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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DIGITAL FOOD CONSUMPTION BEYOND CONVENIENCE: FROM CRAVINGS TO COGNITIVE CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of food delivery applications has significantly transformed consumer food consumption patterns by encouraging convenience-oriented eating habits. Although food delivery platforms provide accessibility, speed and pleasure, their continuous usage has also increased unhealthy food consumption among urban consumers. The present study examines the psychological relationship between hedonic food delivery app usages creating health guilt which later on leads to psychological discomfort. The study focus on the end result of cognitive dissonance that consumers use to reduce the discomfort arising from over usage of food delivery apps leading to consumer scapegoatism. The study also explores the ways and means the consumer use to blame food delivery apps, advertisements, promotions and life style that plays a crucial role in transforming consumption behaviours. The study is conducted among urban consumers of Kozhikode district through quantitative research design adopting 200 respondents of food delivery apps. The data collection was done with the help of online questionnaire and correlation analysis was employed to test the relationship between variables. The findings of the study depict a positive relationship between variables like food delivery app usage, health guilt, cognitive dissonance and consumer scapegoatism which will be helpful the marketers, food delivery app creators and consumers to get a proper idea about the impact created by the over usage of food delivery apps on consumers. The study contributes to consumer behaviour literature by introducing consumer scapegoatism as a psychological coping mechanism associated with unhealthy digital food consumption behaviour.



KEYWORDS: Health guilt, Cognitive dissonance, Consumer scapegoatism, Food delivery app usage

INTRODUCTION

The increasing dependence on digital technology has transformed the lifestyle patterns, food habits and behaviour of urban consumers. Due to the busy and competitive life, consumers stick on to the easiest way of maintaining life through digital platforms. Earlier consumers used to visit stores and select their clothes, groceries and necessities, which was more convenient and satisfying but as time and environment changes their preference and choice has also gone through drastic changes. One of the major changes observed in recent years is the rapid growth of food delivery apps, which have become an integral part of city life. Food delivery applications like Swiggy, Zomato, Potafo and similar platforms have provided the consumers with instant access to restaurant food through smart phones and online payment systems. Users have different priorities and preferences for food and have different expectations regarding online food delivery quality and service [1]. Urban life styles, work pressures, changing family structures, values and morale are the reasons for increasing dependence on restaurant style food instead of traditional home cooked meals. This trend has been accelerated by the exponential growth of the use of online food delivery applications (FDAs), social networking sites (SNSs), smartphone devices, and information and communication technologies (ICT) due to their real-time connectivity and accessibility, which influenced online food delivery business a prominent place among busy diners preferring speed and convenience [2]. FDA is an innovative way to buy food [4]. These apps satisfy both functional and emotional needs of consumers by saving time and reduce cooking efforts. The offers, cashbacks, discounts of food delivery apps strengthen consumer's hedonic perception towards online food consumption. As FDA (online-to-offline) mobile services are gaining popularity, consumers' expectations about service delivery have also immensely augmented [3]. Consumers are increasingly becoming aware about the health risk associated with regular consumption of restaurant style food which are high in calories, fat, preservatives, which negatively affect the health and wellbeing [5]. Consumers who are over dependent on unhealthy food may have to face many challenges in life like obesity, nutritional imbalances and lifestyle diseases. Convenience and pleasure associated with food delivery apps is a way to unhealthy food patterns despite of awareness about its negative consequences. This leads to a contradiction between consumer knowledge and actual behaviour which creates a guilt within the consumers that act as a psychological discomfort. Health guilt refers to the discomfort that consumers face while consuming unhealthy food even after being aware about the aftereffects of unhealthy fast foods that creates regret, same and dissatisfaction after excessive consumption [6]. The presence of health guilt creates internal conflict that influences post-consumption evaluation and behaviour. The post-consumption evaluation explains the concept of cognitive dissonance experienced by the consumers when their beliefs contradict their actual purchase decisions. It is a form of mental discomfort that individuals experience

and to reduce the discomfort, consumers may attempt to justify their behaviour, change their attitudes or transfer responsibility to external factors. One of such coping mechanism is consumer scapegoatism. Blaming food delivery apps, restaurants, advertisements, promotions, influencers, discount and cash backs offers for their unhealthy food consumption is consumer scapegoatism. Instead of blaming oneself for the consumption, consumers switch it towards the digital platforms which temporarily reduces the discomfort and restore emotional balance until next unhealthy purchase. The present study focuses on the examining and exploring the psychological relationship between food delivery app usage, health guilt, cognitive dissonance and consumer scapegoatism among urban consumers. The findings of the study contributes to growing literature on urban consumers food habits, food delivery app usages and explains the emerging role of consumer scapegoatism as a behavioural response associated with cognitive dissonance that justify unhealthy food consumptions. The major objectives of the research study are: (1) to examine the role of influence of food delivery app usage on health guilt, (2) to analyze the effect of health guilt on cognitive dissonance, (3) to study the relationship between cognitive dissonance on consumer scapegoatism, and (4) to examine the mediating role of cognitive dissonance. Based on the objectives, the study proposes the hypothesis that establish relationship between variables.

Hypothesis

H1: Food delivery app usage positively influences health guilt.

H2: Health guilt positively influences cognitive dissonance.

H3: Cognitive dissonance positively influences consumer scapegoatism.

H4: Health Guilt positively influences Consumer Scapegoatism among food delivery app users.

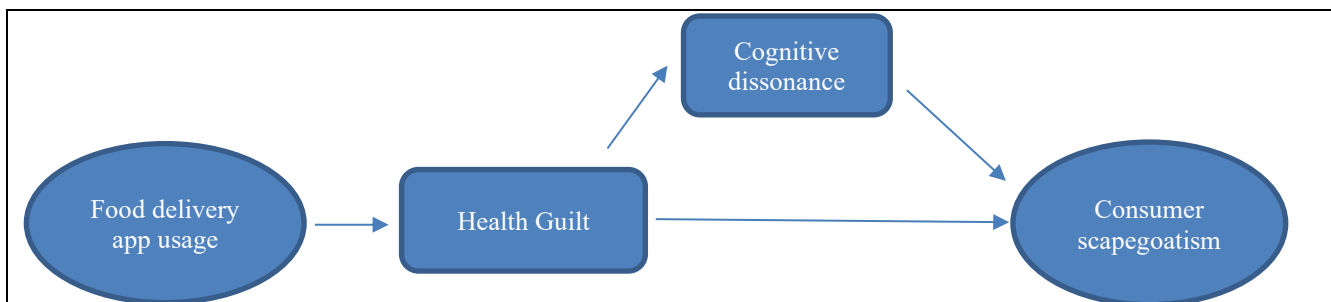


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Methodology and Analysis

The present study uses quantitative research design to examine the relationship between food delivery app usage, health guilt, cognitive dissonance and consumer scapegoatism among urban consumers. The primary data collection process were using structured questionnaire administered among urban food delivery app users who frequently order food through online platforms due to convenience and work pressure. A total of 200 respondents reacted to the questionnaire which was collected using

convenient sampling method. The questionnaire included statements measuring food delivery app usage, health guilt, cognitive dissonance and consumer scapegoatism using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The variables included many sub constructs to test the relationship and the measurement items were developed from previous studies on consumer behaviour and psychology, marketing strategies etc. The collected data were analyzed using Pearson’s correlation analysis to examine the relationship between variables and to test the proposed hypothesis under statistical package for social science (SPSS). Correlation analysis aimed at studying the degree and direction of association among the constructs. The significance level was fixed at 0.01 to ensure statistical reliability and validity. The conceptual framework of the study proposes that food delivery app usages will increase health guilt, which further creates cognitive dissonance due to the inconsistent behaviour between health beliefs and actual consumption that influences consumer scapegoatism, where consumers attribute responsibility for unhealthy eating behaviour to other external factors. The analysis revealed significant positive relationship among all the variables. The findings indicate that frequent use of food delivery apps contributes to health guilt that is vanished temporarily by shifting the blame towards the offer, discounts and advertisements through digital apps. The study has certain limitations, as it is conducted among urban consumers of Kozhikode district with only 200 responses.

Outcomes

Table no.1: Correlation between Food delivery apps usage and Health guilt

		FDA3	HG1
FDA3	Pearson Correlation	1	.591**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
HG1	Pearson Correlation	.591**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Hypothesis 1: The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between FDA3 (Food Delivery App Usage) and HG1 (Health Guilt) among 200 respondents using Pearson’s correlation coefficient. The correlation coefficient of 0.591 indicates a moderate to strong positive relationship between food delivery app usage and health guilt. This means that as respondents’ usage of food delivery applications increases, their feelings of health guilt also tend to increase. Therefore, the relationship observed is unlikely to have occurred by chance. The result supports the assumption that frequent use of food delivery apps may contribute to guilt related to unhealthy eating behaviour or convenience-based consumption patterns.

Table No. 2: Correlation between Health guilt and Cognitive dissonance

		HG1	CD2
HG1	Pearson Correlation	1	.604**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
CD2	Pearson Correlation	.604**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Hypothesis 2: The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between HG1 (Health Guilt) and CD2 (Cognitive Dissonance) among 200 respondents using Pearson’s correlation coefficient. The correlation coefficient of 0.604 indicates a moderate to strong positive relationship between health guilt and cognitive dissonance. This suggests that respondents who experience higher levels of health guilt also tend to experience higher levels of cognitive dissonance. This indicates that increased feelings of health guilt are associated with higher levels of cognitive dissonance among consumers. The result supports the theoretical assumption that guilt arising from unhealthy or convenience-based food consumption may create psychological discomfort and internal conflict in consumer decision-making.

Table No. 3: Correlation between Cognitive dissonance and Consumer scapegoatism

		CD4	CS4
CD4	Pearson Correlation	1	.526**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	200	200
CS4	Pearson Correlation	.526**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	200	200
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Hypothesis 3: The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between CD4 (Cognitive Dissonance) and CS4 (Consumer Scapegoatism) among 200 respondents using Pearson’s correlation coefficient. The correlation coefficient of 0.526 indicates a moderate positive relationship between cognitive dissonance and consumer scapegoatism. This means that respondents who experience higher levels of cognitive dissonance also tend to demonstrate higher levels of consumer

scapegoatism. The result supports the theoretical assumption that consumers experiencing psychological discomfort or inconsistency in their consumption behaviour may attempt to reduce internal tension by attributing responsibility to external entities such as brands, advertisements, or food delivery platforms.

Table No.4 – Regression Model

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	11.714	1	11.714	39.043	.000 ^b
	Residual	59.406	198	.300		
	Total	71.120	199			
a. Dependent Variable: CS4						
b. Predictors: (Constant), HG1						

Hypothesis 4: The ANOVA results indicate that the regression model is statistically significant, $F(1, 198) = 39.043, p < .001$. This suggests that Health Guilt significantly predicts Consumer Scapegoatism. The regression model explains a significant portion of the variance in Consumer Scapegoatism, as the variation explained by the model ($SS = 11.714$) is substantially greater than would be expected by chance when compared with the unexplained variation ($Residual\ SS = 59.406$). Therefore, it can be concluded that Health Guilt exerts a significant influence on Consumer Scapegoatism among respondents.

CONCLUSION

Consumers use food delivery apps for pleasure and convenience as today’s life style makes it necessary in ordering food through apps due to work life pressures. For past many decades as life becomes busy, no one is free to take efforts in cooking homely food for their family. As time passes the family values, moral, culture and life style patterns force the new generations to depend on restaurant style food. Majority of the people enjoy the taste, texture and smell of restaurant style cooking which is a major reason that families stick on to hotel foods. Food delivery apps play a major role in increase the food ordering habits through their offers, advertisement and discounts. Consumers are aware about the health issues of continuously consuming food from outside still cannot make effort to consume healthy homely food. After consuming unhealthy food they feel health guilt and experience psychological discomfort. To reduce the discomfort few of the consumers have taken initiatives to reduce food ordering and makes it a weekly or monthly habit or just on occasions, while some consumers are not ready to change their habits of consuming food from outside and try to reduce discomfort by blaming delivery apps, discounts, advertisements and restaurant promotions. When



consumers start blaming food delivery apps for their unhealthy food consumption it is consumer scapegoatism. The topic focus on emotional conflict the consumer faces when they go for unhealthy consumption due to the influence of hedonic perception formed through food delivery apps which discusses the post- consumption psychology leading to blame attribution behaviour. The study has examined the psychological relationship between food delivery app usage, health guilt, cognitive dissonance and consumer scapegoatism among urban consumers. Consumers experiencing emotional discomfort tend to reduce the internal tension by blaming advertisements, promotions, offers and discounts, marketing strategies of food delivery apps. The findings of the study extend the application of cognitive dissonance theory in the context of food delivery applications and also provides important insights to marketers and consumers who frequently use food delivery apps. Excessive ordering through online platform creates a form of dissatisfaction among consumers. Therefore, food delivery apps and restaurants should consider promoting healthier food choices, balanced meal options and responsible consumption practices that satisfies consumers in long run.

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