

Chapter 4

Impact of COVID–19 on Food Consumption and Marketing: A Behavioral Model Perspective

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has greatly disrupted lives and affected buying behavior of individuals. Countries were forced to impose lockdowns, alongside the practices of wearing masks, social distancing and hygiene have become the ‘new normal’. This situation forced consumers to re-work shopping habits, modify food patterns, develop healthy eating and online shopping behavior. With multiple waves of COVID-19 engulfing countries, pandemic effects are here to stay, suggesting food marketers explore the continuity of healthy food consumption with futuristic behavioral intention. For this purpose, this study uses a behavioral model perspective built upon the theory of planned behavior. A general review of the literature on food choice behavior is used. The literature review shows an integrated framework indicating linkages between the antecedents, consumers’ behaviors, and behavior intentions/consequences from a sustainable behavioral model perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Consumption of food is a basic human need, and as a part of the social system is greatly influenced by many factors including sociocultural, economic, marketing, amongst others. Steenkamp (1993) had stated that given the complexity and diversity of the factors influencing individual food choice and consumption is a call for researchers to draw insights on food behavior from the wide range of science and social science disciplines that include food science, nutrition, medicine, psychology, physiology, psychophysics, sociology, economics, marketing, and anthropology. In line to this, researchers have found there are various factors influencing food consumption. For instance, Mak *et al.* (2012) identified cultural/religious influences, socio-demographics, food-related personality traits, exposure effect/past

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experience, and motivational factors that affect tourist food consumption. Deshpande *et al.* (2009) found that perception of current dietary, quality, perceived importance of eating a healthy diet, self-efficacy or individual perception of being able to perform the advocated behavior and other environmental variables are likely to influence healthy food consumption. Meanwhile, during times of crisis (like-economic recession) factors such as product features and natural contents, economic issues, identity and sensory appeal, mood, weight control and health, and convenience influence consumers' food purchasing behavior, noted Theodoridou *et al.* (2017). Recent researchers (Liu *et al.*, 2020) found feelings of disgust, knowledge, phobia, and social demographic factors such as age, household size, household income and region are the main factors that influence specific food (e.g., insect) purchases and consumption. Thus, as the above studies indicate there are various factors (sociocultural, personal, psychological, and so on) which influence the purchase and consumption of food.

Meanwhile, during specific situational crisis like the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic, people were compelled to fundamentally change not only their way of living but also their consumption behavior of goods and services. In fact, studies suggest that many people across the globe have started looking at products and product-brands through a new lens. Indeed, Covid-19 has greatly affected the consumption behavior of people, more so post the lockdowns that were imposed and, alongside the need to practice the guidelines suggested by the World Health Organization (WHO) of social distancing, wearing masks and maintaining hygiene, which have become the 'new normal' (Sheth, 2020), disrupting many of the existing customers' purchase and shopping behavior. For example, when the lockdowns were imposed across nations consumers were forced to rework their shopping habits, they became more cost conscious, developed a preference towards local products, started to engage in healthy eating habits, and, so on. More interestingly was visible the dramatic shift towards e-commerce and online shopping (Asti *et al.*, 2021; Badenhop & Frassetto, 2021; UNCAD, 2020). Furthermore, with the Covid-19 pandemic spread; the way consumers shop for their groceries has also changed. In that, to limit contact, people have modified their buying pattern (and behavior), preferring to opt for online purchase of groceries through orders placed via the internet, smart phones, delivery apps, etc. Consequently, this also required them to make less number of shopping trips to a grocery store. Thus, unlike pre Covid-19 times, now people have started living differently, purchasing differently, and in many ways, even thinking differently. Of course, partly this can also be attributed to their line of thinking and reasoning which drastically changed when lockdowns were imposed across nations. Needless to mention that the changed circumstances have compelled people to realize the importance of consuming healthy and nutritious food, and alongside, the need to purchase sustainable brands which offer them 'valued choices'. In fact, a visible change in consumer behavior was that instead of engaging in 'impulsive' and/or 'on the go shopping and eating', people started doing 'more' cooking at home, and carefully plan their weekly shopping trips with the focus being on 'the core values' rather than on the 'weekly special offers' (FoodMatters, 2020).

Incidentally, to gain an understanding on the Covid-19 pandemic effect which brought about widespread changes in the way consumers buy food, their concern regarding food safety, and what they eat, during April 2020 the International Food Information Council (IFIC) conducted a Covid-19 IFIC consumer research survey through holding interviews with 1000 individuals. The key takeaways from this study were identified as: (1) people are doing less in-person shopping and cooking more, with the spotlight being on online grocery shopping, (2) there is scope for improvement with regards recommended health habits and grocery shopping, (3) at grocery stores, employees need to take more actions regarding the food safety, (4) food shoppers were most concerned about the health of the other shoppers and grocery store employees, along with the fear of running out of staple foods, (5) although consumers purchased

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