

The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Consumption Patterns: An Application of SOR Framework

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Global pandemics, such as the COVID-19 crisis, are one context that forces consumers to change their behavior and habits (Sheth, 2020). Food consumption is explained by psychological factors, such as locus of control, perception, or motivation (Glanz et al., 1998). As crises like the COVID-19 pandemic are usually associated with increased psychological distress, it is expected to increase alcohol consumption or unhealthy food consumption during the pandemic. The purpose of the study is to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food consumption patterns based on the stimulus-organism (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Based on this theory, the current study considers the COVID-19 pandemic as the stimulus and food consumption patterns as the outcome response. This study employs three cognitive/psychological factors, the general state (i.e., locus of control) and two contextualized states (i.e., perceived impact of COVID-19 in different life aspects and future expectations toward COVID-19 effect) as organisms. The current study examines three types of food consumption: alcohol, soda, and healthy food.

Data were collected through an online survey agency in 2019 (N=997; Pre-Pandemic) and 2021 (N=988; During Pandemic). Models with two samples were compared to check how the pandemic affected food consumption patterns. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed in this study.

In both pre-pandemic and during pandemic models, consumers with an external locus of control were more likely to consume unhealthy foods (i.e., alcohol and soda). However, healthy food consumption was not associated with locus of control. The current study also identified psychological mechanisms underlying food consumption changes. Results showed that those who perceived severe COVID-19 impact shifted toward more unhealthy food consumption patterns (e.g., alcohol and soda) during the COVID-19 pandemic, which suggests that unhealthy food consumption is responded to the pandemic situation. However, our research findings showed that the consumption of healthy foods is not significantly driven by the pandemic situation, which suggests that healthy food consumption is one's managerial action regardless of the social/economic crisis, such as COVID-19.

The results of the study will guide an effort to enhance consumer well-being. In addition, the findings help promote consumer shifts toward healthier food consumption behaviors during this unprecedented time.

References

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