

The Covid-19 Pandemics Effects on Digital Marketing in the Food Industry

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Author Note: Due to the global effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the research of this thesis contains data from various countries. Additionally, this thesis has been prepared for Honors 490: Senior Honors Seminar taught by Dr. Craig Blais and the subject advisor was Professor Linda Marie Nolin MBA

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the effects of the recent Covid-19 Pandemic, specifically the effects it had on digital marketing in the food industry. Countries including Brazil, China, Indonesia, New Zealand, Portugal, Russia, Taiwan, The United Kingdom and The United States of America are referenced to throughout the thesis. Multiple countries had been reviewed due to global impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Peer-reviewed articles available in full-text, in English, and published in 2018 or later were required to fit the inclusion criteria in the thesis. The research indicated cause and effects spanning across three main categories being in grocery stores, restaurants, and influencer marketing. Results varied across studies due to sample size and location of the study, however it was proven, globally, that the Covid-19 Pandemic caused a shift in consumer behavior, increasing the presence of online shopping, and created a sense of familiarity through the use influencer marketing.

## **Definitions/ Glossary:**

*\*Appear in order as presented in the document.*

**Digital Marketing:** The use of websites, apps, mobile devices, social media, search engines, and other digital means to promote and sell products and services.

**Marketing Strategy:** A businesses overall plan for reaching prospective consumers and turning them into customers for their products or services.

**Social media:** Forms of electronic communication (websites for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, videos, and other content.

**Profit margin:** The difference between the cost of manufacturing or buying compared to the price at which it is sold.

**Direct-to-consumer strategy:** A sales strategy where the manufacturers and consumer packaged goods brands sell their products directly to the consumer rather than putting their product in a retail store or third-party distributor (Amazon, Target, Walmart).

**Three phase content coding protocol:** A method systematically analyzes information, directed at content analysis.

**Ultra-processed (food and beverages):** Food or beverages that are made primarily from substances that are extracted from foods (starches, fat, added sugars) and can also contain additives such as artificial colors and stabilizers.

Middle class: A socio-economic strata that falls between the working class and the upper class. It constitutes about half of the United States of Americas population.

Non-contact delivery: Preventative measures of distance between individuals to prevent the spread of disease or sickness in the act of delivering goods.

Brand loyalty: A perception-based long-term commitment to make repeated purchases from the particular brand.

Social influence: Any process of social communication that alters a person's attitudes, beliefs, or perceptions.

Price comparison: The direct or indirect comparison of a product's price to another similar product in different outlets.

Consumer behavior: The actions and habits of consumers and how they purchase a product over another as well as how they use and dispose of products and information.

E-commerce: commerce, the exchange or buying and selling of commodities on a large-scale involving transportation from place to place, conducted via the Internet.

U-box: Taiwanese Agri-food e-commerce platform created by the Council of Agriculture.

Live streaming: The act, process, or an instance of streaming (an event) over the internet for live viewing purposes.

Marketing: The activities a company undertakes to promote the buying and/or selling of a product or service. (Formal definition: "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have

value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. " -Official definition from the American Marketing Association, approved 2017).

Focus sales points: An aspect or detail that is emphasized.

CDC: Center for Disease Control; Center for Disease Control and Prevention

Influencer Marketing: The leveraging individuals who have influence over potential buys and orienting marketing activities around these individuals to drive a brand message to the larger market.

Loyal follower base: Similar to a strong consumer base, however more related towards social media content. Known as a community of engaged and satisfied customers who have trust and support your values.

Influencer: could include but not limited to the following: celebrities content creators, customer advocates, and employees.

Content Creator: An individual how creates and/or publishes, post, or promotes information and entertainment on the Internet, commonly seen on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

TikTok: A social media platform in the form of a free application on a cellphone that allows users to create, post, like, and share short videos.

Impulsive buying: The tendency of a customer to buy goods or services without planning in advance. Usually triggered by emotions or feelings.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

The Covid-19 Pandemic had an enormous impact on the field of digital marketing and electronic media advertising. As companies were forced to use alternative forms of marketing to communicate to their customers as face-to-face or on-premises advertising and marketing were not possible, the use of electronic media was critical; furthermore, if they didn't already have a presence on the internet, they were forced to adjust quickly to create an online presence. Companies that already had an online presence were able to more quickly adapt to this shift in marketing strategy with exclusive online content. If they failed to do so, they were "not seen" and hence "forgotten," therefore losing market share and struggling to keep their businesses functioning.

The Covid-19 Pandemic impacted all industries and companies in one way or another. How did the Covid-19 Pandemic effect digital marketing in the food service industry? Various aspects of the food service industry that may have been overlooked as being impacted by the pandemic include the food distribution facilities, food processors (farmers/ ranchers), restaurant infrastructure, and grocery store management. Covid-19 effected each one of these aspects and many more shifting the consumer behavior that was dependent on digital marketing changes.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The broad purpose of my study is to enhance the understanding of how the aspects of business strategy are always adapting. The audience will be informed and understand the concept of different markets having their own methods and procedures that may influence their markets differently than other industries.



The pandemic caused a seismic shift in the way that the world perceives information due to the disruption of “business as usual” for the consumer. Consumers get information in a variety of ways, and the recent pandemic beginning in 2019 changed how we could easily obtain information and how we retain it. People now rely on technology as a form of information more than they ever did before. Our habits have shifted to looking down at screens to learn, rather than looking up. The content of this research is significant to marketing strategy in the food industry, as well as the world of business as a whole. Each company must understand its separate specialized market and its target audience to establish an effective marketing strategy, not only to benefit the consumers but to benefit the financial standpoint of a company as well.

### **Research questions**

The complexity of the food industry led to a multitude of questions in conducting the research for this thesis. The broad question would be the following:

- “How has Covid-19 effected digital marketing in the food industry?”

Additional questions could include the following:

- How has the Covid-19 Pandemic effected consumer purchase intention?
- Has marketing effected our consumption habits in the past five years?
- What is the impact as people return to “normal” i.e. lifestyle before The Covid-19 Pandemic
- Has the shift in marketing strategies resulted in changes to how the consumer receives and absorbs information?

## **Limitations**

Limitations to this research would include time and access to resources. Time has been a huge limitation in the completion of research; this is because the focal point in the thesis occurred very recently, throughout the past five years. For analytical research, the writing, and publication of these documents, this is a short period of time to have a quick turnaround; therefore, some studies may not be published to date. Additional research continues to determine the effects of Covid-19 on digital marketing, not to mention specifically for agriculture and the food service industry. There may be long-term effects that we may have not noticed yet.

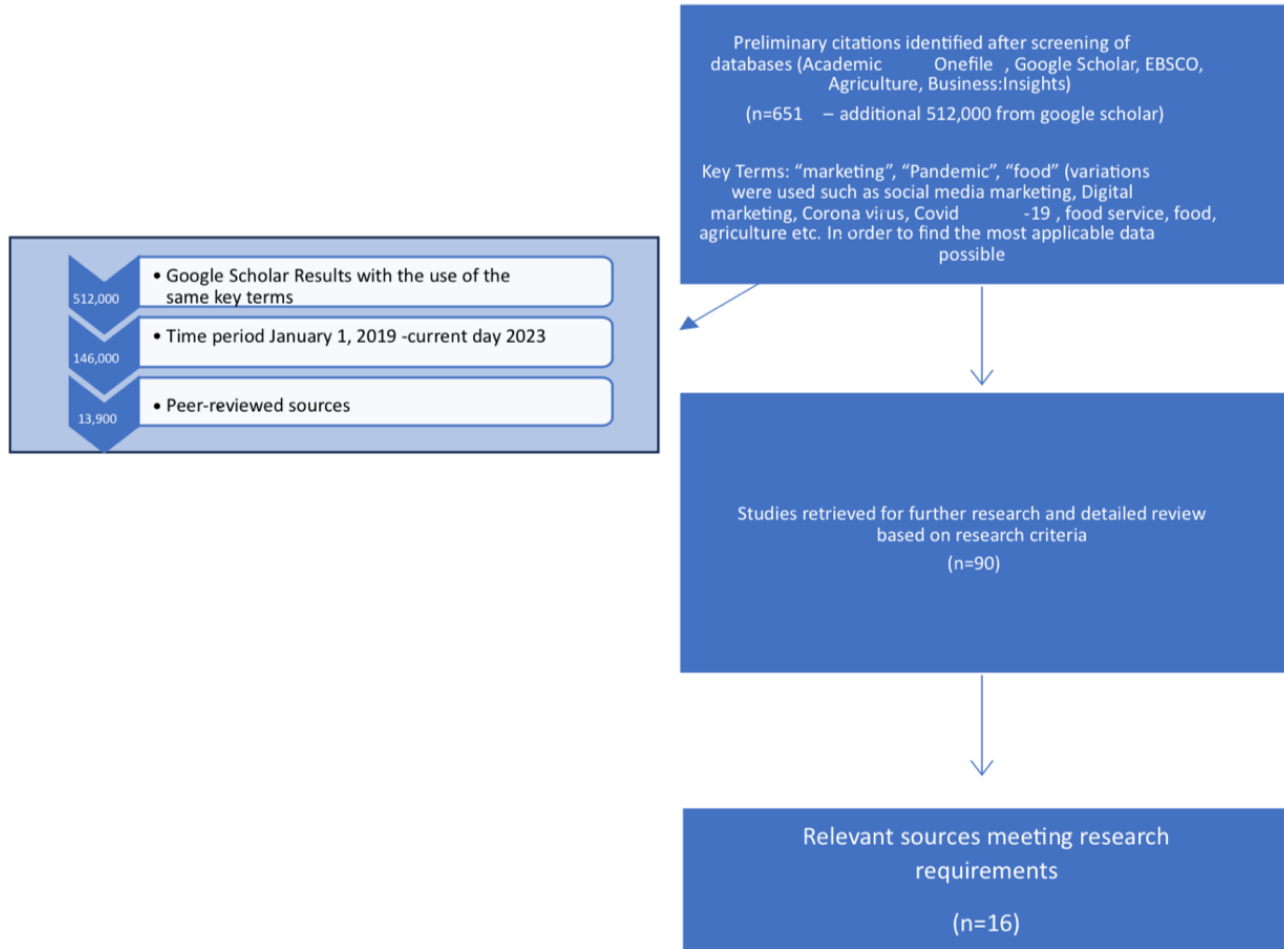
Another limitation that effected the material found for the study is that the library that was accessed may not have all the databases available that would benefit the research. Since the topic is relevant and the data being sought out is from the past five years, the Mondor Eagan Library did not have many recent publications in a tangible printed format.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

Information used to conduct research for the content of this thesis originated from peer-reviewed articles from the databases available from the Anna Maria College library. Databases from the Anna Maria College Mordor Eagan library that were used include Gale Academic One-file, Ebsco, and Google Scholar. These databases contained the most relevant information for the thesis topic. An abundance of search terms such as “Covid-19” (and various synonyms such as “Coronavirus”), “Pandemic”, “digital marketing”, “social media marketing”, “online advertisement”, “food service”, “agriculture”, “social media influencers”, “grocery store”, “eating habits”, “lock-down”, “food supply chain”. The use of synonyms for words such as online advertising and digital marketing had broadened results while searching for relevant sources.

Requirements for sources to be considered as supportive data must have the inclusion criteria of being peer-reviewed and available in full text. Additionally, all academic journals must be published in the past five years, the earliest being from 2018, and hold information that is coincident with the time it was published. This was implemented to find the most applicable data possible. The figure below demonstrates a visual to how data was collected.

Figure 1: Prisma Flow Chart



## **Chapter 3: A Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

The recent Covid-19 Pandemic shifted the purchasing behavior of individuals around the world. One way in which this can be identified is through research of how online food delivery services became more popular and how the marketing in which these companies took part in effected the purchase behavior of consumers.

Social media emerged in the early 2000s and continues to grow exponentially. It has been replacing other sources of media such as television commercials, magazines, newspapers, etc. Due to social medias huge presence in everyday life, social media has turned away from only being a method of catching up with friends and family from afar and has become a way in which people receive news, stay updated on current events, learn from educational creators, and as a source of entertainment. Another huge component of social media is business.

### **Area 1: Grocery shopping**

The Covid-19 Pandemic was scary for many. People of all ages were told that the virus could seriously effect them and to practice social distancing. This being said, many individuals were scared to leave the premise of where they lived and to interact with anyone outside their immediate family or living arrangements. One thing that became difficult for many people was grocery shopping, yet people needed access to their basic needs of survival, in this case food. Even though most businesses were forced to shut down, grocery stores remained open. Their traditional ways of operating shifted. Many grocery stores had occupancy capacities limiting the number of people allowed in the building at the same time; others had arrows pasted on the flooring to direct customers as to which way they were allowed to walk down the aisles to

decrease the walking traffic and contact with strangers. Some franchises implemented an in-shopper element to their business model. This is when employees had the role of shopping around the store and packing up groceries for a customer that submitted their grocery list online. These customers would then pull up to the store location and park in a specified parking spot for pick up orders and have the ability to stay in their vehicle while the employee packed the groceries in their vehicles. The sense of security and safety made this a desirable option for many to take advantage of, increasing the popularity of alternative methods of acquiring your groceries.

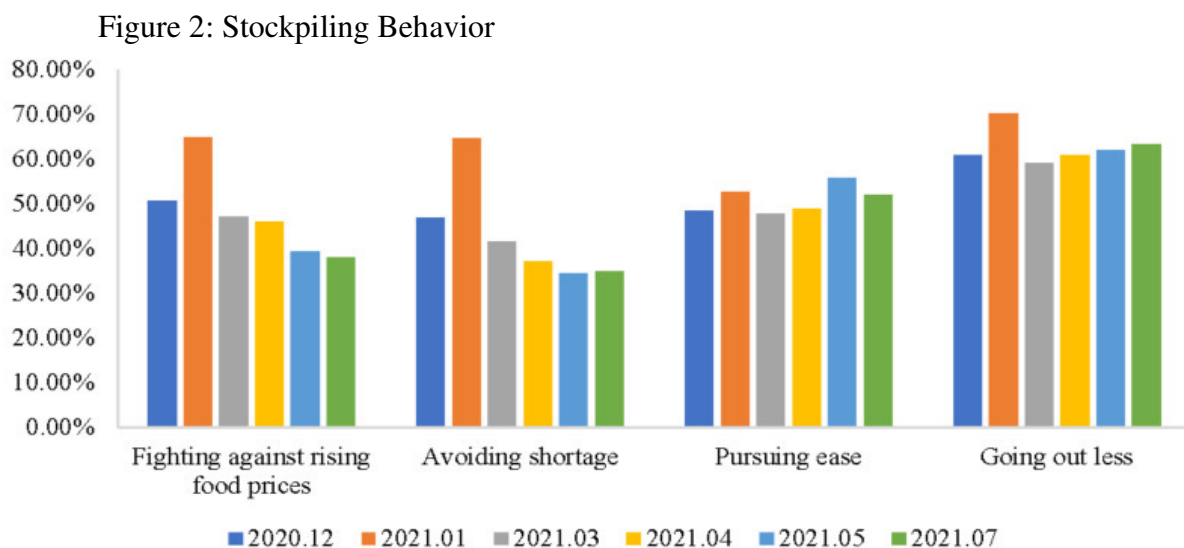
The Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research published a quantitative study examining the evolution of online grocery shopping in Portugal in July 2022. The study was done with 358 Portuguese consumers. These consumers were people who shopped online for groceries at the time and the researchers collected their data by having these 358 participants answer an online questioner. The study was designed to answer the following question: “Does the experience of online food shopping during the Covid-19 Pandemic lead to intention of online food shopping after the pandemics end?”. Meaning, will the strategies introduced during the pandemic continue to be effective post pandemic?

During the pandemic, many businesses were forced to shut down at this time and people were sent home from work for extended periods of time. The only places that remained operational and open were mainly grocery stores, pharmacies and other medical facilities, and food distributors. Many of these businesses struggled to keep inventory due to distribution restrictions and the high demand of customers who were overstocking due to perceived or anticipated shortages. Therefore, the study conducted in Portugal helped to determine future

marketing strategies based on the sociodemographic characteristics they discovered in the data (Gomes).

Additionally, many individuals wanted to stay at home and avoid contact; therefore, they shifted to online grocery delivery services. With shortages in stores, this led the “hired shoppers” to choose alternative options from what the buyer may have wanted. This became a debate about shopping online and what factors outweighed the others to either go shopping yourself or let someone else do it. Some of the deciding factors included packaging, reliability in stock, timeliness of the delivery, price, and the safety derived from non-contact (Li).

Shortages of your favorite food and beverage items were common during the Covid-19 Pandemic. There was an increase in the demand for certain food products when the stay-at-home orders were announced. There was uncertainty as to how long these stay-at-home policies would be in place and what the next steps were to prepare for the unknown. These uncertainties led to impulse buying, stockpiling, and food hoarding from consumers. The figure below shows the reasoning for stockpiling behavior in China over six-month throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic. The data was collected through the form of a survey (Wang).

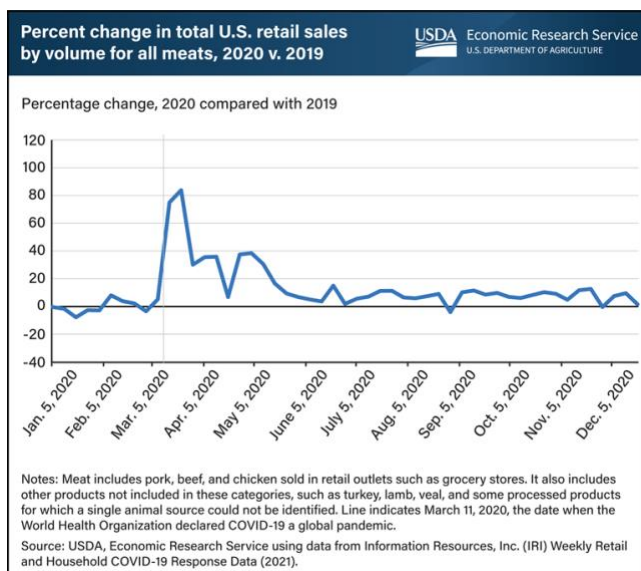


The increase of impulse buying, stock piling, and food hoarding was an abrupt and unexpected shift in sudden purchase behavior that the grocery stores and supplies were not prepared for the demand they were suddenly faced with. The demand for non-perishable items and bottled beverages was extremely high, while the supply was low. This resulted in an extreme shortage of food available on store shelves. This sudden shift in consumer behavior required the grocery industry to adapt their operational methods quickly, or their customers would go to other stores to find the products they were in search of. This was extremely stressful and at times very difficult for the consumer. Consumers often felt safer and more secure in the stores they were familiar with. If they were unable to find the products at their local supermarket, they would most likely look to purchase their groceries online rather than travel to a new store location.

Not only were the grocery stores themselves not ready for this sudden shift in economic behavior, but suppliers were also not prepared. An example of this was in livestock producers. In the United States of America, the effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic led cattle farmers to change their approach to sales to maintain profit margins. The Covid-19 Pandemic had a direct impact on the food industry as sales volumes at grocery stores drastically spiked. This could directly been seen in the increase in quantity of meat sold in grocery stores could be seen during the week of March 15, 2020 when sales increased 75% compared to that same week in 2019 (USDA).



Figure 3: Grocery Store Sales of Meat Comparison



This was because people were unsure of what would happen next and feared running out of food and having nowhere to go for it. At the beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic, this led to a huge demand of food products and a low supply. Livestock producers were effected by a “bottleneck” of situations such as processing plants require time to adapt, packing facilities reducing operations, and the biological nature of production. In April of 2020, livestock prices plummeted, and grocery store stock had been reduced, this left livestock producers in a tough situation. Many livestock producers decided to sell products directly to consumers which resulted in increases in their profits, while eliminating the cost of a middleman.

In March 2023, The Agriculture Communicators in Education published a study conducted in Oklahoma that consisted of 16 cattle ranchers over the age of 18. Some participants explained that they used social media to directly connect with consumers and market their products; others, relied on word-of-mouth promotion within the local communities to sell their products. Methods like this gave their consumers a way to connect and relate to the ranchers. In 2020, online sales accounted for 10.5% of direct-to-consumer sales in the United States from

farmers, whereas it was only 6% five years prior in 2015. The direct-to-consumer strategy (tactic) developed trust and a sense of brand loyalty and trust. The beef producers also made this a way to share the “story behind the beef” (Langusch).

### ***Consumption Habits and Consumer Behavior***

Does digital marketing influence food and beverage consumption? If it does, to what extent does the influence last with the consumer? Will the proper digital marketing strategy enhance long-term consumer loyalty, or will it just result in short term purchases? These are key questions that have been waiting to be answered. A study published in October 2022, by Cambridge University had the goal of answering these questions through conducting a study by taking advantage of a free version of a cloud-based data extraction software to collect information from popular online food delivery services’ public Instagram accounts. The researchers collected data through conducting a three-phase content coding protocol. The study found that the percentage of internet users who purchased food through online food delivery services increased since 2018. Internet users (in Brazil) who bought snacks or meals from online food delivery in 2018 was 15%, whereas it rose to 44% during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Given that consumers were using online food delivery before the pandemic, the transition to increase the incorporation of this type of service was less shocking to business systematics already in place, making it an easier transition. This comfort level would most likely make the consumer have more trust with the food delivery provider more and would likely be attentive to additional marketing from these providers. After a look at all of the data collected, a conclusion was made that online food delivery services placed less focus on food products but rather on social responsibility during the pandemic (Botelho).

Throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic, there was an increase in online food delivery advertisements that displayed images of and promoted ultra-processed food and beverages. In Brazil, advertisements that promoted free delivery were most commonly accompanied by images and graphics of salty package snacks, pizza, ice cream, and candy. The option to have free delivery is extremely tempting for potential buyers, especially during the pandemic. This was a time when people were often found in a situation where they were not as financially secure as before, it also helped individuals that were too scared of traveling and was a safe alternative. Consumers found any way to save money was found rewarding and tempting, even if it meant making sacrifices elsewhere, such as the quality and nutrition of the food sought out. Another way in which online food delivery services promoted products and their services was through the combination of various products at a discounted price, referred to as “combo deals”. Combo deals were mainly seen in the advertising of natural juices or smoothies, ultra-processed beverages, pizza, and sandwiches during this time (Botelho).

Cambridge University also studied how the Covid-19 Pandemic effected eating habits in various ways. Typical consumer behavior shifted during the pandemic, and this is a direct correlation to the increased time spent online amount various platforms. The study states that the food service industry responded quickly to the change in consumer behavior and increased its presence on social media and online outlets. Businesses that stayed active online, at this time, helped them to keep in touch with their audience and enabled them to gain more loyal followers and repeat consumers. The study looked at public information from Facebook, in order to collect data to analyze. The researchers stated that most posts were targeted to the general public, but 22% were focused on or targeted at parents with young children. During this time of uncertainty, many companies decided to not only spread awareness of safety precautions but also promoted

the aspect of comfort. This was achieved by advertising and selling comfort food and ultra-processed foods (Antúnez).

A study published in December of 2022 by Russian New University focused on what determined the actions of a person's purchasing behavior when shopping for groceries both in person and from online food delivery service methods (such as grocery store pickup and delivery services such as Instacart). The data found in their research was determined from 145 members who took part in an online questionnaire. The respondents to the survey were between the ages of 18 through 60 and were all members of the middle class. Throughout the study it was found that 70% of respondents said that the Covid-19 Pandemic changed their view when purchasing groceries and that the factors they considered while buying products had changed. In online delivery services, it was found that 39% of male respondents valued on time delivery compared to the quality and cost of items received. On the other hand, 41% of females valued the quality of items received over the dollar amount spent or the timing of delivery. Another aspect of purchasing groceries during this time was the safety of not contracting the Covid-19 virus. This led to the option for non-contact pickup and delivery services. A total of 77% of the respondents to the survey stated that they were influenced by the factor of non-contact options available and how advertisements of this option grabbed their attention. Factors such as brand loyalty, social influence, price comparison, and proper product representation also had an impact on the respondent's purchase intention and behavior (Rushi).

This was seen similarly in Taiwan, where a study was conducted by Huang-Hao Chang that was published in November 2023. This study displayed the demand for online grocery shopping and the purchase behavior of its customers. After surveying 801 participants, it was determined that about 35% of everything they purchased online was food and beverage products

(Chang). Consumers in Taiwan typically purchase food from local markets. The pandemic shifted consumer behavior immensely in Taiwan due to health and safety precautions and people started to find various ways to acquire the products needed to meet their nutritional needs. It is believed that about 39% of food shoppers in Taiwan switched from relying on traditional in-person shopping methods to online retailers. Business-to-consumer relationships increased through Ubox, which is the largest Agri-food e-commerce platform in Taiwan which was created by the Council of Agriculture. Ubox promoted its services through the digital marketing tactic of live streaming to promote its benefits to consumers during the pandemic and this is one reason in which online grocery shopping spiked in Taiwan (AgCon).

## **Area 2: Restaurant Industry**

Today, restaurant doors are open for the public to dine, however this was not the case during the early days of the Covid-19 Pandemic. In the United States of America, restaurant owners were forced to shut their businesses down due to government mandated stay-at-home orders. Many restaurants developed outside eating options only and had very limited eating spaces. This became difficult for certain areas as the weather had a significant impact on customers, more than it had before. For instance, the extreme hot weather in the southern part of the country as well as the cold weather in the northern part of the country during winter would make uncomfortable environments for dining outdoors.

Do people miss the sit-down environment of a restaurant? Have people rather been conditioned to become comfortable with eating at home, having ready-to-eat meals delivered to us without leaving the comfort of our own homes? Have people developed the ideology that meals should now be quick and should be delivered to their hands from a drive-thru window?

These were questions waiting to be answered by many restaurant owners who were left to wonder when everything would go back to “normal” and were left with the question, what could be done in the meantime?

Marketing had a huge role to play in the shift of where people were going to get their food. When the world went online, restaurants had to shift their marketing strategy and their focus sales points. Whether people wanted to or not, they were unable to sit in a restaurant to eat. Therefore, there had to be a focus on advertisement explaining the new alternatives and promoting their efficiency to the customers.

An example of how the Covid-19 Pandemic both negatively and positively effected a restaurant was the story of Sweet Chili Thai food in Augusta, Maine. Pinto Thai ToGo was formerly known as Sweet Chili Thai. The restaurant was once located in the Augusta airport, which consisted of one runway. Although being in a small location, the restaurant had a big following and a large number of loyal customers. When the pandemic started it hit small businesses hard, and Sweet Chili Thai was no exception. People were not looking to spend as much money on food and this left the resultant owners no choice but to close. They were not prepared for the vast amount of change that occurred in a short period of time. However, after their closing the owners bought a new, smaller, property on the other side of the town and opened Pinto Thai To Go, rebranding and shifting their business model to strictly takeout togo. This became a huge success for the owners, gaining both old and new customers with this change. They were able to do so through their marketing. Pinto Thai To Go used digital marketing to connect with their old customers through Facebook. They explained how, although the name had changed, the ownership had not, this was a way in which they were able to promote their familiarity of providing quality ethnic cuisine to the community. Their use of

traditional marketing was useful in gaining new customers as well through the use of radio advertisements broadcast local in the area. A way in which they maintained customers was through their specialization in the takeout to go option. They perfected their craft in take-out food and developed strategies to keep their customers happy. They utilized live text updates on customer orders, updating the expected wait time for your personalized orders, and through emails. The Catastrophic event which closed Sweet Chili Thai during the pandemic resulted in the use of Pinto Thai To Go's digital marketing and their success in connection with original customers and building online followers. Their rebranding and reopening were due to their marketing through the use of social media (Marie).

Restaurants can use social media in a variety of ways to grab the attention of both current and future customers. A restaurant may have chosen to create an Instagram account, to promote their business during the pandemic since non-contact made it difficult to see the creation and environment of the food and the faces behind it. This was a way to maintain a connection of business to consumers, create online conversations, and increase visibility in a time when face-to-face contact was rare. Once this bond was created, this form of digital marketing continues to play a vital role in each businesses marketing strategy. Now, they can utilize their public platform to post images and descriptions of their special menu items of entrees, desserts and even drinks. This is a great way to grab people's attention, oftentimes pictures can convince someone to buy something more than words can. This strategy also works for a business of any size and will be an aid in attracting new audiences (Ashraf).

### ***Fast Food Restaurants***

Fast food restaurants ended up shutting down their inside dining areas and locking the doors of their building, leading to solely operating business through their drive-thru windows. This created two situations depending on the chain of the fast food restaurant and location. There were too many employees for the jobs demanded at the time and either hours were cut, or employees were let go. The other scenario was that employees did not want to work at their job anymore due the fear of getting sick with the Covid-19 virus and would rather have no contact with others and collect unemployment. During the pandemic, the United States of America had three programs, the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation Program and the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, to aid workers effected by the widespread contagious disease.

In New Zealand, the fast food industry took advantage of social media marketing during the time of the pandemic. A content analysis was conducted as a result of the CDC reports stating that “Concerns have been raised that health and societal causes surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic were misappropriated by companies to promote their unhealthy products to vulnerable populations during a time of increased stress and hardship” (News Rx LLC). A study published by The National Library of Medicine observed the twenty largest snack, candy, non-alcoholic beverage, and fast food service restaurants and businesses over two months in 2020. They did this by viewing the public social media post of these major food and drink corporations and examined their messages, timing, and engagement. It was found that out of these three categories, the advertisement and content of fast food service restaurants was the form of digital marketing that had the most engagement. They also had the greatest number of posts on social



media of the twenty restaurants and businesses looked at in the study and the greatest number of posts that acknowledged Covid-19 in the theme of the advertisement (Gerritsen).

Another way that fast food brands took advantage of consumers' technological habits through the use of digital marketing was by adding the tactic of marketing into their business strategic plans. Influencer marketing “is the practice of compensating individuals for posting about a product or service on social media” (Campbell). Social media influencers tend to have a “branding” of themselves and a loyal follower base. Influencers could be trendy or could be well established in the industry of entertainment, being “timeless celebrities”. However, in the sense of advertisement in the food industry, it is beneficial to choose an influencer that has a previous connection to the company, a long-term and loyal fan base, as well as “wow factor” such as recent big news or announcement of an upcoming success.

### **Area 3: Influencer Marketing**

The use of influencer marketing can be extremely high-risk with high reward stakes. Being in the spotlight all the time can be exhausting for celebrities and lead to uncertainty in actions or in public conversations. Businesses often overlook this aspect of potential risks and view celebrities and social media influencers as opportunities and have seen celebrities as a “walking billboard” due to their high frequency of exposure. The key aspect that marketing strategists think of is how this individual, in one way or another, is being photographed and posted on social media, therefore meaning that their “billboard” wouldn't need to just be driven by to be seen but rather can be seen by anyone looking at their phone. Celebrities and other social media influencers can be extremely useful for companies to promote their product or services (Panggati). This thought process and strategy was advantageous to restaurants, primarily fast food service restaurants during the recent pandemic. Fast food restaurants had a shift in their

marketing strategies by adopting influencer marketing which played a key role in their updated business strategy put into place to adapt to the changing world. Some of the more popular Influencers used in advertising fast food are Travis Scott, Charli D'Amelio, and Shawn Mendes. These influencers not only benefited the brands they made a deal with, but also financially benefited themselves. These influencers made an immense amount of money making the deal extremely profitable.

Influencer marketing has become extremely popular, but also is a highly competitive and risky strategy to install in a business. Companies may want someone to promote their products yet the influencer they have in mind may already have a deal with another company that is a competitor or may result in a conflict of interest. Many social media influencers have created a “brand” of themselves, doing so by having a repetitive style and consistent ideologies. Therefore, if they are promoting one behavior in their posts, they may not want to be signing a deal with a company that may have differing messages or values. This would lead to a lack of trust from both their fan base, and customers of the company (Campbell).

The United Kingdom published an investigation on how marketing strategies shifted throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic from traditional marketing then shifting to digital methods due to the increase of online traffic. Research was conducted through an online survey of 461 respondents who had been questioned on the topic of trust in digital advertising and consumers purchase intention. The study was done in Indonesia however published in the United Kingdom. The rise of social media influencers and how companies can use them to their advantage to gain customers and a wider audience has become a huge focus for a variety of companies to take advantage of. Influencer marketing is becoming more popular and is a method of advertisement that is growing rapidly. It was estimated that influencer marketing would reach \$16.4 billion in

2022. From the study conducted, consumers were proven to enjoy advertising content when the brands were able to personalize their advertisement to the consumer on the other side of the screen. Results from this research also led to the stating that social media influencers do help consumers build trust towards a company and do influence their purchase behavior (Panggati).

### ***Influencer Marketing Example***

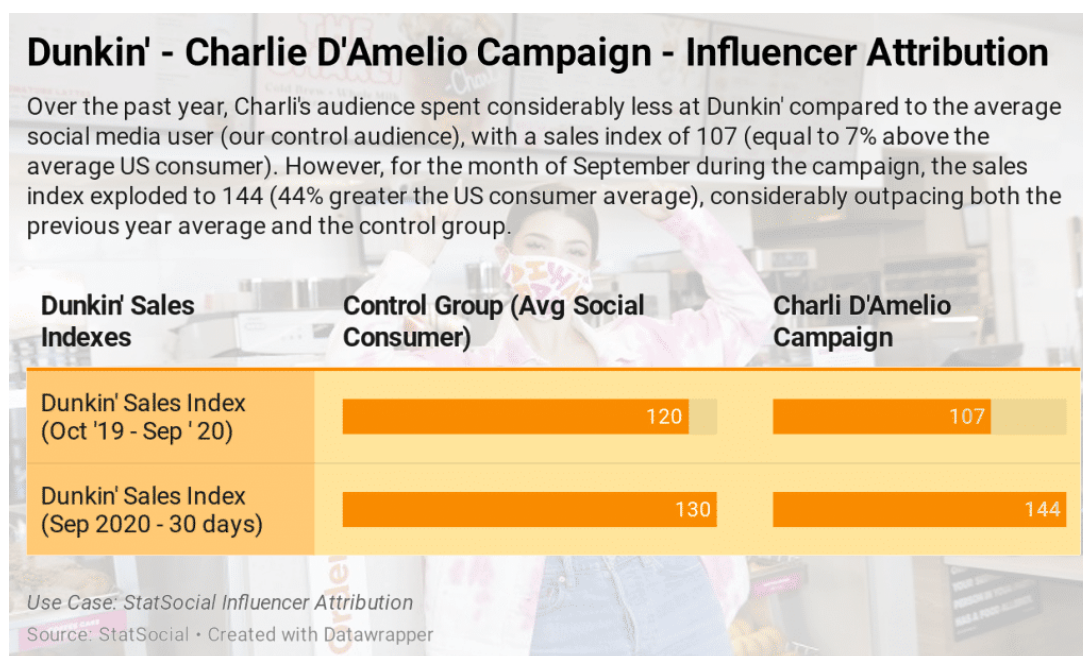
An example of a social media influencer that had a life altering deal with a fast food service restaurant was Charli D'Amelio. Charli D'Amelio became famous through the use of the TikTok app, making videos of herself dancing. She gained followers quickly and grew a huge audience that viewed her videos and gained five million followers in less than a week of posting on the app. In September of 2020, D'Amelio partnered with Dunkin' Donuts and added a drink to their menu called "the Charli", a Dunkin' cold brew with whole milk and three pumps of caramel swirl, which has been her "go to" order when purchasing a beverage from the store. She was only sixteen years old at the time yet had a total of 80 million followers on TikTok, making her the perfect candidate to market to a younger, which often is more impressionable audience. Charlie D'Amelio found major success through this collaboration and in October of 2023, had a total of 151.6 million followers on the free TikTok app.

Dunkin' Donuts also has their own free app on the App Store available on personal cell phones that customers can use to get exclusive deals, collect points to use towards rewards like free beverages or food items, and to upload a gift card or credit card to purchase your order ahead of time. During the time of Charli D'Amelio's collaboration with the brand, they created an offer of 100 points (halfway to a free beverage reward at the time) to any app user who ordered "the Charli" ahead of time through the app, this was an incentive that brought even more

craze and desire to increase purchase intention. As a result of their partnership, Dunkin' Donuts had a 57% increase in their app being downloaded onto personal cellphones and a 20% increase of cold brews being sold the day of the sponsored "Charli" drinks release, and a 45% increase in cold brew sales the following day.

The results of the Dunkin'- Charli D'Amelio Campaign sales index are noted below. The use of Charli in the promotion of Dunkin' Donuts has been extremely beneficial to the company's sales index and financial standings.

Figure 4: Dunkin' Donuts Influencer Campaign Impact



Data shows that sales from consumers that were exposed to the Dunkin' Donuts/ Charli D'Amelio advertisements increased 37% during the campaign. Previously, D'Amelio's audience was below the average Dunkin' Donuts consumers, whilst during the campaign they increased the overall sales in the company and outweighed that of the average Dunkin' consumers in the prior year. The campaigns statistics show that the use of their marketing tactics had an extremely

significant impact in driving higher sales. This is a prime example of a well thought out, planned, and executed use of an influencer marketing strategy in the food industry.

One thing that would be intriguing would be to determine what kind of behavior these individuals have after the campaign ended. If the study collected data from the company in the time after the campaign, it would be telling information on the long-term effects of how influencer marketing impacted sales and brand perceptions. Specifically, the Dunkin' Donuts franchise would learn from a continued study if Charli D'Amelio's presence in the Dunkin' Donuts advertisement had lasting persuasion on this group of consumers buying behavior.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

### **Summary**

The Covid-19 Pandemic shifted the way in which our society behaved. Businesses were forced to close down, staffing was cut, and people lost their jobs, effecting their livelihood. Businesses were forced to change their strategies to maintain relevance to the changing world and remain both reliable and attainable to consumers. The food service industry was a strange case of a business industry that was forced to be in a grueling situation where they were demanded to stay open, (because food is a basic need of survival) yet, were presented with an abundance of regulations on how each business could function according to the new standards, procedures, and policies. However, these regulations did not have in mind the effects that were placed on the consumer, their shift in habits, and their new found positions. This is where marketing strategies had to be repurposed and redefined. The research conducted in completing this thesis strives to explain how an unexpected crisis can shift marketing strategies required by businesses to be successful.

### **Conclusions**

The Covid-19 Pandemic had a huge influence on the food industry as well as the operations in agriculture and business management that effected the way in which we viewed consumerism in the food industry over the past five years. Digital marketing has been heavily effected by the pandemic in the past five years, and consumer behavior has in return been effected by the updated digital marketing strategies put into place. An individuals increase in the average screen time used daily has in turn led to an increase in marketing exposure. The purchase intention of consumers increased when they saw an influential figure promoting a

product or service. Additionally, impulse buying increased with the content of advertisements for comfort food and the inclusion of social impact statements. Digital marketing tactics earned their spot as a priority in many business models. The questions that remain for the future are: How long will these trends last? Are these trends or now permanently expected consumer behavior?

### **Limitations**

Time became a limitation factor throughout the process of completing this thesis. Timing was a limitation because of the subject material and focal point of the research being, within the past five years. This made inquiring useful data difficult. Five years, or even less, is a very quick time to not only acknowledge prominent impacts and effects, but also is then time-consuming in developing a research study with real life examples, evidence, and participants.

### **Recommendations for further research**

Dialing focus into data collected from one country may be beneficial for future research to ensure consistent habits of activity in both marketing in the food industry and the consumer behavior as an effect of the marketing strategies utilized within a given time period. The data found was adequate for the research and comparison of data organized to be from various countries, frankly continents due to the Covid-19 virus causing major impacts across the globe, therefore causing the pandemic. A recommendation would be to focus on one specific organization or affiliation and to conduct a deep dive into the cause and effects in that specific area rather than an extremely broad research topic with many subcategories.

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