



A STUDY OF CUSTOMER PERCEPTION TOWARDS VISITING RESTAURANTS FOR MEALS AFTER THE UNLOCK OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

In an unprecedented calamity of Covid -19 pandemic which was set in the more than 180 countries all over the world according to the WHO website published a report in the month of March 2020, it was imperative to understand the conditions and challenges which will be faced by the Stand-alone restaurants.

The study carried out in this research paper shows the change of mind set of the guests, the change is seen across the strata of the people irrespective of their age groups, background and meal choices.

The stand-alone restaurants in Pune city is one of the large but unorganised business sector which is growing rapidly in the last decade. This sector is very competitive, price sensitive and exploring innovative ideas of food and service very aggressively. The entire sector of stand- alone works on very narrow net profit margins of 10%-15%. This calls for very accurate and precise execution of the operations.

The results of the study shows the expected change in the spending patterns of the customers from different age groups, the choice of the out let will depend upon different parameters, the frequency of the visit to even popular and preferred restaurants will be reduced.

Key Words: Pandemic, Covid 19, Restaurant, Lockdown, Unlock, Customer Perception, Dark Kitchens, Hygiene and Sanitization, Social Distancing, Take Aways, Ecomic Slow Down.

Introduction to the problem and its background

After the outbreak of Covid-19, Government of India declared a lock down in the country from 25th March 2020. The Stand Alone Restaurants were closed abruptly and for the entire period of lockdown. This resulted in massive losses. The restaurant owners like many other businesspersons had never prepared for this kind of problem. Not only the businessmen community but even the Government of India and all the State Governments were unprepared. The lockdown brought down the cities and towns to halt. None of the businesses were functioning in the initially excluding for the very essential commodities and services for very little period during the day.

The lockdown and further slowing down the economy has led several effects on the society. The virus has altered our mind set the way it spreads and is affecting people worldwide have made people more cautious about the choices they make such as dine out get food from outdoor.

A fascinating and nouvelle trend was set in the last few years of Dark Kitchens or the Cloud Kitchens. These are only the production centres or in our terms called even as Ghost Kitchens, which only produce



the food and deliver the same through, own distribution channels or with the help of more, professional and national level distribution systems developed with the help of new technology like Zomato which being the most popular, trusted and having span in more than 24 countries and in more than 10,000 cities as per the reports of "About Zomato". zomato.com. But apart from Zomato, there are other local delivery options such as Swiggy which has good distribution channel in more than 100 cities according to Madhav Chanchani (17 March 2019). "Online food delivery wars are moving from India to Bharat". The Times of India. Retrieved 13 August 2019. The dark kitchens are cost effective and hence passing the benefits to the end consumers and are becoming popular over the Take Away's!! The young generation is interested in getting their high-quality meal delivered to their home/office and in perfectly packed and has the same quality that they would have been served at the restaurant. There is a steep rise in such organisations since restaurants were not allowed to do business on their premise.

A new competitors, which the restaurants, Take away's and dark kitchens will experience soon, is the upsurge of Home Chefs in hugenumbers!! This will add another contestant for the same size of the market, which will reduce the share of the established restaurants even more. This increase in number of Home Chefs is due to many reasons such as, less or almost NO Capital Investments, less staff requirement, greater standards of hygiene as less or only couple of family members are involved in the whole process from Purchasing to Pick up/ Delivery and over all execution of the order. Such Home Chefs have also increased in numbers during this period of lock down.

In this setting key question faced by the restaurateurs is, will the trusted brands be preferred over new outlets and ways of delivered food? This study tries to analyse when the lock down will be completely lifted and stand-alone restaurants will be allowed to open for operations, what will be the approach of the customers towards the restaurants? Will the customers be happy to go back to their favourite fast food outlets/ restaurants or there will be many speculations that will come to their mind about whether or not to go to restaurant?

There will be few other concerns as well! Such as, 'Will they put the hygiene on major importance for visiting the restaurants? On the other hand, will it be still the taste and the quality of food, will be the primary concern of the people?

Future for restaurants may be locally sourced food, ghost / cloud kitchens, more dependency on online services and Hygiene, Hygiene, Hygiene!!

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is primarily targeted at the guest perception towards the changed mind set for revisiting their favourite restaurant and fast food joints for socializing or even for recreational needs. This study will also aim at the challenges faced by the restaurants due to changed perception of their patrons.

Objectives

- To study the perception of the customers for visiting restaurant post Unlock.
- To assess the parameters that contributes the change if any and study the causes and remedies.



Research Methodology

Primary Data

- To collect feedback from the guests from different strata of the society.
- To collect information from various guests who choose a particular out let over the other options available based on certain parameters.
- To collect information about changed parameters and the causes.
- To understand the new challenges which the stand- alone restaurants will have to face.

Research Design: Exploratory

- Research Method – Online Survey
- Research Instrument – Questionnaire
- Proposed Sample Size – At least 100 customers from different strata.
- Sample Type – Random
- Secondary Data
- Hospitality Journals and Magazines
- Research Papers
- Relevant Websites.

Literature Review

According to WHO website <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019> COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of corona virus. ‘CO’ stands for corona, ‘VI’ for virus, and ‘D’ for disease. Formerly, this disease was referred to as ‘2019 novel corona virus’ or ‘2019-nCoV’. The COVID-19 virus is a new virus linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold. Virus spreads through contact. The virus spreads between people in close contact (within 6 feet) through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. But the infection can spread before people develop symptoms, which, on an average, take around five days to appear. Some people develop no symptoms and others have mild disease but still infect others. Stepping out also results in contamination of surfaces or objects, from where it can infect people who touch the surface and then touch their own mouth, nose, or eyes. The virus spreads very easily in areas where there is community transmission of the disease, according to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in US. Infection may occur without having close contact also!!

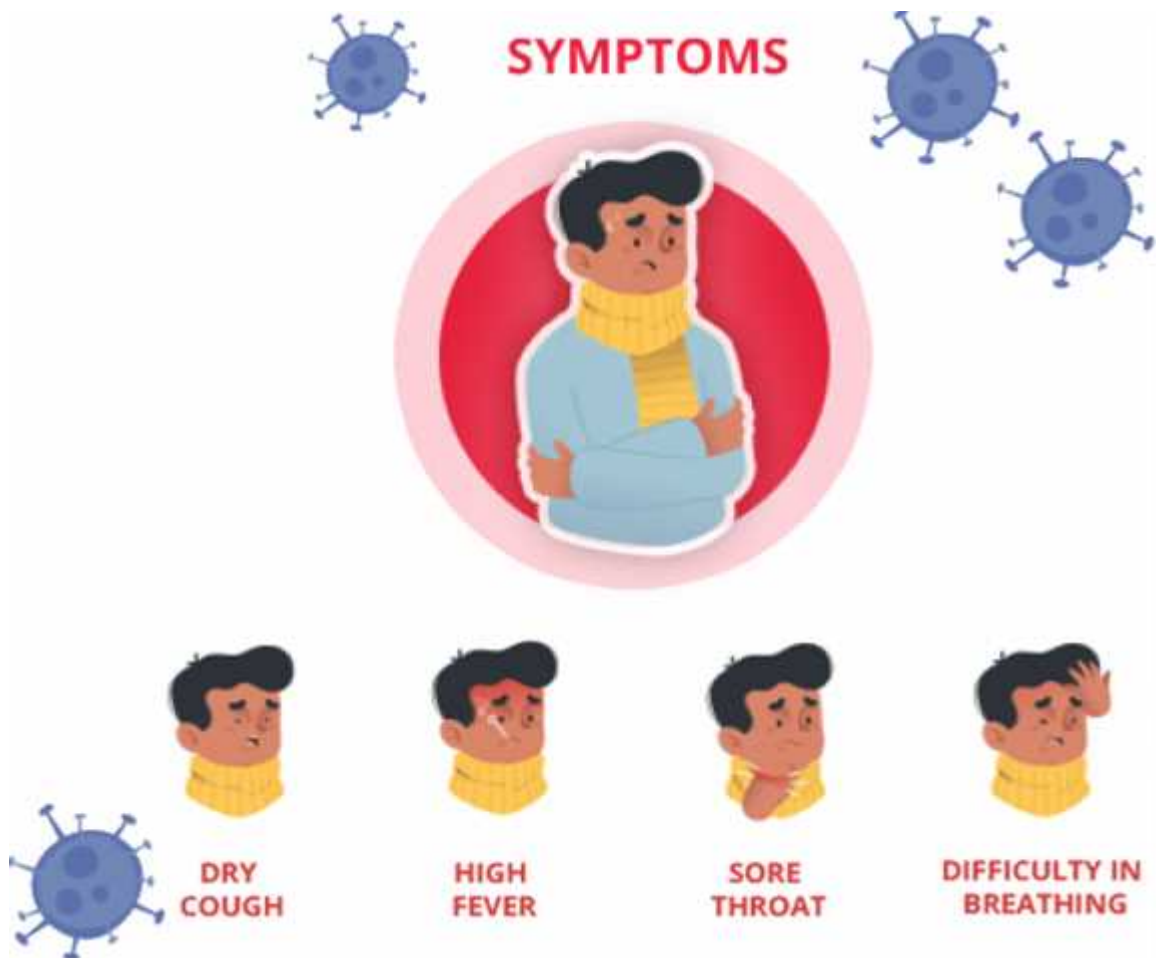
Scientists have documented a cluster of cases among people who worked in shops, visitors or were staff of a mall without direct contact with an infected person, according to a research document called “Indirect Virus Transmission in Cluster of Covid-19 Cases, Wenzhou” in China published by the CDC on March 12. Indirect transmission may have happened among these unrelated cases from spread via surfaces like elevator buttons or restroom taps, said the paper. For case-patients who were customers in the shopping mall but did not report using the restroom, the source of infection could have been the elevators or asymptomatic patients.



How Lockdown helps in reducing of spread of the disease?

Lockdown greatly reduces transmission. A recent study by the Imperial College London's Covid-19 team found that population-wide social distancing would have the largest impact in transmission reduction; and, in combination with other interventions, such as home isolation of infected people and closure of schools and universities. There are many more scientific studies that prove massive social distancing measures can stabilise transmission and give governments time to prepare for a spurt in infections.

One positive change is boosting Ghost / Dark / Central kitchens with delivery-only concept where food is sold online or through a mobile app, instead of traditional establishments will raise which may increase the reach of restaurants where they can reach more people and have less overheads.





How It Spreads Prevention



About restaurants

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Restaurant' is an establishment where the public may procure refreshments or meals.

It is a public dining place where people come together. Food is prepared and served to the customers on the premise. This definition need to be elaborated in today's world where restaurants not only serve food on the premise but also serve food by online takeaway medium.

These meals are prepared and served to customers and during this time they are exchanged through many hands

Let's look at a typical process in which cooked food is handed over to guest--

- **Guest on premise:**

Chef cooks food (let's start from point where food is cooked as when food is cooked there will be no contamination considering the microbial activity is killed at temperatures above 80 degree Celsius) and plates it, the plates are washed by Stewarding assistants. Plated food is handed over to the Aboyeur (One who announces the orders and handover correct food to the waiter) Waiter then carry the food most of the time by himself and in certain cases one brings it out in restaurant upto the sideboard and head waiter serves it. So the food travels from Chef -- Stewarding assistants – Aboyeur – Waiter -- head waiter – Guest.



- **Take away by help of a Online food-delivery platforms:**

Agent from Online food-delivery platforms brings order to restaurant Chef cooks food and hands over to assistant for packing it. Packed food is handed over to the Aboyeur who further handover to Agent from Online food-delivery platforms who carries food to guest .

Chef – Assistants for packing – Aboyeur – Agent from Online food-delivery platforms – Guest ,The above examples show that food comes in contact with many people before being served which makes it vulnerable for getting infected Also in a typical restaurants guests come in contact with many people other than food handlers which is also to be considered for example, valet, welcoming staff, other people who are visiting restaurant, the cashier, waiting area assistant, housekeeping staff in restaurant, etc.

So considering the spread of the corona virus its method restaurant goers will have many questions before going to the restaurant.

Bob Goldin, a partner at consulting firm Pentalllect Inc. in the article published in The Print an Indian online newspaper published on 17 April, 2020 expressed a concern about the customers thinking who is touching there food, also they are thinking to live without restaurants . In the same article Dr. Erin DiCaprio, an expert on food safety from the University of California, Davis also raised the concern that social distancing will remain for long time and also customers who go to restaurants will have fear to go to crowded places.

To overcome these doubts restaurant owners will need to take precautions to assure customers about their safety.

In an article - How Indian restaurants will change post lockdown. Published in THE HINDU on April 17, 2020 and updated on April 18, 2020 restaurateur Ashish Kapur brought forward the necessity of Technology for ensuring safety of customers use of automatic temperature checks for staff, portable washing sinks, minimises contact — mobile wallets, menus on personal devices and automated surface sanitising were highlighted in the article. In the same article restaurateur AD Singh raises the concern about social distancing which will eliminate the crowded bars and restaurants particularly on weekends which are major revenue generators. Chef Manish Mehrotra of Indian Accent brought forth the issue of sourcing of ingredients which have to be done carefully by the restaurants as the guests may be concerned about it, he also raised a thought that customers may also change their diet pattern and prefer more healthy options. in the same article also Sandeep Tandon, managing director of Old World Hospitality that owns Delhi's Indian Accent emphasised that customers may not be willing to pay more for all the extra care taken for the hygiene and sanitisation.

The article What's cooking? Pune restaurants are uncertain as lockdown changes rules of engagement published in The Indian Express Written by Dipanita Nath in May 11, 2020 issue Devesh Bhatia of the Pan Indian Eatery says that trimming of menu, changing it every few days, smaller staff and also the



staff that have gone back to their native places who may not return, extra expenses on sanitization also the rent that restaurant owners have to pay may not reduce are the major concerns of restaurateurs.

“In that scenario, we will trim the menu and keep changing it every few days. The rules of social distancing mean we may operate 10-15 guests at a time. The staff will also be smaller as many of them, who stayed back during the lockdown, will want to return home, outstation, to their worried families. The first challenges we are going to face as soon as the lockdown is lifted, is that at least half of the staff — cooks, service and utility sections — will go back. We hope there will be a reduction in rent from our landlord. Sanitisation will also have to be carried out frequently, probably every hour, which means that the cost of running the restaurant will go up,” says Devesh Bhatia of the Pan Indian Eatery. Vaibhav Paliwal of Nukkad Café in the same article say that the covid19 situation have affected the culture of interacting with people and that people are not allowed to meet, listen and talk which is one of the main reason for people to patronise the restaurants apart form food. Smita Murthy one of the owners of The Fat Labrador Cafe in Bavdhan, Vishal Pipraiya who started Pagdandi Bookstore and Café and Shruti Kapre of Midnight Kakerly are the owners of restaurants which operate with a thought of building communities and relationships for doing business are concerned as they have to depend on the food delivering apps to reach the customers this is also one of the concern raised in the article.

Anurag Katiyar, president of the National Restaurant Association of India in a recent interview on the food safety equinox. Said that Hygiene requirements will change the restaurant industry post COVID as it was changed for security after 9/11 terror attacks. Hygiene will be the key marketing factor in the future.

According the paper published by Prof Rayarikar and Ms. Anahita Manna in the journal *International Journal of Business and Administration Research Review*, Vol. 2, Issue.1, Jan-March, 2016. Page 317 , ‘Nowadays, the trend of dining in restaurants has become quite prominent. Frequent restaurant visits are not only the reflection of satisfying hedonistic needs, but also the result of increasing number of single-person households as well as adjustment to the business hours’

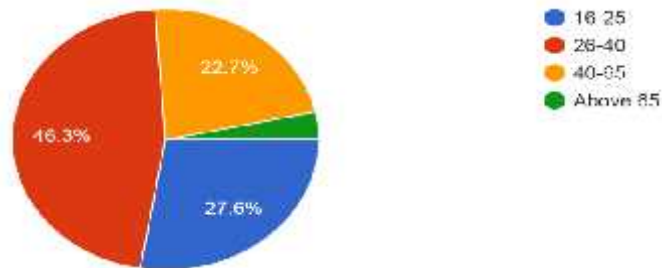
Method and Procedures

This is a explanatory research trying to explain the consequences of the problems that restaurant business is going to face after the covid-19 lock down. This is an initial research on a newly-generated issue in the restaurant business. This research is trying to analyse the impact of covid-19 on perception of customers towards restaurants through quantitative research. It is a field research where the questioner is circulated with sample size of **322** and ananalysis was done on the data collected about causes and effect.



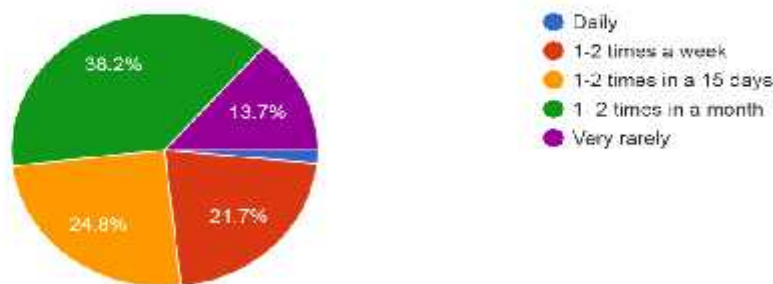
Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Q.1 Age of the respondents



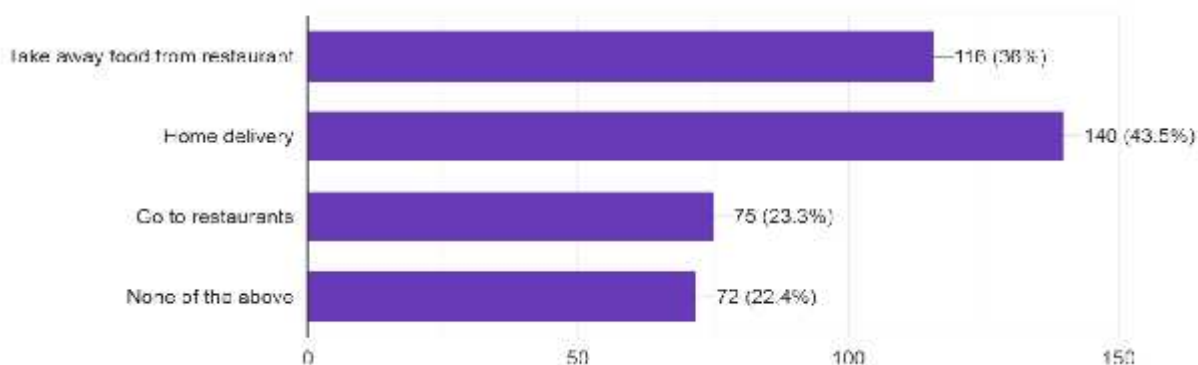
Maximum respondents were in between age group of 26 to 65 which includes a large number of people who go out for work and are from the earning class of society who can spend on restaurants.

How often you used to visit restaurant before covid-19 outburst?
 322 responses



A very small section of the respondents are those who go for eating out very rarely. Because most respondents are regular visitors to restaurants the feedback given to the questioner can be considered a valid data

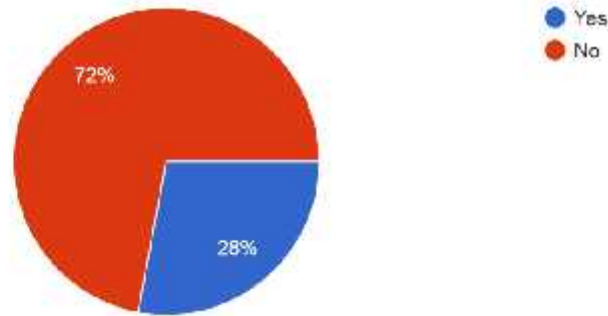
What will you prefer more after lockdown is over
 322 responses



After lock down is over most people are preferring to bring food home than to go to the restaurant. Also there is substantial amount of respondents who dont want to get food from restaurants at all

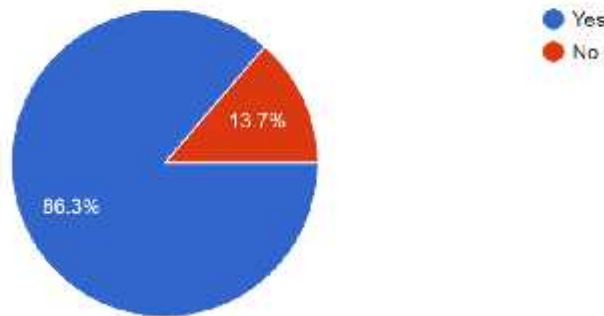


Did you order food by food delivery apps during the lock down period ?
322 responses



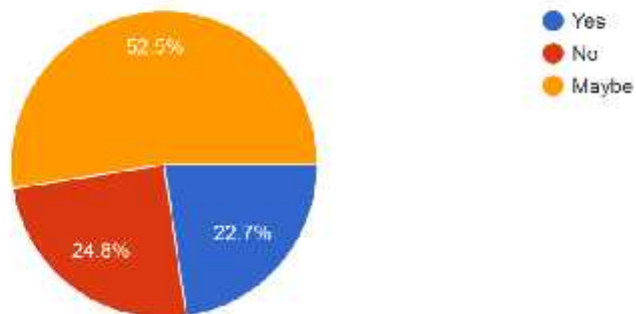
Most people have preferred to cook at home than ordering food from restaurants.

Do you think Restaurants are among the hardest-hit in the covid-19 pandemic ?
322 responses



Most people agree that restaurants are among the hardest hit sectors.

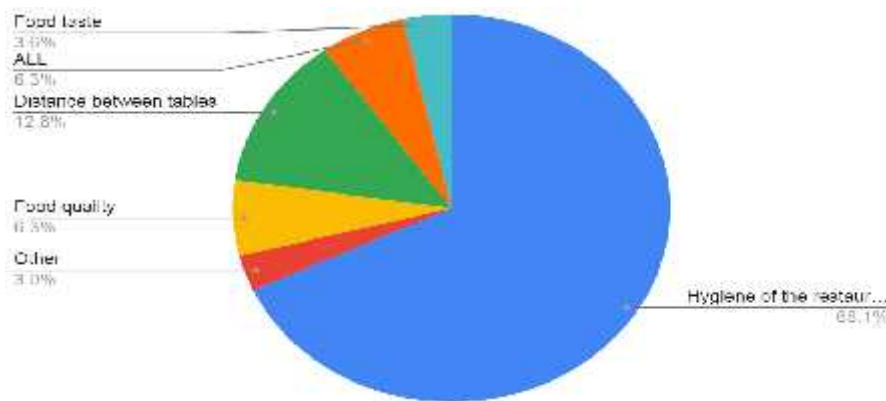
Will you go to a restaurant for dining after the lockdown is over?
322 responses



Only 22.7 % people have responded positive towards going to restaurants after lockdown



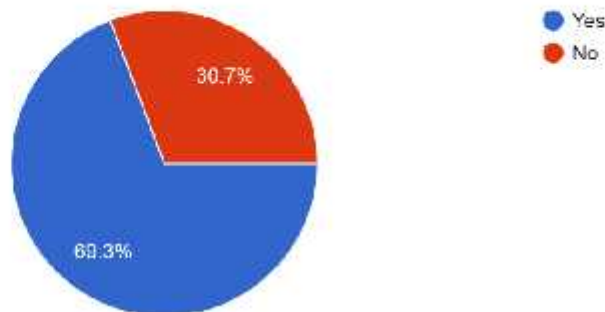
Which is the most important aspect that you will consider to go to a restaurant after the lock down is lifted?



Food quality and food taste are no more important for in selection of restaurant

Will " a unknown person handling your food before it is been served", affect your perception to go or not to go to restaurants?

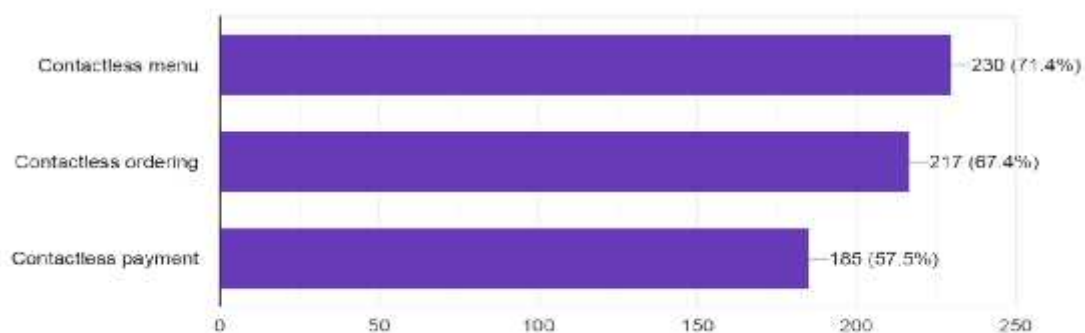
322 responses



Perception about restaurants is changed after covid-19. People do consider the fact that food which is handled by an unknown person may not be safe to eat.

Which of the following will interest you to come to restaurants considering care of social distancing ?

322 responses

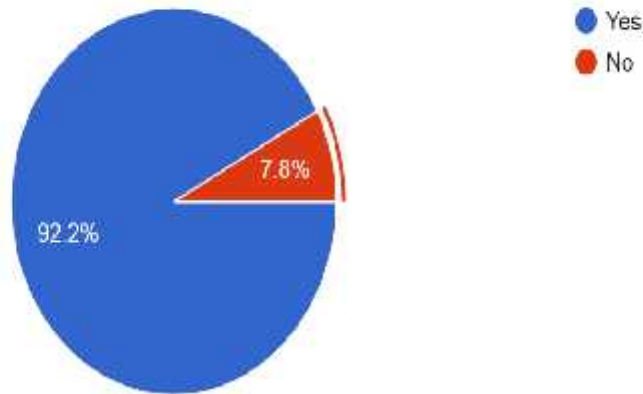




All the Contact less options are considered by respondents as important

Do you think social distancing will be required even after the effect of pandemic is reduced ?

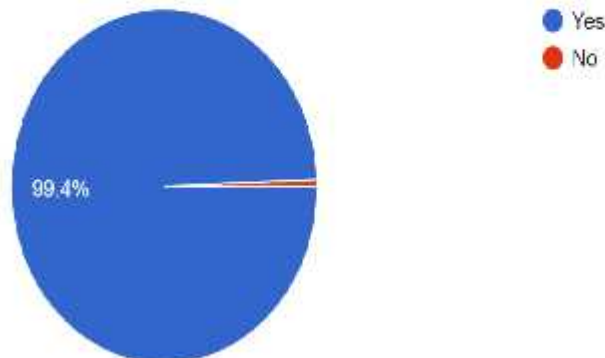
322 responses



Nearly all thinks that social distancing is to stay with us.

Will you expect that workers' need to wear gloves Masks and other safety gears as prescribed?

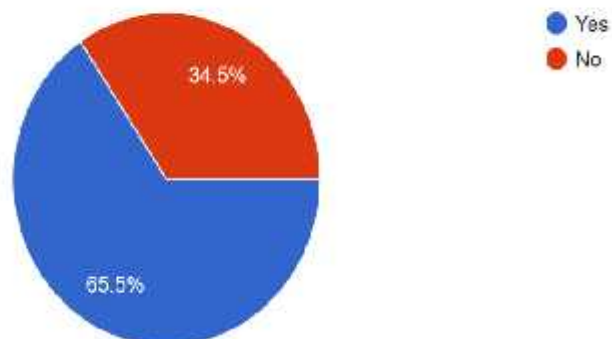
322 responses



Safety gears are compulsory and will affect the decision whether to choose an outlet or not

Do you expect Restaurants to keep prices same?

322 responses

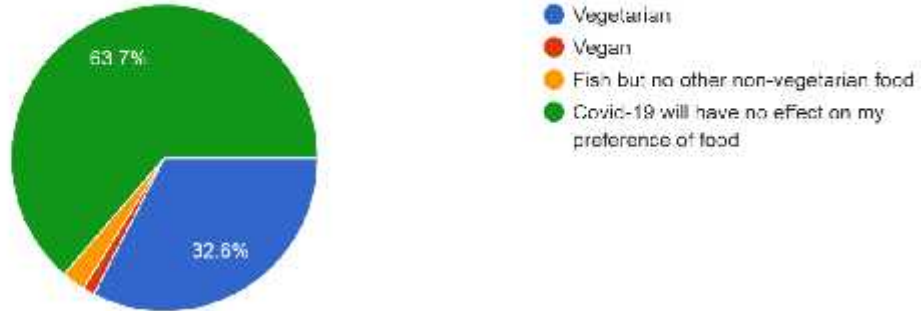




Most people expect the prices of the menu to remain unchanged

Which type of food will you prefer after the covid-19 effect ?

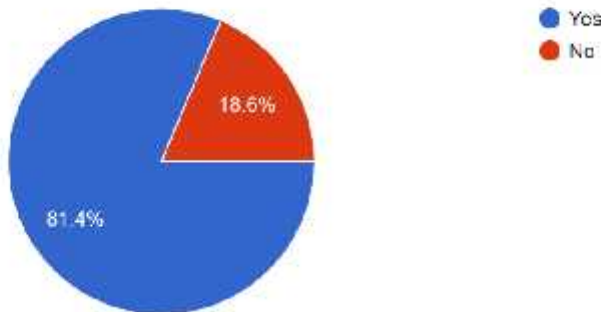
322 responses



There is a large section of respondents who have no effect on food preferences.

Do you think uncertainty about finances mean even the privileged may be less inclined to spend in restaurants.

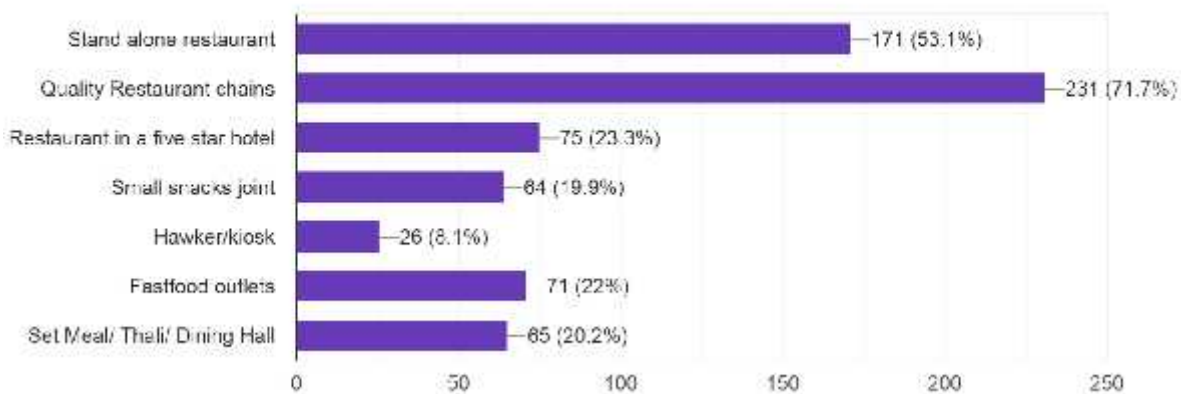
322 responses



Most respondents say that people will spend less in restaurants after covid-19

Which type of food outlets will you prefer to eat at after the lock down is over ?

322 responses





Most preferred joints are quality restaurants chains and Stand alone restaurants.

Findings

As we try to summaries the findings we arrive at are rather unusual out comes through the online survey of 322 respondents from various age groups and strata of the society.

Many of the respondents are frequent restaurant customers and are fond of variety of food available in the nearby restaurants.

Finding 1

The first question was targeted to find the age group of the frequent customer of the restaurants. From the responses received we are able to say the largest group is from age group of 26Yrs. to 40Yrs. This reveals that they are from the middle-aged group having better income and hence higher spending power.

The second highest spending group is from the younger age group of 16 Yrs. To 25Yrs. And has less spending capacity and hence they are not regular patrons of stand- alone restaurants.

Finding 2

The second question was aimed at finding out the frequency of the visits to restaurants. The outcome tells us that most of the customers do visit Stand-alone Restaurants 1-2 times in a month. As the stand-alone restaurants are usually higher priced and hence the frequency is relatively low.

Finding 3& 6

This question gives us the percentage of the patrons who preferred home deliveries over the other option post Unlock.

The response received tells us clearly that almost 44% of the respondents prefer home delivered food from their choice of restaurant rather than visiting a public place physically.

Only 22.7 % people responded positive towards going to restaurants after lockdown is lifted.

Finding 4

The impact of the pandemic was grave on the mind set of the respondents and due to the fear 72% of the people prefer Not to order food from their favourite restaurant or any takeaway kitchens during the lockdown.

Finding 5

As we wanted to know if the patrons are aware about, How badly the Hotels and Restaurant Industry is affected? The response was very satisfactory as almost 87% of the respondents agree that Hotels and Restaurant Industry is the most or one of the most affected industry.

Finding 7

This question has revealed a new parameter for selection of a restaurant post unlock. The parameter is Hygiene!! Now more than 68% of the prospective customers are preferring higher and better standards of hygiene if they decide to go the public place such as restaurant.



Finding 8& 9

This question was asked to the customers to understand their perception of social distancing and contactless options they would seek if and when they decide to go to the restaurant.

The response reveals that all the contactless options such as app based menu and ordering and even contactless payment options are preferred options.

More than 92% customers feel that social distancing will continue and is the New Normal!!

Finding 10

The customers are now more concerned about staff wearing all possible safety gears.

The gears include such as Masks, Hand Gloves and Face shield.

Finding 11:

Most of the customers expect the menu pricing will not be changed and they will get the same service and quality after restaurants resume their operations.

Finding 12

This question was aimed at the choice of the food that customers seek post unlock. According to the responses received the customers will Not change their preference of being vegetarian or non-vegetarian or the newer options such as vegan etc,

Finding 13

This question was include in the survey to check the financial constraint of the customers post unlock. It clearly indicates that even as the restaurants will re-open but the customers will have relatively less spending power to spend on leisure and restaurant visits.

Finding 14

This question revealed that customers now prefer only such restaurants, which assures quality in terms of food and hygiene. These restaurants may be stand alone or a part of a well known chain which may include branded fast food out lets as well.

Conclusion

The pandemic has changed the perception of the customers significantly. Many aspects and considerations to which customers pay attention to were evaluated through this research work. Study revealed that large number of respondents are between the age group of 26 to 65 years and are from the earning group and hence they have additional disposable income which they usually spend on leisure in various ways. These respondents used to visit the restaurants 2-3 times in month before the lock down was imposed.

As the first lockdown was extended further with some sectors conditionally reopened the Cloud Kitchens/ Dark Kitchens/ Ghost Kitchens were on the fore front to deliver the food/ meal to the end consumers, restaurants on the other hand took some time to restart and the deliveries with the help of delivery channel partners such as ZOMATO, SWIGY, etc. This increased the scope of this delivery app.



Most of the respondents were aware that restaurants and over all the hospitality industry is one of the hardest hit due to this pandemic. But due to the fear of pandemic more than 50% of the respondents were not sure if they wish to visit the restaurants after the lockdown will be lifted. One of the basic concerns shown by the respondents was Hygiene, and hence that will be the most important criteria if they decide to visit the restaurant after the pandemic or even post lockdown. This is one of the major change that is observed through this study.

Hence customers will prefer Stand alone restaurants and quality restaurants chains.

Though many organizations had been following decent levels of hygiene and employees have been following hygienic practices. But due to the pandemic newer and higher levels of hygienic practices are required to be implemented. Contact less options for menu, placing the order and even service options need to be explored.

Safety gears such as Face Shields, Masks, Disposable hand gloves have become an essential and somewhat compulsory and will affect the decision whether place an order from a particular outlet or not

Food quality and food taste are no more important for in selection of restaurant!!

Restaurant industry is poised and awaiting for the further guidelines from the competent authority.

Post COVID 19 pandemic most customers would prefer 'Take Away' of food deliveries by popular agencies, channels and food delivery app such as ZOMATO, SWIGY, etc.

This study also highlights that many of the respondents are reluctant to order any food from any of the restaurants in near future. People have given preference to home cooked food over the restaurant/ food from Cloud Kitchens/ Dark Kitchens. This has given a rise of another contender, Home Chefs/ Cooks in the existing and stipulated business domain of each of the restaurant.

Perception about restaurants has changed after covid-19. People do consider the fact that food which is handled by an unknown person may not be safe to eat. Nearly all the respondents thinks that social distancing is to stay in the near future. Most people expect the prices of the menu to remain unchanged.

There is a large section of respondents who have no effect on food preferences but preference of the type of restaurants has changed!! Due to lockdown the economy has slowed down this will result in less spending on food and leisure after covid-19.

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