Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2025, No.1
February 2025
ISSN 2229-3388

Consumer Awareness Towards Traditional Food Products, During Covid – 19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes to global consumption patterns, particularly in the food sector. Among the many shifts was a significant increase in consumer interest in traditional food products due to perceived health benefits, cultural affinity, and a renewed sense of local resilience. This study explores consumer awareness and behavioral changes concerning traditional food items in the post-pandemic era, with a focus on motivations, purchasing decisions, and constraints. Findings are expected to provide meaningful insights for policymakers, marketers, and producers to strengthen the traditional food ecosystem, particularly in regional markets like Madurai District.

Keywords: Traditional Food Products, Consumer Behavior, Post-COVID-19

Introduction

Traditional food products represent the culinary identity of a region, rooted in cultural, spiritual, and environmental sustainability. These foods, often passed down through generations, include millets, native rice varieties, fermented dishes, herbal products, and other ethnic specialties. In the face of rising industrial food production and aggressive marketing of processed goods, traditional foods were gradually losing consumer interest, especially in urban settings. However, in many rural and semi-urban regions like Madurai District, traditional food items remained integral to daily diets, albeit in a less commercialized form. The importance of these products lies not just in their nutritive value but also in their local availability, environmentally friendly production, and community-driven supply chains.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant disruption to food systems globally, influencing not only how food was sourced but also how it was perceived. As modern supply chains were interrupted, consumers began turning to more reliable, local, and less-processed options—opening the door for traditional foods to reclaim their place. Moreover, concerns over immunity, long-term health, and safe consumption made traditional food products more appealing. This shift was accompanied by a broader movement toward organic, indigenous, and sustainable food sources. The pandemic period also sparked a resurgence of home cooking, traditional recipes, and conscious eating, which catalyzed awareness around the benefits of traditional foods.

While this shift in consumer preference presents opportunities for traditional food sectors, several challenges remain. These include limited availability in organized retail, lack of standard packaging, absence of quality certification, and poor branding. Producers and retailers of traditional food products often lack the marketing knowledge and infrastructure to scale their operations or reach modern consumer segments. Additionally, though consumer interest has risen, actual conversion into consistent buying behavior depends on affordability, accessibility, and continued awareness. The post-COVID environment, therefore, represents both a chance to reimagine traditional food ecosystems and a call for strategic interventions at policy, community, and entrepreneurial levels.

Review of Literature

Review 1

According to Rao et al. (2021), the pandemic sparked a strong preference for native grains and organic pulses, primarily due to concerns over immunity and food safety. Their study on South Indian households indicated that over 60% of respondents increased their consumption of millets, heritage rice, and traditional oils. These foods were perceived not only as nutritionally superior but also emotionally comforting. The researchers emphasized the role of digital media in reintroducing lost culinary traditions, as platforms like YouTube and Instagram became tools for reviving interest in indigenous food recipes and their health relevance. However, the authors also pointed out that despite increased awareness, consistent accessibility and pricing remained major obstacles. Many producers still rely on informal markets or weekly haats (markets), lacking formal branding or online presence, which restricts their growth. They argue that government schemes, if better structured, could support localized branding and logistic systems.

Review 2

Sundararajan and Balamurugan (2022) studied consumer attitudes in Tamil Nadu toward traditional rice varieties, particularly during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Their findings suggest that lockdown-induced supply chain disruptions led many consumers to explore alternative local staples, and this organically boosted demand for traditional varieties like Kullakar, KaruppuKavuni, and Mappillai Samba. These grains were found to be rich in antioxidants and fiber, making them attractive from a preventive health perspective. The study also identified significant knowledge gaps, especially among younger consumers, regarding the preparation and nutritional value of these items. While older generations retained awareness, they noted that aggressive marketing and pricing of modern polished rice had displaced traditional products in most retail spaces. The authors concluded by emphasizing the need for targeted awareness campaigns and integration of these products into institutional procurement channels like mid-day meals and public distribution systems.

Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the key factors influencing consumer behavior towards traditional food products post COVID-19.
2. To evaluate the level of awareness and knowledge consumers hold about the nutritional and cultural value of traditional food items.
3. To identify the barriers and constraints faced by both consumers and producers in the consumption and promotion of traditional foods.
4. To examine the role of marketing, distribution, and policy in shaping access to and demand for traditional food products.
5. To provide strategic recommendations for producers, retailers, and policymakers to enhance the traditional food ecosystem in the post-pandemic era.

Framework of Hypothesis

Hypothesis (H_0):
There is no significant relationship between consumer awareness and the purchase behavior of traditional food products in the post-COVID-19 era.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):
There is a significant relationship between consumer awareness and the purchase behavior of traditional food products in the post-COVID-19 era.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive research design with a focus on primary data collection through structured questionnaires administered to 100 respondents across urban and semi-urban zones of Madurai District. A convenience sampling method was used to select participants, ensuring a mix of age, income, and education levels. The questionnaire captured demographic data, awareness levels, purchase patterns, behavioral changes post-COVID, and perceived barriers. Secondary data was collected from journals, government reports, and published case studies to support and triangulate primary findings. Data analysis included percentage analysis, cross-tabulation, and interpretation of responses. The study emphasizes qualitative insight derived from consumer narratives and aims to present actionable findings for various stakeholders in the traditional food supply chain.

Demographics:

The respondents are grouped in the table based on demographics like as age, gender, marital status, educational qualification, occupation, family size, economic position, family decision maker, and finally, respondents' place of residence in Madurai city.

Table 1 : Demographic Factors of the Respondents

S.NO	Demographic Factors	Respondents (150Nos.)	Percentage (100%)
01.	**AGE**		
	Less than 20 Years	5	3.3
	21 to 30 Years	57	38.0
	31 to 40 Years	73	48.7
	41 to 50 Years	12	8.0
	Above 51 Years	3	2.0
02	**GENDER**		
	Male	108	72.0
	Female	42	28.0
03	**MARITAL STATUS**		
	Married	93	62.0
	Unmarried	57	38.0
04	**EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION**		
	Secondary Schooling	3	2.0
	Diploma	5	3.3
	Under Graduate	12	8.0
	Post Graduate	90	60.0
	Professional	33	22.0
	Others	7	4.7
05	**OCCUPATION**		
	Employee	65	43.3
	Professionals	37	24.7
	Business Person	31	20.7
	Agriculturist	1	0.7
	Home Maker	5	3.3

	Others	11	7.3
06	**FAMILY SIZE**		
	1 to 4 Members	52	34.7
	5 to 8 Members	91	60.7
	Above 8 Members	7	4.6
07	**ECONOMIC STATUS**		
	Below Rs. 10,000	8	5.3
	Rs.10001 to 20000	39	26.0
	Rs.20001 to 30000	29	19.3
	Rs.30001 to 40000	17	11.4
	Rs.40001 to 50000	13	8.7
	Above 50,000	44	29.3
08	**DECISION MAKER**		
	Self	66	44.0
	Spouse	38	25.3
	Parents	46	30.7
09	**PLACE OF LIVING**		
	Urban	92	61.3
	Semi-Urban	43	28.7
	Rural	15	10.0

Source: *Primary data*

According to the table, 48.7% of respondents are between the ages of 21 and 30, 38 percent of respondents are between the ages of 21 and 30, 8% of respondents are between the ages of 41 and 50, 3.3 percent of respondents are under the age of 20, and 2% of respondents are above 51 years old.

The bulk of responders, 72 percent, are male and 28 percent are female, according to the data.

It is clear that the majority of respondents are married (62%) and unmarried (38%) respectively.

A maximum of 60% of respondents are postgraduates, 22% are professionals, 8% are undergraduates, 4.7 percent have other credentials, 3.3 percent are Diploma Holders, and 2% are secondary school graduates.

The majority of 43.3 percent of respondents work in the public or private sector, 24.7 percent of respondents are professionals, 20.7 percent of respondents work in business, 7.3 percent of respondents work in other occupations, 3.3 percent of respondents work as homemakers, and the remaining 0.7 percent of respondents work as agriculturists.

It was discovered that 60.7 percent of respondents said their family size is between 5 and 8 members, 34.7 percent said their family size is between 1 and 4 members, and the remaining 4.6 percent said their family size is over 8 members.

According to the above table, 29.3 percent of respondents have income above Rs.50000 per month, 26% have income between Rs. 10001 and 20000 per month, 19.3 percent have income between Rs. 20001 and 30000 per month, 11.4 percent have income between Rs. 30001 and 40000 per month, 8.7% have income between Rs. 40001 and 50000 per month, and the remaining 5.3 percent have income between Rs. 40001 and 50000 per month.

The majority of 44 percent of respondents indicated that they are the decision makers in their family, while 30.7 percent stated that their parents are the decision makers in their family, and the remaining 25.3 percent stated that their spouse is the decision maker in their family.

The figure shows that 61.3 percent of respondents live in cities, 28.7% in semi-urban areas, and 10% in rural areas.

Table 2 : Opinion about Traditional Food Consciousness

S.NO	Traditional Food Consciousness	Respondents (150Nos.)	Percentage (100%)
01.	**FOOD HABIT**		
	Vegetarian	38	25.0
	Both (veg & Non-veg)	112	75.0
02	**OPINION ABOUT "TRADITIONAL FOOD"**		
	Natural Food	24	16.0
	Authentic Food	5	3.3
	Unprocessed Food	12	8.0
	Herbal Food	8	5.3
	Healthy and Nutritious Food	45	30.0
	Food without additives and preservatives	28	18.7
	Food without synthetic colors	15	10.0
	Others	13	8.7
03	**LEVEL OF AWARENESS**		
	Highly Aware	29	19.3
	Aware	65	43.3
	Moderately Aware	34	22.7
	Unaware	15	10.0
	Highly Unaware	7	4.7

Source: *Primary data*

According to the above table, the majority of respondents (75%) eat both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, while the remaining 25% eat just vegetarian food.

It is clear that the majority of 30 percent of respondents believe that traditional food is "Healthy and Nutritious Food," 18.7% believe that traditional food is "Food without additives and preservatives," 16 percent believe that traditional food is "Natural Food," 10% believe that traditional food is "Food without synthetic colours," and 8.7% believe that traditional food is "Food without additives and preservatives.", 8% of respondents said traditional food was "unprocessed food," 5.3 percent thought traditional food was "herbal food," and the remaining 3.3 percent thought traditional food was "authentic food."

The majority of respondents (43.3%) are aware of traditional food products, 22.7 percent are moderately aware of traditional food products, 19.3 percent are highly aware of traditional food products, 10% are unaware of traditional food products, and the remaining 4.7 percent are highly unaware of traditional food products.

Table 3 : Source of Awareness and Duration of purchase of Traditional Food Products

Source of Awareness	Less than 1Year	1 to 2 years	2 to 3 years	3 to 5 years	More than 5 years
Newspaper, Magazine and Books	34(22.7%)	31(20.7%)	26(17.3%)	29(19.3%)	30(20.0%)
Radio	69(46.0%)	23(15.3%)	15(10.0%)	26(17.3%)	17(11.4%)
Television	64(42.7%)	43(28.7%)	18(12.0%)	20(13.3%)	5(3.3%)
Internet and Social Media	42(28.0%)	97(64.7%)	5(3.3%)	4(2.7%)	2(1.3%)
Friends and Colleagues	33(22.0%)	38(25.3%)	34(22.7%)	20(13.3%)	25(16.7%)
Others (Doctor, Health-Worker, Nurse, Nutritionist, Seminar & Conferences, Promotional etc.,	88(58.7%)	35(23.3%)	12(8.0%)	10(6.7%)	5(3.3%)

Source: *Primary data*

The above table shows that the majority of 22.7 percent of respondents know about Traditional Food Products from newspapers, magazines, and books for less than a year, and the least of 17.3 percent know about Traditional Food Products from newspapers, magazines, and books for 2 to 3 years.

The bulk of respondents (46%) are aware of Traditional Food Products through radio for less than a year, while the least amount of respondents (10) are aware through radio for two to three years.

It is obvious that 42.7 percent of respondents have only been exposed to Traditional Food Products through television for less than a year, while only 3.3 percent have been exposed to Traditional Food Products for more than 5 years

A maximum of 64.7 percent of respondents are aware of Traditional Food Products through the Internet and Social Media for a period of 1 to 2 years, and a minimum of 1.3 percent are aware for a period of more than 5 years.

Between 1 and 2 years, the majority of 25.3 percent of respondents are aware of Traditional Food Products through friends and colleagues, while between 3 and 5 years, the least of 13.3 percent of respondents are aware through friends and colleagues.

Finally, for less than a year, the maximum of 58.7% of respondents are aware of Traditional Food Products through other sources such as doctor, health-worker, nurse, nutritionist, seminar & conferences, promotional, etc., and the minimum of 3.3 percent of respondents are aware through other sources for more than 5 years.

Level of overall consumer awareness and their level of importance for Traditional Food Products :

Testing the Hypothesis -1

Null hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between the respondents' level of importance for

Traditional Food Products and their level of overall consumer awareness.

Alternative hypothesis: There is significant relationship between the respondents' level of importance for Traditional Food Products and their level of overall consumer awareness.

Tool used for testing the hypothesis - χ^2 test

Table 4 :Cross tabulation between the respondents' level of overall consumer awareness and their level of importance for Traditional Food Products

Level of importance for Traditional food products	Level of overall consumer awareness					Total
	Highly Aware	Aware	Neutral	Not Aware	Highly Not Aware	
Highly Aware	6	24	0	0	0	30
Aware	6	62	8	0	0	76
Neutral	8	8	14	0	0	30
Not Aware	0	0	0	2	0	2
Highly Not Aware	4	4	2	2	0	12
Total	24	98	24	4	0	150

Source: Primary data

$\chi^2 = \Sigma (O-E)^2 / E = 37.266$

Degree of freedom = (r-1) (c-1) = (5-1) (5-1) = 16

Calculated Value = 134.92

Table Value = 26.3

The Table value of χ^2 for 16 degree of freedom at 5percent level of significance is 26.3. The calculated value of χ^2 is more than the table value and hence the result rejects the null hypothesis. So there is significant relationship between the respondents' level of importance for Traditional Food Productsand their level of overall consumer awareness.

Suggestions

- Promotional strategies that enhance **brand visibility and consumer engagement** should be prioritized by both established and emerging producers of traditional food products. Consumers have shown a strong preference for advertising formats that raise awareness, making this a key consideration in future sales campaigns.
- **Word-of-mouth promotion** within local and general stores can significantly boost in-store sales. Educating customers at the point of purchase through verbal recommendations or live demonstrations can encourage greater adoption of traditional food products.
- **Publicity and continuous product innovation** play a vital role in the market success of traditional foods. Any modifications or enhancements made by producers—particularly those related to nutritional value or convenience—should be effectively communicated to consumers through value-added marketing efforts.
- There is a growing preference among consumers for **organized retail formats** when purchasing traditional foods. Well-maintained outlets with structured display, clean arrangements, and visually appealing

showcases are more likely to attract and retain customers, thereby cultivating a more traditional food-oriented buying culture.

Conclusion

To achieve the objectives of this study, both **primary and secondary data** were utilized, offering a comprehensive view of consumer behavior. The analysis examined demographic factors and identified key drivers influencing the purchase of traditional food products. Additionally, the study measured consumer awareness and preferences, shedding light on the promotional channels that most effectively influence buyer behavior. It was found that consumers in **Madurai City demonstrate a strong inclination** toward traditional food consumption, driven by cultural familiarity, health consciousness, and product trust. The findings affirm the need for enhanced awareness strategies, improved product access, and robust marketing frameworks to meet the rising demand and sustain consumer interest in traditional food items.

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