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Abstract: Food is the component that serves the primary purpose of survival for all of us. In the pre-pandemic situation, engagement with online food communities was considerably low. People enjoyed the experience of going outdoors and sharing experiences about the food and the restaurants. However, with the lockdown and imposition of the rules, going outdoors has become unfeasible. The pandemic has also affected consumers' consumption behaviour regarding food. No literature has studied the consumers' emerging trend of food consumption behaviour during the pandemic. I intend to explore and understand the dominant themes and consumer insights regarding food consumption through netnography to address this gap. I have considered the "Dil se Foodie" community as one of the largest online food communities on Facebook.

Keywords: online communities; food; netnography

Introduction:

The emergence of online communities, driven by technological advancements, has significantly impacted human relationships and their behaviour. Online communities serve as facilitators, promoting trust and commitment among members (Bond, 2019). These online communities thrive and grow in size via the accumulation of members, posts, likes, relevant material, and interactions among members on various themes, including cuisine, travel, literature, sustainability, and physics. Especially regarding food, members, reviews, and shared experiences are essential in conveying meaning to others. Consumers derive advantages from these platforms since they may access shared experiences and have the chance to compare products or services, enabling them to make informed decisions. Millennials are highly effective in promoting food community brands through platforms like Instagram and Facebook, which they consider their new digital companions (Lamont, 2017).

Amidst the pandemic, it is evident that consumers have increasingly turned to online communities for knowledge and social interaction, hence influencing their purchase habits and behavioural patterns. During the pandemic, there has been a noticeable change in food consumption patterns, particularly in online food communities. This shift has introduced a new and growing dynamic to how people consume food. Despite the growing membership, posts, and information sharing in online communities, they have yet to be successful in offering a complete understanding of food consumption trends. As researchers, the current body of literature has primarily focused on online communities from the standpoint of branding, advertising, and communication. This allows us to investigate the consumer behaviour patterns that have arisen due to the pandemic using Netnography. Our study focuses on the online food community to understand the changing patterns of food consumption among consumers.

Literature review:

Online communities:

A community is "a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings" (MacQueen et al., 2001, p. 1933). The concept of a community lies in the ability of an individual to build relationships for a purpose. The identification of a community takes place with the name of the brand. Moreover, brands connect people, which encourages the promotion of a brand. Such types of communities are called brand communities. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) define a brand community as "a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). The brand community has three important characteristics: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (Peters & Bodkin, 2018). Further, Peter and Bodkin, in their paper, explain shared consciousness as the feeling of "we-ness" when the members share a standard connection, rituals and traditions as a social process that builds a community based on shared experiences and moral responsibility as a sense of duty of the members to integrate and assist each other (Peters & Bodkin, 2018 and Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Earlier brand communities were studied in an offline context. However, with the pandemic outbreak, communities are being studied extensively online. Online communities mean "individuals who use electronic means such as the Internet to communicate and share interests without the need to be in the same place, have physical contact, or belong to the same ethnic group" (Flavian & Guinaliu, 2005, p. 407). The difference between a brand community and an online community is that we can emphasise limited interactions and behaviour and analyse news, images, music and videos (Peters & Bodkin, 2018). In an online community, people who belong to the neighbours and do not all share a common interest and share their experiences enable them to interact. These online communities are more than meeting with each other; they also build intangible attachments and hold together each other with a feeling of we-ness. It establishes a relationship rather than consuming media online (Rabobank.com, 2021). To understand how online communities communicate to build relationships, Fig 1 below displays the communications networks between brands and communities. In the traditional or offline setting, communication took place in a bidirectional way where consumers and the particular brand exchanged experiences with each other. Whereas in the modern or online environment, it is multidirectional. Consumers exchange shared interests with the brand and with each other consumers. However, consumers are more rational and opinion-oriented in an online setting.
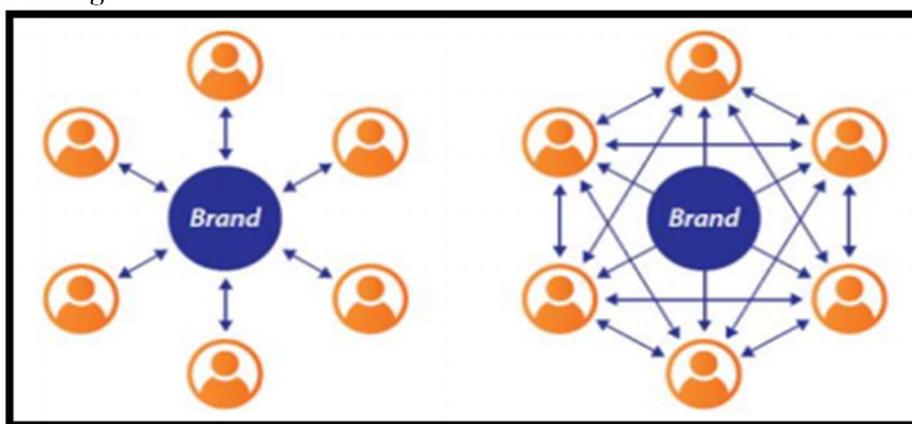

Figure 1. Communication structure in offline and online communities: Source: (Rabobank.com, 2021).

Researchers have also extensively studied online communities, which have become a valuable marketing tool for brand co-creation (Hajli et al., 2017). Community participation creates brand creation through brand trust and loyalty. Brand trust and loyalty positively and significantly affect brand co-creation (Kamboj et al., 2018). Consequently, this can also attract new members who will contribute to positive brand co-creation and build a unique online identity for a community.

Online food communities:

The online communities provide strong support for brands to communicate the brand message and support the transfer of brand meaning to consumers. Food is necessary for everyone's survival as it provides energy, stimulates our growth and helps maintain life (The Scientific World & The Scientific World, 2018). Studies have shown that food is essential in building community (WorldLink Staff, 2020). Food helps us give the required nutrition, rejuvenates individuals and grows consciousness to establish deep connections. These connections bind like-minded individuals and form a community with a common goal (Agritecture,2020). However, food communities need help getting the consumers' limelight as people prefer to experience the ambience, taste and feel using the senses in an outdoor environment. Despite all these, earlier in an offline setting, communities were less popular than people who loved to enjoy the food sitting in restaurants or a food outlet to experience the physical environment and conversations (Rabobank.com, 2021). With the pandemic outbreak, everyone was left with only limited options. However, with the digitalisation boom, many online food communities started developing and exchanging their interest. Marketers realise that online communities are platforms and networks that work closely with consumers, and they generate rich insights for their marketing strategy. Earlier in the pre-pandemic situation, restaurants and food outlets were the common places where friends and families met and exchanged experiences that comforted them (Hill, 2020). People have started to adopt and engage in various online platforms to connect and share experiences, initiating conversations and discussions around food and changing consumption patterns.

Food consumption pattern in the era of the pandemic:

Pre-the pandemic situation:

Social media provides information where we can uncover the new and emerging patterns of consumer behaviour during the pandemic. In the pre-pandemic situation, people freely visited restaurants and outdoor food outlets to experience the external environment and taste the foods. They emphasised the quality, newness and taste of the dishes. Also, it allowed them to get involved in a conversation with each other or strangers related to the food. Therefore, the aesthetic and functional aspects were taken into consideration. Also, individuals were more emotionally involved in consuming the food rather than being cognitively and psychologically.

During the pandemic:

Psychologically, people have started to develop risk perception in their minds (Janssen et al., 2021). Along with it came the anxiety related to the hygiene factor that began to elevate and affect the consumption behaviour of food outdoors. The imposition of lockdown and restrictions also limited people from travelling. Therefore, online food communities on social media platforms aided in helping each other through sharing experiences.

Research objectives:

The pandemic has had a profound influence on the food business. However, via the process of digitalisation, individuals have discovered a means to establish connections and reconstruct the community through the use of social media platforms. In addition, there has been significant growth in social media, creating a chance for marketers to engage in cost-effective branding strategies that allow them to reach customers more directly. The study aims to investigate the current food consumption trends during the pandemic and analyse how they influenced consumer behaviour. The study focuses on the following objectives:

　• To examine the prevailing themes in food consumption during the pandemic.
　• To comprehend the evolving cultural attitudes and behavioural patterns related to food consumption on Facebook during the pandemic.

Methodology:

Netnography is used to investigate trending food consumption topics using online food communities on Facebook. Netnography is a qualitative approach akin to ethnography focusing on online communities and culture (Kozinets, 2002). I examined Facebook and want to research the online community "Dil se Foodie" in terms of community development and community cohesiveness. People from multiple platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, are brought together to form the community. Mr Karan Dua (DilseFoodie,2020) established and managed the community. The community exchanges and promotes meals and eateries from all around India.

Furthermore, it conveys experiences, authenticity, and a place's legacy in the recipe, which promotes the location and raises awareness among all community members. It has 5.3 million Facebook fans. Furthermore, Facebook is the most frequently utilised platform globally, with the most people engaged. Non-participatory immersion is used in the study. Many comments, emoticons, and postings were investigated and evaluated for interpretation. The immersion lasted from February 10 to March 10 2021. Thematic analysis was used for further analysis since the study focused on discovering and comprehending dominating themes concerning the food consumption behaviours of members of the "Dil se Foodie" Facebook community during the pandemic. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method of analysis that aims to identify and comprehend patterns or themes within collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Researchers can fully grasp the data by using theme analysis to find underlying meanings. This approach is especially valuable for analysing intricate phenomena or investigating subjective experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Findings:

As the research involves netnography in the initial stage of data collection, to analyse it further, thematic analysis is used. As a result, four dominant themes have emerged based on culture and belief.

Health-driven consumption choices:

Consumers in India now hold a sense of high risk. Consumption preferences are predominantly oriented towards nutritious meals and diets, ensuring the intake of essential elements and vitamins for bolstering immunity. This is because they prioritise their health over the flavour of the food. Furthermore, during the pandemic, there has been a surge in the acquisition of fresh fruits and vegetables. The image clearly shows that consumers see the use of butter and cheese as a hazardous dietary practice. Consequently, there is a growing inclination towards making choices that prioritise health, and it is predicted that fast food consumption will decrease.

Source: Facebook

Hygiene:

The pandemic has had a psychological influence on consumers. The primary concerns of both members and customers about food are external factors such as cleanliness and preventative measures. Consumers are choosing restaurants and food outlets that prioritise sanitary measures,

like using gloves, regular hand washing, wearing masks, and ensuring that staff maintain a proper temperature. The images below demonstrate that customers are wary of visiting food establishments needing more sanitary standards. Moreover, these online community interactions and discussions create awareness of food hygiene among the members. The evolving consumption trend emphasises the use of healthy food components and the consideration of the external environment.

Source: Facebook

Mindful Eating and Behaviour:

As lockdown measures have been enforced, people have grown more conscious about how they store their food and mindful about what to eat and what to avoid. Consumers are increasingly aware of their food consumption habits, indicating a noticeable trend where mindful behaviour is seen. This type of behaviour is becoming more prominent as consumers are aware of the influence of their decisions on their well-being, the environment, and the community. The pandemic outbreak has significantly affected consumers' perception of the importance of food, patterns of consumption, and cultural customs. Consumers have developed a greater awareness of their cultural customs, resulting in a preference for meal planning that emphasises health, locally sourced products, and ecologically conscious disposal methods, such as using food scraps as fertilisers instead of contributing to garbage.

Source: Facebook

Information Sharing:

An online community functions as a central hub where individuals with similar interests share information and engage in debates and activities. This is especially apparent when examining the comments, as individuals engage on these platforms, searching for tips and suggestions for eateries. Amidst the pandemic, consumers depend more on online networks to obtain information, updates, and knowledge on purchase habits. Consumers have a favourable predisposition towards patronising cafés and restaurants that prioritise environmental sustainability, nutritious food options, and locally sourced cuisines. Online food communities have a crucial role in enabling the exchange of knowledge on these topics, influencing consumer consumption habits.

Setup are very nice looking like village but lunch cost & you will show you plate it's not acceptable 3 time hige. My request visiting Iskon cross road The Grand Thakor special for Gujarati thali only in 300 but you never forget the test & service Oooooossssmmm & speechless. try it

5w   Like   Reply   37

Bro, I have a diet food cafe. Try to make a video on healthy food too. We are serving healthy foods to the people but you guyz just don't wanna make a video of it. Try to promote some good & Healthy food too 😄

2 d   Like   Reply   18

Source: Facebook

Discussion & Conclusion:

This study delves into the examination and comprehension of developing themes in food consumption during the pandemic, revealing four major themes: Health-driven consumption choices, Hygiene, Mindful eating and behaviour, and Information sharing. Cultural alterations in consumer behaviour and views have been noticed. Consumers are becoming more health-conscious and observant of their choices, with a focus on hygiene. The study found a paradigm change in food consumption dynamics during the pandemic, as evidenced by increased consumer knowledge, attentiveness, and consciousness compared to the pre-pandemic situation. This transition has altered not only food consumption behaviour but also engagement with food-related web content. The community component, as represented by "Dil se Foodie," depicts a group of like-minded, health-conscious individuals who openly share critical and positive opinions on internet sites like Facebook. Such platforms help raise awareness among others about the quality, cost, and worth of food the community provides. The study provides valuable insights into the changing landscape of food consumption habits, emphasising the importance of health, cleanliness, and mindful decisions, particularly in the context of the pandemic.

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