

Brazilian Consumer Behavior in Restaurants During the Pandemic: Practical Implications

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic situation brought several challenges to Brazilian consumers, especially in the food and catering sector. For greater control of the pandemic, the Brazilian government has implemented a set of laws and regulations with the aim of containing the spread of the virus. The closure of restaurants, as well as the ban on the sale of food and beverages, led consumers to change their buying habits, as well as the emergence of innovative ways of selling these products to customers. This study aims to identify changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic period in restaurants located in the state of Bahia, Brazil. As for the methodology, quantitative research was used, with the application of an online questionnaire, made available on google forms; we get a final sample of 123 consumers of food and beverages, residents in the state of Bahia. The data obtained by applying the questionnaire revealed some changes in consumer behavior during the pandemic: adaptations in the way of buying and consuming food, as well as a reduction in trips to restaurants due to the increased use of mobile applications in shopping habits and a greater concern with hygiene habits.

Keywords: Food, Pandemic, Consumer behavior, Restaurants

1. Introduction

The world has undergone major transformations and the COVID-19 pandemic has brought several challenges to the food sector in Brazil. The disclosure of state decrees banning the normal operation of restaurants, as one of the main measures to fight the spread of the coronavirus, was a clear example. According to the Brazilian Association of Bars and Restaurants (ABRASEL), in 2020 Brazil lost three out of ten businesses related to the take-out food sector, mainly restaurants that could not continue operating due to restrictions and social isolation measures to stop the spread of the virus; about 300,000 businesses ended up closing for good. A survey by the Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service (SEBRAE), carried out in 2020, showed that 31% of companies changed their way of operating and had to adapt their business models in order to achieve a stable financial situation.

Health restrictions led restaurants to review their processes, sales channels, reassess their costs and focus on customer relationship strategies to (1) ensure adequate measures in response to the pandemic and (2) enable business continuity. In this critical scenario, as already stated, several establishments had substantial financial losses, having been forced to close. Others, in order to keep customers, bet in providing great shopping experiences. They reconsidered the entire service process, so to meet expectations: from ordering, cooking menus in the kitchen, deliveries and even after-sales service.

Consumer behavior has changed and the demands resulting from a pandemic situation have stimulated online consumption; as a consequence, home-delivery services gained considerable importance as e-commerce adoption increased. This study intends to clearly understand the significant changes that have occurred in the behavior of consumers of products and services in restaurants in the state of Bahia, Brazil, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Exploratory qualitative research was carried out, through a questionnaire, shared on Google Forms with Brazilians' consumers.

2. Literature Review

With the rise of restaurant deliveries an entirely new delivery and takeout business model has emerged: the dark kitchens, consisting of highly efficient production units, without a physical shop and properly optimized for home delivery service. They are also known as “cloud kitchens”, “ghost kitchens” and “delivery-only restaurants”; regardless of how we call it, a dark kitchen always means selling meals exclusively by online requests and through delivery services. Concepts like Uber Eats and Just Eat were the foundations for the dark kitchens: getting food to customers has become easy, cheap and highly sought after by individuals. Even for small and or independently-owned restaurants (<https://www.ub.edu/foodstudies/dark-kitchen-concept/>).

Due to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, several control measures were introduced simultaneously in numerous countries (Aquino et al., 2020; LIMA, 2020): quarantine, isolation, closure of companies and public institutions and social distance were “adopted” everywhere. On June the 5th, 2020, the National Health Surveillance Agency (ANVISA) released a document with relevant guidelines for the safe production of food during the Covid-19 pandemic situation: the Technical Note No. 48/2020/SEI/GIALI/GGFIS/ DIRE4/ANVISA. Due to the unquestionable importance given to the delivery of food and meals to consumers (considered as an essential activity as prescribed by XII, art. 3, of Decree No. 10.282/20), specific instructions were developed to ensure that food reached the Brazilian population safely. The government intended to ensure that there were no supply failures, providing correct information on the subject to the population and minimizing the risks of contagion by the new coronavirus. Even if food is considered as unlikely vehicles of transmission of COVID-19, faithful compliance with Good Manufacturing and Food Handling Practices at this time were considered essential, in order to continue to guarantee the safe delivery of food to the Brazilian population (ANVISA, 2020).

The National Health Surveillance Agency (ANVISA) also published the technical note No. 47/2020/SEI/GIALI/GGFIS/DIRE4/ANVISA, with information on the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in food companies; then, the technical note Nº 49/2020/SEI/GIALI/GGFIS/DIRE4/ANVISA came to complement the regulation, with guidelines for food services with direct customer service during the pandemic.

In 2020 another change brought about by the pandemic was the need to adopt remote work. Numerous companies joined the home office and remained active. However, for some business models this was not possible, as it was the case in the hotel and catering sector. The entrepreneurs of the sector needed to plan and think of ways to adapt to the new moment. Delivery services were expanding and could be a way to keep selling (SEBRAE, 2020). In Brazil, there are several companies that work with food delivery platforms, namely iFood, Uber Eats, Rappi, AiQfome and 99 Food.

In August 2020, iFood announced that the platform brokered 39 million orders per month during the quarantine period. The pandemic, which brought social isolation, boosted the number of requests. This brand was growing due to the change in consumer behavior and the company’s capacity to answer promptly (Faria & Ferreira, 2021; Marino, 2020). Marino (2020), after analyzing the market, revealed that small and medium-sized restaurants were the segment that grew the most, with a demand 44% higher than at the beginning of the pandemic. The food delivery platform iFood reached the mark of 212 thousand partner restaurants, having a growth of 32% compared to March 2020, when the isolation measures began.

In order to be able to keep customers, companies started to pay attention and search for mechanisms to increase satisfaction, promote retention and develop adequate loyalty programs. The idea was to increase customers’ commitment and engagement and, by the right rewards and stimulus, also increase profitability per customer. Companies need to look at the customer in a unique way, monitoring their satisfaction. Loyalty programs were redesigned and technology was introduced to exceed expectations.

Regardless of whether you are a large, medium or small company, betting on Customer Relationship Management (CRM) started to be understood as the proper way to identify, differentiate, and interact with customers. CRM management activity presupposes collecting, managing and adequately using data, supported by technology solutions that allow to develop long-term customer relationships and great customer experience (Ledro, Nosella & Vinelli, 2022). It also leads to customer loyalty (eg. Haudi, Rahadjeng, Santamoko, Putra, Purwoko, Nurjannah, Koho, Wijoyo, Siagian, Cahyono & Purwanto, 2022). It is a business strategy to sell and profit more through personalized service. Regarding CRM, Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan (2017) stated that we now have traditional CRM and social CRM. Traditional CRM is typically business-oriented, while social CRM is customer-oriented. In other words, in traditional CRM, companies decided on how to communicate with customers and which channels to use – email, call centers, social media, site. In social CRM, customers start the interaction/communication by searching for the respective sites, marketplaces and social media platforms. Thus,

social CRM ignores business hours and can rarely be automated as it depends on the will of consumers. They expect instant and personalized answers, 24 hours a day, 7 days per week (Asmare & Zewdie, 2022; Faria & Ferreira, 2021; Kotler et al., 2017).

The pandemic situation made people use more the internet, either for recreational reasons, for working reasons and/or as a way to buy products and services needed for your daily life. Consumers began to carry out various activities online. To adjust to the new needs of these consumers, respecting their (new) purchase journey and trying to retain them, companies needed to adopt an omnichannel strategy. Moving from a merely multi-channel posture (being present at all the possible touching points) to an omnichannel one means to consolidate all the customer touch points into one holistic experience. In other words, allowing the same brand's experience regardless of the chosen touching point – on and offline (eg. Asmare & Zewdie, 2022).

According to SEBRAE, Omnichannel is a trend that is based on the convergence of all channels used by a company. It is about the possibility of making the consumer see no difference between the online and offline world. Omnichannel integrates physical, virtual stores and shoppers. According to Kotler et al. (2017), consumers are understood as the most powerful actors in the market. Customer Centricity (customer at the center) shows that the customer is very important to any company. Individuals are increasingly looking for a combination of online and offline channels. Companies need to innovate on experiences that go beyond basic offerings if they aim to create a genuine connection between customers and the brands (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2021). As a result, companies today feel forced to interact and engage with customers via internet and other digital technologies, ensuring the same experience and the immediate association to the brand's values (Kotler et al, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted significantly on consumers' brand interaction and loyalty. It has changed the way consumers think about and interact with the brands. First change is related to e-commerce and online shopping; the imposed lockdowns and the social distance as a way to avoid the virus dissemination, lead to a considerable increase in the number of persons that started to buy online. Nowadays, already used to look for products and services on sites, marketplaces and social media, the consumers are blended and demand to have a similar and good experience in all the touching points they decide to use to get information about products and services and even buy them. ROPO – research online and purchase offline and vis a vis is nowadays the common modus operandi of any actual and potential client (Faria, Pereira, Lima, Vilela & Loureiro, 2022). This Blended consumer is also a chameleon. This means that they are more likely to switch to another brand if they perceive a better value or a better customer experience through the buying process (Asmare & Zewdie, 2022; Solomon, 2021; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). Brands that are able to adapt quickly, ensure a seamless shopping experience on and offline are the ones with the higher probability to have success and achieve competitive advantages (Asmare et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

Exploratory quantitative research was developed, following Marconi and Lakatos (2017) suggestions. To build the theoretical model researchers based themselves on the bibliographic review carried out. They also accessed some official websites of the Brazilian government - Ministry of Health, Brazilian Association of Bars and Restaurants, National Health Surveillance Agency and Brazilian Service of Support to Micro and Small Enterprises.

As far as data collection, a structured online questionnaire, developed on Google Forms, was applied. The questionnaire had 35 questions, including some about socioeconomic data, consumers' habits and behaviors on food services. Respondents lived in Bahia during the pandemic period. We used a convenience sample and the questionnaire was made available through the authors' social networks. Since it was a convenience sample, due to budget and time constraints, the sample does not adequately represent the entire population of the state of Bahia. However, it is not considered as a very restricted sample: <30 measurements (<https://www.scielo.br/j/jvb/a/Dxg84WBMPnNrVcpKMXyVfHd/?lang=pt>).

4. Results Presentation

4.1 Descriptive Statistics – the Sample

Our final sample total 123 respondents and is composed of 62.1% of female individuals and 37,9% of male individuals. As far as the degree of education, 21.8% of the respondents have a superior degree and 8.1% have a postgraduate and/or a master degree; 28.2% of the participants have completed the high school and 17.7%

did not complete it. Regarding the monthly income of the participants, the majority of the participants earn between less than R\$1,212,00 to R\$2.499,99: See Figure 1.

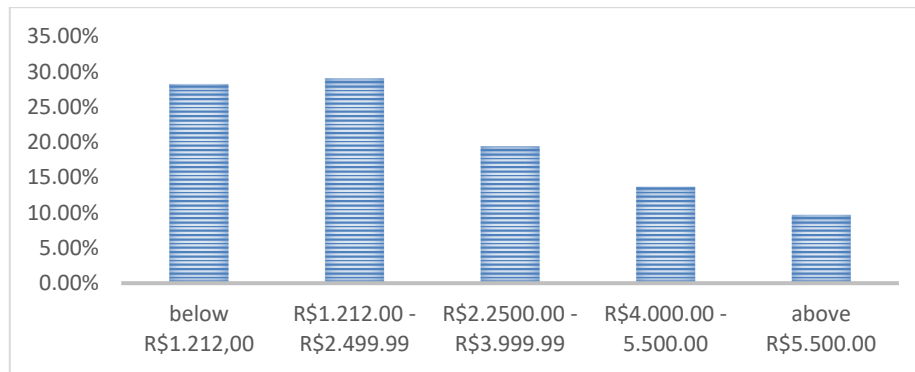


Figure 1: Monthly Income of Survey Participants Source: Original Google Forms Survey Results

4.2 Descriptive Statistics – Important Questions

4.2.1 Changes on Consumption Habits

When asked about changes on consumption habits, with regard to going to restaurants before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, 18.5% of the respondents stated that they kept the same behavior. However, 80.6% of the respondents stopped going to restaurants during the pandemic period.

As far as food consumption during the pandemic, 54.8% of the participants said that they preferred to stay at home and prepare their meals; 30.6% decided to stay at home and order a meal from a restaurant with delivery service. 14.5% of the respondents said that they kept the habit of going to restaurants for meals.

As for the purchase of pre-prepared meals, during the pandemic, 62.1% of the respondents referred to prefer the delivery system, 35.5% do not purchase pre-prepared meals and 2.4% prefer the takeaway. When asked about apps, 54.8% of the participants said that they regularly used food delivery apps.

Participants showed that, during the period when restaurants were closed, due to state specific rules prohibiting their activity, the predisposition to use delivery apps at home was felt differently by the individuals; in fact, 32.3% increased their use, 21% reduced their use, and 15.3% showed no change in their habits. However, in general, the use of delivery platforms and the number of online orders increased during the pandemic.

4.2.2 Impact of Online Advertising Campaigns on the use of Home Delivery Apps

This study also wanted to understand the impact that advertising campaigns on social media had on the use of home delivery apps; only 25% of the participants confirmed that they were influenced by online ad. 25% of them said not to use delivery apps and 50% demonstrate that they were not influenced at all by ad campaigns online.

4.2.3 Adoption of Specific Sanitary and Cleaning Procedures and Concerns

The pandemic situation also demanded for specific sanitary and/or cleaning procedures; 59.3% of the respondents said that they did it every time they received home-delivery food. See Figure 2.

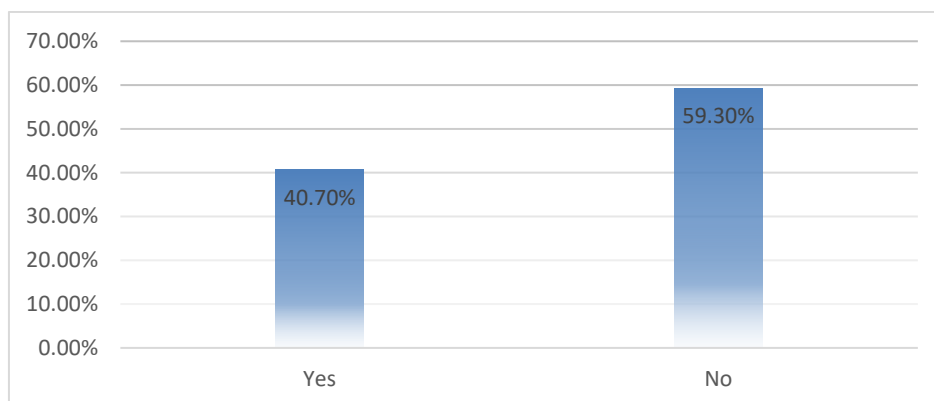


Figure 2: Habits of Sanitizing the Packaging of Food Received Through Home-Delivery

The reason-why for this sanitizing procedures was, mostly, for fear of contamination and lack of confidence in the hygiene of the delivery workers.

The vast majority of the participants highlighted the importance of using protective masks and hand hygiene, as well as to have easy access to alcohol gel at physical points of sale and/or restaurants. They also showed considerable concern with the delivery packaging (quality, hygiene and protective seal), the food's hygiene, the appearance of the delivery workers and the cleanliness of physical facilities (front and back office). All the participants stated that they respected the social distance and took all the measures at their disposal to prevent coronavirus.

When the government allowed the opening of restaurants, coffee shops and other hospitality establishments, 68.5% of the individuals reported that they fully agree that a safe and sanitized environment was needed to consider going there. They also revealed that social distance between clients should be maintained, to avoid contamination by Covid-19 and, consequently, they started to pay attention to these aspects: See Figure 3.

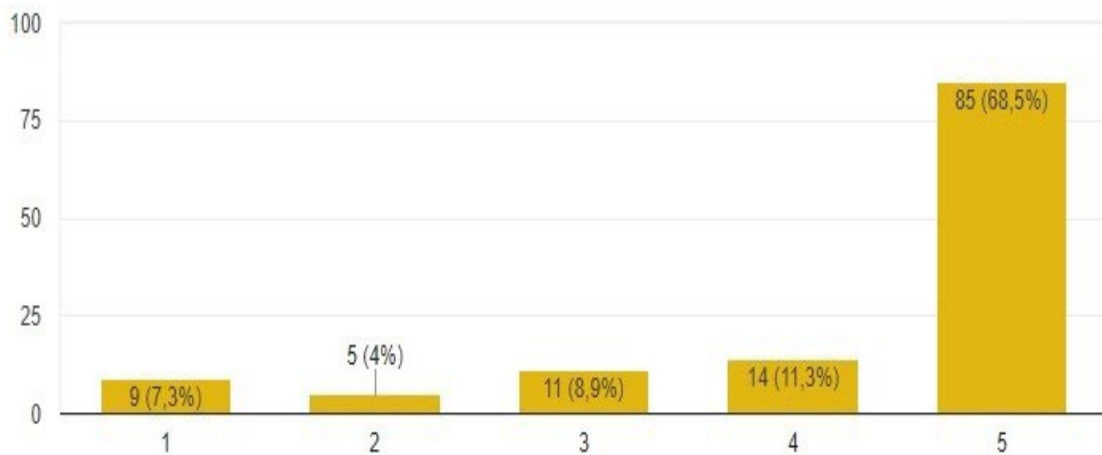


Figure 3: Concerns on the Need for a Safe and Hygienic Environment, With Social Distance Between Individuals

Another important issue was to understand whether the pandemic has awakened in the individuals the awareness of paying attention to hygiene routines and the use of PPE (personal protective equipment, such as masks, gloves, alcohol sprays, among others) by restaurants' employees. 61,3% of the respondents showed totally agreement: See Figure 4.

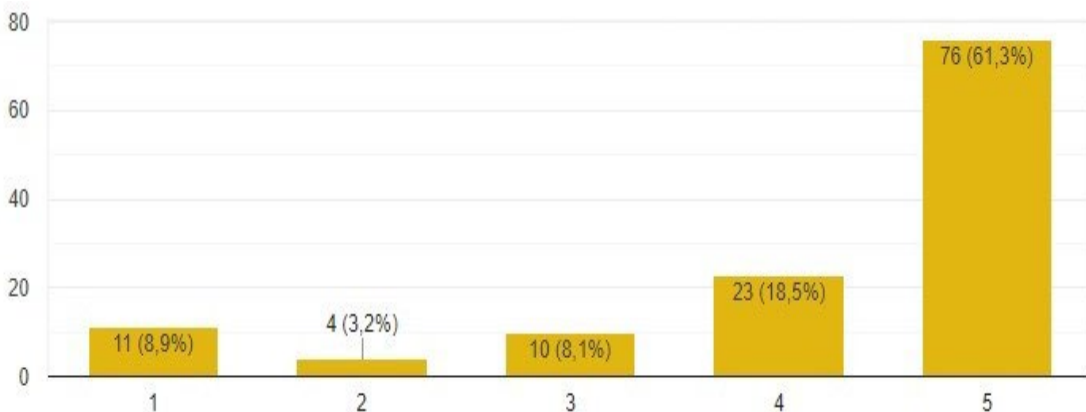


Figure 4: Attention to Hygiene Routines and the use of PPE

4.2.4 The use of technology to promote safety against covid-19

When asked about how technology could help promoting safety against the virus, respondents were asked to reflect on some of the ways that brands have chosen to implement safety. About considering the QR code menu at the table as a safer practice for customers, the majority of them said yes: 56.5% reported that they totally agree, 12.1% agree, 18.5% neither agree nor disagree; only 4.8% disagree, and 8, 1% strongly disagree.

When deciding to go, for the 1st time ever, to a new restaurant, 61.3% of the individuals reported that they used to access social media and/or search on review sites about recommendations; only 17.8% disagreed on this.

4.2.5 Other Comments

Despite being vaccinated against Covid-19, the majority of the respondents claimed to prefer attending less crowded restaurants (71%). Also, and even after the strong sanitarian measures had been reduced, there is a high concern regarding the care with food, from its preparation to transport and consumption and even when choosing restaurants. It seems that the majority of consumers realized the importance of food hygiene, whether with regard to the meals themselves, or in terms of cleaning commercial establishments.

5. Discussion

Our study allowed to realize that 81.5% of the participants changed their consumption habits, regarding going to restaurants, before and during the Covid-19 pandemic situation. Only 18.5% kept the same behavior. We also found that regarding the purchase of pre-prepared food, during the pandemic, 62.1% prefer the delivery system, 35.5% do not buy prepared food since they like to prepare their own meals and only 2.4% prefer the takeaway.

During the period in which the restaurants were closed due to specific government instructions, it grew the use of apps and the online order of meals to be home-delivered. Regarding the influence of advertising campaigns on social media in the use of mobile apps, only 25% of the participants stated that they were influenced; 50% of them said that they were not influenced at all.

It is important for restaurants' owners to understand that the pandemic situation awakened in individuals the attention to sanitary conditions and cleanliness in the physical spaces (back and front office), as well as in the employees and in the home delivery service. With regard to hygiene routines and the use of PPE (personal protective equipment such as a surgical mask, face shield, gloves, cap, etc.) by restaurant employees, they began to be carefully observed. The use of simple technologies, such as the QR code menu at the table, is perceived as a faster and cleaner service.

On the other side, this study also revealed that the majority of the individuals use social media to look for information and opinions about new restaurants, hotels, coffee shops and bars. The participants also demonstrated that they look for information on evaluation sites. Therefore, being present on all the possible and adequate touching points, ensuring the same customer experience and creating stimulus online that can make people come to the offline, and vis a vis, is a urgent strategy to adopt and implement: omnichannel strategy.

6. Conclusions

The pandemic has changed the way of life of a considerable number of people, all over the world. It lead to a growth in internet sales, as well as a greater demand for the use of delivery platforms, apps and the emergence of new users. Consumers started looking for information online, ordering online and accepting to use delivery apps. Restaurants needed to adapt to the new changes, as a result to operating restrictions and limited supply of products. Clients prefer the convenience to do research online, to order online and to receive at home. Some has changed nowadays, after the gradual easing of restrictions, but the number of new users and online shoppers has increased substantially; in this scenario, companies need to think about digitalization and/or to continue betting on that, gaining the customers' trust. Consumers still prefer clean restaurants and other hospitality establishments, clean and healthy food and good customer service.

Despite being focused on a specific place – Bahia state, in Brazil- and having a convenience sample with a low number of valid answers (123), the results are in line with previous literature on the need to focus on Customer Relationship Marketing – CRM. The practical implication of this study lies in the fact that it highlights some new habits that have had and continue to have an impact on consumers' choice of places where they can enjoy restaurant and hotel services: the cleanliness of the facilities has become one of the factors present when choosing where to go . Hygiene care and cleaning in general remain essential aspects in the minds of most individuals. Finally, and also in the area of hotels, coffee shops and restaurants, a consensual presence on social networks, clear information, the existence of online incentives and rewards for offline use, or vice versa, are a requirement of today's consumers (omni-channel strategy).

The fact that the participants indicate that they are looking for information, recommendations and scores on social networks and on voting sites, clearly indicates the path to be followed by entrepreneurs in the sector. Digitization, the use of artificial intelligence, more or less complex (eg. chatbots, apps, QR code), are also more

and more understood as ways to surprise the consumers and promote their engagement. From this perspective, restaurants need to ensure proper hygiene measures, and redouble care from meal preparation in the kitchen, to cleaning the environment and delivering food at home on time and in clean conditions.

As main limitations we have a small sample and we focused on a specific destination. We recommend a future study with a larger sample, to compare the evolution in time of the customers' habits and, also, of the companies' responses to all the mentioned challenges. We also recommend to replicate this study in other touristic places, so to understand the customers' opinions in different touristic and/or areas of residence.

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