

The Impact of COVID-19 on Local Food Consumption Habits in Hungary. Growing Couch Potatoes?

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Abstract. The spread of COVID 19 disease caused unprecedented impacts on consumer habits. It has changed the way we as consumers live, work and shop. The impact of this study was to explore the changes in consumer behavior, with special emphasis on attitudes towards local food, due to COVID-19. We conducted a survey, representative for gender, age, and city-type (N=1000) in Hungary through phone interviews, when the lock-down measures were about to be lifted. Thus, respondents could express their opinion in the light of experiences of social distancing. Statistical analysis (descriptive statics, factor and cluster analysis) were applied involving variables related to attitudes towards food consumption and training habits before and at the end of the pandemic. Schwartz-portrait values (SPV) were also used to describe personalities.

In spite of early positive tendencies reported by key stakeholders of the local food sector, consumers seemed to turn away from the presumably healthy local food on average. Cluster analysis revealed three major parts in our sample. The biggest group (66%) ‘Conformists’ was characterized by minimal changes in the food buying and food preparing habits; and a little bit more interest in doing exercises, compared to the other clusters. The members of the smallest group (11%) purchased more convenience food, cooked more often, and ordered, too, food for the main dishes. Furthermore, they give up regular exercises, thus, they might seem ‘Couch potatoes’ at first sight. Sociodemographic variables revealed that they were typically intellectual workers or managers. Regarding SPVs, this latter group was significantly dominated by the variables of self-enhancement (achievement, power, hedonism). While important elements of lifestyle were apparently not affected by the coronavirus in case of the majority of the Hungarian society, a visible minority did face a period deteriorating health. As this consumer segment is expected to be interested in health-related issues, a potential market gap seems to form if an additional wave of turmoil is foreseen. Innovations related to the development of healthy alternatives for convenience food items, personalized soft training programs might be demanded.

Keywords: health, training, local foods, coronavirus