

COVID-19 LOCKDOWN: SHIFTS IN HOUSEHOLD FOOD PRIORITIES AND PREFERENCES

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Abstract

The Covid 19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the different sectors of the world. It has changed the world of retail and customer. The unexpected lockdowns and restrictions brought a lot of challenges and opportunities for the business organizations and consumer behavior and their preferences and priorities towards food products. The study was undertaken with a view to investigate the changes in consumers' food priorities and preferences during Covid 19 pandemic and to determine the factors that explain these changes. For that 70 sample respondents were selected for the collection of data. The study result shows that during the lockdown, the Covid 19 pandemic has caused a significant rise in foodstuff demand in some kinds accompanied by stocking up and panic buying, changing food purchasing behaviour and healthier dietary habit in favour of local, natural, organic, traditional, long-life products and immune boosting ingredients etc.

Keywords:- Covid-19 Pandemic, Lockdown, Consumer Behaviour, Food Priorities, Food Preferences.

At the beginning of 2020, the world has witnessed an unpredictable disease called novel corona which was reported in Wuhan, China on December 2019 and it

gradually spread to the whole country, including India. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus to be a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020).

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To limit the spread of the virus, many governments imposed nationwide lockdowns (Kartari et al., 2021) and certain restrictions such as travel restrictions, closure of all retail outlets, ban on public gatherings etc.

The global lockdown caused a stagnant situation in the different sectors of the economy, especially in the retail sector. As malls and restaurants were closed, people spent time inside their homes. The people had faced the difficulty to purchase products due to the closure of retail outlets. Shops sell daily essentials have permission to open under strict conditions. This health crisis had also influenced consumer buying habits. The purchasing power of common people has decreased because of unemployment and loss of income which forced them to buy cheaper brand of product. It had also modified their eating habits and consumption of food; they had become more price-sensitive and started to buy less priced items for consumption. This results in a change in the buying decisions of people, especially on food products. Consumers over the world expressed their severe concerns about the shortage of food supplies and a decrease in personal incomes during the worldwide shutdown, which pushed them to cut back on spending. All these factors have greatly influenced their buying patterns and preferences and the decision to buy the product.

Working definition: Food products include grocery items such as cereals and pulses, grains, dairy or milk products vegetables, fruits, meat and fish, snacks, ready to eat items etc.

Statement of the Problem

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the different sectors of the world especially the world of retail. Due to the lockdown restrictions many businesses have forced to shut their businesses. The temporary loss of jobs had reduced the disposable income of consumers, which in turn reduced the purchasing power and consumption during the lockdown period. During the outbreak the people had faced a lot of difficulties in purchasing products through nearby shops. Due to the social distancing norms and fear of infection huge no of people suddenly jumped to online shopping in order to fulfil their needs.

Food consumption is vital for human well-being so it makes this an important area to investigate in terms of the impact of Covid-19. It is also to be noted that consumers' priorities and preferences will not be same like pre-pandemic and businesses need to change in accordance. The crisis had also affected the brand preferences, shopping behaviour as well as spending habits of the consumers. It can be concluded that the purchasing behaviour of the consumers is rapidly changing and it is hard to predict. This research was carried out to investigate the changes in consumers' food priorities and preferences during the Covid-19 pandemic and determine the factors that explain these changes.

Literature Review

Jha and Pradhan (2020) examined factors driving changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic. Their study revealed that 87 per cent of respondents

had altered their buying behaviour often choosing available products over preferred brands. The unemployment leads to lower income of the people which had reduced the savings among the people. The study concluded that the outbreak of Covid-19 had made both positive and negative impact on the behaviour of people.

Nielsen (2020) had identified six major consumer behaviour thresholds tied with Covid-19 outbreak. This shows that customer becomes more proactive and health minded buyer during the pandemic and they increased the buying of shelf stable foods and health safety products. The study finds that due to the social distancing norms and fear of disease the online shopping were increased during the pandemic.

According to Oana (2020) the perception of risk as well as the attitude of individuals towards risk leads to major changes in consumer behaviour in terms of shopping, consumption habits, and skills. During the isolation period, the demand for hygienic products, cleaning and disinfection products, food, and beverages had increased significantly. Customer loyalty towards the particular brand also fluctuated during the period of crisis, and the customer increased the tendency to store the products to meet the contingency in the future.

Eger, Komarkova, Egerova and Micik (2021) conducted a study to explain the unusual behaviour pattern of the consumer during the crisis and also investigated the effects of fear appeal theory by breaking it down into fear for health and fear for economic situation.

Study reveals that 64 percent of customer expressed fear about their health during the crisis. Due to the fear of health they started to buy more hygienic and healthy products instead of unhealthy one.

Ngoc and Kriengsinyos (2020) conducted a study to ascertain the impact of COVID-19 on the eating behaviour of the consumer. The study reveals that an individual eating behaviour is greatly influenced by a variety of personal, social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors, so the outbreak of COVID-19 had a direct and indirect effect on the eating behaviour. The pandemic has caused a significant rise in the demand for the food stuff, accompanied by healthier dietary habits, immune-boosting ingredients, etc.

Suri (2020) explained about the behavioural changes that happened in the lifestyle of the people during the pandemic. The loss of job and reduced income has made a direct impact on the purchasing power of the people. Apart from the depleted purchasing power, it had also made behavioural change among the people. The study result shows that the pandemic situations had changed the mindset of people; they modified their buying habits and focused their purchases on necessary products rather than luxurious and unnecessary products.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the preferences of household towards food products.
2. To study the priorities adopted by the household on the food items during the lock down.

Hypotheses

H1: There is no significant difference in the priorities adopted by households in Kerala regarding food items during the COVID-19 lockdown.

H2: There is no significant difference in consumer behavior towards food products among households in Kerala during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Scope of the Study

This study comes under the jurisdiction of the Trivandrum district, Kerala. The main focus of this study is to understand the buying behaviour of consumers towards food products during Covid-19 pandemic. This study tries to explore factors which affect the buying behaviour of the consumers and to find out the problems faced by the consumer while purchasing the food products during the pandemic.

Research Methodology

The present study is analytical in nature and was used both primary and secondary data. Secondary data were obtained from research articles, web articles, published reports, official websites of relevant agencies. Primary data were collected from 70 respondents living in Trivandrum district of Kerala. Convenience sampling was used in this regard. Structured questionnaire was circulated among these 70 respondents and the data obtained has analysed with the help of M.S. Excel. Mathematical and statistical tools like percent analysis, ranks, and weighted average have been employed for the analysis of data keeping in view of objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

In this study a number of factors were analyzed for understanding the preferences and priorities of household towards food products. To identify the preferences of household towards food products, respondents were asked to list out food products brought more during the period of pandemic. The results obtained are showed in the following table 1.

It is evident from the table 1 that people always purchase cereals and pulses, milk and dairy items and vegetables. Respondents purchases fruits, snacks and instant/ready to eat items very often. They rarely purchase beverage items.

In order to identify the priorities adopted by the household on the food items during the lock down respondents were asked to share their agreement with some statements. The results obtained are depicted in table 2.

The table explores the priorities that households in Kerala followed when purchasing food products during the lockdown, based on the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between these priorities and the types of food items. A one-sample t-test was conducted using a test value of 3 (neutral level). The results indicate that households prioritized various aspects significantly above the neutral value. Hygienic aspects had a mean score of 3.27, with a statistically significant t-test result ($t = 4.378, p < 0.001$), showing a moderate level of importance. Taste, with a mean of 3.93, was strongly prioritized, supported by a highly significant t-test result ($t = 23.312$,

Table 1
Food Products Brought More during the Period of Pandemic

Products	Total	WM	MS	Status
Cereals and pulses	288	4.1142	3	Always
Milk and Dairy items	319	4.5571	3	Always
Meat products	202	2.8857	3	Sometimes
Fish and other Sea food items	212	3.0285	3	Sometimes
Vegetables	319	4.5571	3	Always
Fruits	271	3.8714	3	Very often
Beverages (carbonated water, Fruit juices)	145	2.0714	3	Rarely
Snacks	224	3.2000	3	Very often
Frozen food	171	2.4428	3	Sometimes
Instant /Ready to eat items	234	3.3428	3	Very often

Source: Survey Data

(WM- Weighted Mean, MS- Mean Score)
(5-Always, 4-Very Often, 3-Some times, 2- Rarely, 1- Never

Table 2
Priorities Given While Purchasing Food Products

Variable	Mean	S.D.	One-sample t-test with test value 3	
			t	Sig.
I give more priority to Hygienic aspects in product	3.27	1.16	4.378	0.000
I give more priority to the taste of product	3.93	0.78	23.312	0.000
I give more priority to Health and nutritious aspects of product	3.98	0.84	23.376	0.000
I pay more attention to the Packaging of product	2.86	1.02	-2.870	0.004
I bought Ready to eat or instant cooking products	3.92	0.86	20.913	0.000
I give priorities to those products which give more Convenience in cooking	3.94	0.89	19.986	0.000

Source: Survey Data

$p < 0.001$). Similarly, health and nutritional aspects had the highest priority, with a mean of 3.98 and a significant t-test result ($t = 23.376$, $p < 0.001$).

However, attention to product packaging showed a mean of 2.86, which is slightly below the neutral value, and its t-test result ($t = -2.870$, $p = 0.004$) indicates

a significant but lower priority compared to others. Convenience aspects, such as ready-to-eat or instant cooking products, had mean scores of 3.92 and 3.94, respectively, with significant t-test results ($t = 20.913$, $p < 0.001$ and $t = 19.986$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting their strong preference. Overall, the data shows that households placed significant emphasis on health, taste,

and convenience while purchasing food products during the lockdown. Since significant relationships were observed between the various priorities and the food items purchased (as indicated by significant t-test results and mean scores different from 3), ***the null hypothesis is rejected.*** This means there is a significant difference in the priorities adopted by households on the food items during the lockdown in Kerala.

The hypothesis states that there is no significant difference in consumer behavior towards food products among households in Kerala during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, the table provides the results of a one-sample t-test comparing mean responses for various consumer behavior variables with a test value of 3. The analysis reveals that all variables exhibit statistically significant differences, as evidenced by their p-values (Sig.) being less than 0.05. For instance, variables such as “I had modified my eating habit during COVID-19”

($t=18.387$, $p=0.000$) and “I became more careful while purchasing food products during the pandemic” ($t=19.523$, $p=0.000$) show positive significant deviations from the test value, indicating changes in these behaviors.

Similarly, the variables “I have started eating some traditional food items” ($t=-4.020$, $p=0.000$) and “I bought only necessary products during the pandemic” ($t=-3.891$, $p=0.000$) show significant negative deviations, suggesting shifts in behavior compared to the test value. These findings reject the null hypothesis and indicate that there were indeed significant changes in consumer behavior regarding food products among households in Kerala during the COVID-19 lockdown. Each variable highlights specific behavioral adaptations, reflecting heightened awareness, cautious purchasing, and a shift toward traditional and healthier food choices.

The Table 4 shows the opinion of consumers about their priorities and

Table 3
Consumer Behaviour towards Food Products

Variable	Mean	S.D.	One-sample t-test with test value 3	
			t	Sig.
I had modified my eating habit during Covid-19	3.87	0.93	18.387	0.000
I become more careful while purchasing food products during pandemic	3.88	0.89	19.523	0.000
I bought only necessary products during the pandemic	2.82	0.92	-3.891	0.000
I have started eating new dishes which I were not eating earlier	3.77	0.92	16.513	0.000
I have started to eating some traditional food items	2.81	0.93	-4.020	0.000
I look for more healthy food items than earlier	3.89	0.83	21.238	0.000

Source: Survey Data

Table 4
Opinion of Consumers Regarding Change in Priorities and Preferences

Opinion	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	29	41.42
No	41	58.57

Source: Survey Data

preference towards food products in post Covid period. 58.57 per cent of respondents opined that they did not change their food preferences and priorities after the pandemic.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are discussed below

1. From this study it revealed that people always purchase cereals and pulses, milk & dairy items, and vegetables from the store. Respondents purchases fruits, snacks and instant or ready to eat items very often from the stores and sometimes they purchase meat, fish and sea food items and frozen items for their consumption, but they rarely purchase beverages from the store. This shows that the pandemic had shifted their preferences from inessential products to essential or necessary one.
2. The table 2 shows that household placed a significant emphasis on health and nutritious aspects, taste and convenience while purchasing food products during the lockdown. Product packaging has showed low significance or priority compared to others. This means that there is a significant difference in the priorities adopted by household on the food items during the lockdown in Kerala.
3. The table 3 reveals that all variables showcased statistically significant differences, as evidenced by their p values. The Pandemic had changed the consumer behaviour towards food products. The consumption pattern and eating habits shows a positive significant deviation from the test value whereas the shift towards traditional and healthy food preference showing negative significant deviation from the t value. Each variable highlights the behavioural alteration among household including increased awareness, cautious purchasing and shift towards traditional and healthier dietary preferences. These findings reject the null hypotheses and shows that there is a significant change in the consumer behaviour towards food products during pandemic in Kerala.
4. It suggests the change in consumption behaviour related to food shopping. The results indicate a shift towards healthier diet during Covid 19 pandemic. This shift was probably driven by pro-healthy diet concerns

due to a stronger focus on health and nutrition in consumer's mind.

5. Majority (58.57 per cent) of respondents opined that they have changed their food preferences and priorities after the pandemic. This means consumer behaviour of the respondents influenced a lot by the pandemic.

Suggestions

1. The pandemic had changed the preferences of consumer towards food products. Their preferences had changed towards essential or basic food items such as cereals and pulses, vegetables, milk and dairy items and instant or ready to eat items. So, the retailer should ensure adequate quantity of these items in the store.
2. The retailer should ensure the availability of wide range of products and try to offer multitude of products and services to customers under one roof.
3. Price and quality of the food products are the main factors which influence the purchase decision of every customer. So, the store retailer should try their best to provide product at fair price and should ensure that the products have minimum required quality.
4. The household prefer pre-package food due to hygiene reasons. So, the

stores should provide well packaged or sustainable packaged food products to the customer.

5. The retailer should handle food carefully and follow precautions, including sanitization and wearing a mask, while selling food items in the store.

Conclusion

This study explores household preferences for food products during COVID-19, based on a survey of 70 respondents from Thiruvananthapuram district. The pandemic led to increased demand for certain foods, panic buying, and a shift toward healthier, local, organic, and long-life products. Lockdown restrictions reduced store visits and increased reliance on online shopping due to limited transportation, fear of infection, and social distancing norms. During the pandemic, consumers' food priorities shifted toward hygienic, healthier, nutritious and sustainable packaging. Fear of infection and social distancing led many to increase stockpiling of food products. The study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic, through market shutdowns and border closures, significantly altered consumption, shopping patterns, and consumer preferences for essential food products. Consumer purchasing behavior will likely remain different from pre-pandemic norms, requiring businesses to adapt. As consumer priorities continue to shift rapidly, predicting future trends is challenging.

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