that among purchasers, ready-made meals consistently accounted for a larger share of the food budget in the youngest households than in older ones, although these differences were moderate in magnitude and tended to narrow over time (Table 2; Figures 3a and 3b).

5. Conclusions

Based on the conducted analysis, answers were provided to the three research questions (RQ1–RQ3).

With regard to RQ1 (whether demand for ready-made meals among young households in Poland was higher than in older age classes between 2015 and 2023), the results confirm that young households (with a reference person aged 30 years or less) consistently belonged to the segments characterized by relatively high demand for ready-made meals throughout the entire study period. Both the share of purchasing households, the average monthly real per capita expenditure, and the share of ready-made meal expenditure in total food expenditure were higher in this age class than among older households.

An exception was observed among purchasers only, where the average level of expenditure on ready-made meals was lower than in the oldest households, and during the COVID-19 pandemic also lower than in the 60–70 age class. Overall, the results indicate that young households play a particularly important role in the diffusion of ready-made meal consumption and in shaping future consumption patterns. At the same time, the findings suggest that producers should also recognize the potential demand among older households.

With respect to RQ2 (whether the growth in demand for ready-made meals was stronger in younger than in older age classes), the results point to a relatively smaller scale of change in the youngest household age class.

Although a clear increase in demand was observed—reflected in a rise in the share of purchasers (by approximately 19 percentage points), real per capita expenditure (by about 33%), and the share of expenditure in food budgets (by 0.6 percentage points)—the magnitude of these changes was lower than for the total population and for most other age classes.

This indicates that while young households exhibited a high level of demand, the relative growth of this demand in recent years was less pronounced than in other groups. A key factor contributing to this pattern was the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a temporary decline in demand for ready-made meals among the youngest households.

Regarding RQ3 (whether the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns led to a decline in demand for ready-made meals), the analysis shows that for the overall population of households in Poland, the pandemic did not result in a decline in demand, but rather in a slight slowdown in its growth.

This suggests a relatively high resilience of demand for ready-made meals to the pandemic shock and related restrictions. The youngest household age class proved to be the least resilient, as a decline in demand was observed in this group.

This effect cannot be attributed solely to lockdowns and reduced mobility since similar patterns were not observed in other age classes. Explaining the decline among young households requires further in-depth research, although it is likely related to a deterioration in their income situation during the pandemic.

Across the entire household population, a systematic increase in real average expenditure on ready-made meals was observed up to 2022 (from 6.2 PLN per capita per month in 2015 to 10.3 PLN in 2022). Between 2022 and 2023, a slight decline to 10.1 PLN was recorded, which may be associated with household budget adjustments under conditions of high inflation and changing relative prices.

In the youngest household age class, average monthly real expenditure increased from 8.9 PLN in 2015 to 11.8 PLN in 2023, confirming the strengthening position of ready-made meals in the consumption structure of young households.

Despite growing interest in and expenditure on ready-made meals, their share in total food expenditure (excluding non-alcoholic beverages) remains relatively small, increasing from 1.6% in 2015 to 2.5% in 2023. In the youngest households, this share rose from 2.6% to 3.2%, confirming a greater propensity of young households to allocate a relatively larger portion of their food budget to ready-made meals compared with older households.

In the long run, the growing popularity of ready-made meals may lead to lasting changes in the structure of food consumption in Poland. Maintaining high product quality and addressing health, environmental, and ethical concerns may further support the expansion of this category, the development of new sales models (e.g., dietary meal kits or organic ready-made meals), and changes in everyday dietary practices.

Finally, it should be emphasized that increasing consumption of ready-made meals has economic implications extending beyond the household sector. Rising demand may affect the structure of local agri-food markets by stimulating the development of food processing, logistics, and retail trade adapted to changing consumer preferences. As a result, the growth of the ready-made meal market may exert a complex, multi-level impact on local food markets and employment in the food sector.

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