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COVID-19 and the Impact on Consumers' Food Shopping Behavior

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Abstract

The years 2020/21 will be forever etched in all of our minds, with retail memories that range from panic buying to the nostalgic yearning for local favourites such as Marmite. It is well known that the choices made by consumers have far reaching effects, that ripples throughout the entire supply chain (farm to fork). With the reality of COVID-19 and the restrictions set in place "business as usual" can no longer be the norm. Finding innovative solutions to address the needs of consumers is vital. This study aimed at investigating the impact of COVID-19 on Gauteng consumers' food shopping behavior.

The methodology entailed a cross sectional, explorative-descriptive study that collected data by means of an online survey. The sample for this study was urban food consumers 21 years and older, residing in Gauteng, SA. Due to time and monetary constraints, non-probability convenience sampling was employed. A total of 608 questionnaires were completed. The sample consisted of well educated, mostly females, and from a middle-higher income bracket.

Results indicated that during the 2020 COVID-19 lock-down, consumers altered their shopping behaviour. This included limiting the frequency of store visits to monthly instead of daily, employing a more controlled budget and sharing the responsibility of shopping with significant others such as husbands and /or partners that previously did not contribute. Food products that were prioritized during the lock-down included fresh produce however, results did indicate an increase in purchasing of long-life ambient items and frozen goods. In terms of consumers' shopping motivation results showed that most of the respondents shopped out of necessity and that the previous ideas about retail being a relaxing "therapeutic" experience was not in play. This was confirmed in the respondents' reasons for not shopping which highlighted consumers' fear / safety concerns but also budget restraints and previous stockpiling.

In conclusion findings highlighted that to retain a competitive advantage, retailers' need to revise "traditional" practices and foster a consumer-centric approach that acknowledge the psychological impact of COVID-19.