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Article

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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

COVID-19 and a way forward for restaurants and street food vendors

Shumaila Zeb^{1*}, Syed Shahwar Hussain² and Asma Javed²

Abstract: COVID-19 has had a drastic impact on every field and walk of life. The long-lasting impacts of this pandemic have changed the way businesses used to be conducted and will have a strong impact on business models as well. The main objective of this qualitative study is to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on restaurants and small stalls of street food vendors in Pakistan and to suggest a way forward. A total of 30 interviews were conducted through conference calls. The findings proved that major issues faced by the restaurants are the massive decline in sales, massive layoffs, no economic activity, and no relief from the government. The major changes required in the existing business models highlighted by the interviewees are proper sanitization, changes in the sitting area, change in menus, and the need for innovative ideas to attract the customers back. The study is useful for the restaurants and street food vendors to help them out in this difficult phase and suggest a way forward to them.

Subjects: Sociology & Social Policy; Hospitality; Industry & Industrial Studies

Keywords: COVID-19; restaurants; street food vendors

1. Introduction

The restaurant industry in Pakistan is changing significantly with an inclined shift in lifestyles and traditional eating habits. According to the survey on the performance of the restaurant industry in Pakistan, it is observed that an average consumer spends 42% of his income on food. Youngsters are more inclined toward going to restaurants or buying food from street food vendors. However, mature adults are also motivated toward dining outs. On average, the trend of eating habits of the locals in the country is increasing almost by 21% annually. The results also show that the growth of the restaurants in Pakistan is more than 20% on annual basis (Memon, 2016).

The restaurant industry is the second largest industry in Pakistan. This industry has a total employment of 16% and consumers of about 180 million. Moreover, the restaurant industry of Pakistan is the

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

COVID-19 has changed the business dynamics. It is the high time to help the business industry in identifying the new needs and norms for their revival and sustainability. The recent study aims to bring in focus the difficulties faced by the restaurants during the lockdown and afterward suggest a way forward. The findings are important for the readers, and they provide new insights for restaurants and street food vendors. It is a dedicated effort to help the restaurants and street food vendors in this pandemic.

world's eighth-largest market. These results make this industry one of the fastest growing industries not only in Pakistan but worldwide as well. Due to changes in the demographics of the population, almost all the family members now work as people do in western countries. Instead of cooking at home, they prefer to dine out. The young generation also enjoys eating in restaurants.

Everything was running smoothly until the end of December 2019 when the entire world was hit by the devastating global pandemic of COVID-19 breakout. The situation gets worrisome in the first two months of 2020 and things get more worst in March 2020. Around 13 March 2020, the government of Pakistan announced a complete lockdown in the country due to COVID-19. On average, more than 1500 patients were reported per day. The number of patients increased to 4000 to 5000 patients per day in May 2020. All restaurants were closed and there was no business for them. Even takeaway and home delivery was also banned by the government. Social distancing of 1 m was imposed to reduce the number of COVID-19 cases, like in other parts of the world (Courtemanche et al., 2020).

In June 2020, the government opened the markets with certain Standard Operating Procedures (SOPS). As per the SOPs, all restaurant staff must cover their mouths by wearing a proper face mask and hand gloves, frequent sanitizing and social distancing were a must. Customers and employees had to wear masks all the time. No customer was allowed to enter the premises if not wearing a mask or having a fever. Also, only take away and home delivery was allowed. But dine-in facility was not permitted by the government till August 10th, 2020. This situation led to a rapid shutdown of restaurants, small hotels, and stalls of food street vendors.

Business industries around the globe lost billions of dollars in this pandemic (Nicola et al., 2020). Many countries including the US announced billions of dollars as bailout packages for businesses as well (Ozili & Thankum, 2020). However, the government of Pakistan does not seek any bailout package for the restaurants and small hotels as of now. No support from the government has added more miseries in the lives of the business community. No bailout package from the government means that small business including restaurants needs to re-adjust themselves as per new requirements (Bartik et al., 2020). This is the high time for the restaurants to think about some shift in their existing business model (Bakers et al., 2020; Richards & Rickard, 2020; Seetharaman, 2020). Therefore, in the absence of any bailout package, the pressure was exerted on the government to resume the economic activities at the earliest.

During the lockdown, there was certain news regarding the home delivery boys getting tested positive for COVID-19. Even such videos were shared on different social media platforms. No one can claim the authenticity of the news and videos. But these types of news and videos increase the vulnerability of the restaurants. The situation is even worse for the street food vendors. These types of rumors and news are enough to scare the people before they even think of ordering the food online or getting a takeaway. In such circumstances people are reluctant to buy anything from the food street vendor stalls. It becomes even harder for them to earn their bread and butter in this pandemic. In the current scenario, a need was assessed to investigate the main issues faced by the restaurants and street food vendors and suggest a way forward.

The current study is an effort to help the restaurants and street food vendors in this situation. COVID-19 has proved that this sector is financially fragile. The small businesses including small restaurants, hotels, and street food vendors are badly affected by this pandemic. Therefore, the main objective of the study is to assess the issues faced by the restaurants, small hotels, and street food vendors during the current pandemic and suggest some recommendations accordingly.

The study is qualitative. A total of 30 interviews were conducted to achieve the main objective of the study. The findings highlight the main issues faced by the restaurants, street food vendors, and the way forward as well. The findings indicate that the restaurants and street food vendors are facing a lot of issues including staff layout, no bailout package from the government, no economic activity hence no business at all. The findings have important implications for the restaurants because they

suggest some way forward. The findings highlighted that post-COVID-19 period would require restaurants to bring some innovation not only in the menu but in the services offered by them as well.

The remaining paper is organized as follows: after introduction research setting is described in Section II. The data analysis procedure is elaborated in Section III. Findings and discussions are given in Section IV. The conclusion is provided in section V.

2. The research setting

Interviews were conducted from the 30 individuals working either in the capacity of managers, owners of the restaurants or small hotels, or street food vendors. The interviews were conducted through conference calls on a one-on-one basis. The participants were selected based on their relevant experience in the restaurants. A purposive sampling technique was used for approaching the individuals. This technique is used because it effectively accommodates a small number of respondents (Marshall, 1996). The study particularly has chosen those participants as our respondents of the study who willingly participated in the study and answered all questions in the best way possible to be in line with the main objectives of the study.

Two criteria were specified for selecting the respondents of the study. First, only those managers and owners were selected with a minimum experience of two years. Second, only those participants were interviewed who could easily make a comparison in the operations of the business before and during the pandemic. These individuals were accessed using personal contacts. All interviews were taken using conference call due to the lockdown in the country. The study used minimum of three individuals as an interviewer to conduct an interview. The main purpose of including more interviewers was that one individual asked the relevant questions related necessarily to achieve the objective of the study. The other two were taking notes to capture the main points of the interview. The other two individuals were experts in their fields. Their experience was used for validity and reliability purpose. The questions were asked by keeping in mind the previous literature as well (Dube et al., 2020). The duration of the interviews was about 25–50 minutes. The sample comprised 27 male and 3 female participants.

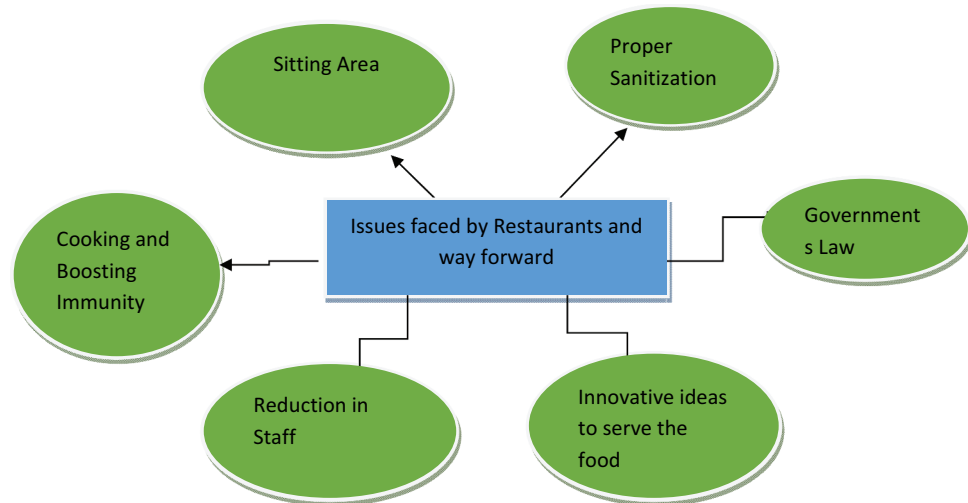
The main focus of the interviews was to discuss all the problems and issues coming in the ways of earning revenue during the COVID-19 pandemic by the restaurants, small hotels, and street food vendors. The second focus was to suggest the way forward. The interview guide was designed to gain insight into the problems faced by the restaurants and street food vendors during the lockdown and discussions were also done on the possible way forward to improve the revenues earned by them. Questions are framed to make interviewees comfortable in providing answers and thus lead to “thick descriptions” rather than just surface explanations (Flick, 2009; Nadeem & Mumtaz, 2018). The interview questions were developed through a few high-quality articles to ensure they comprehensively cover all the essential areas.

The interview guide was designed in three main parts. In the first part, pre-screening and attribute questions were asked, e.g., whether s/he decided to start a restaurant or street food stall and since how long had s/he is associated with this business. The second section focused on the problems faced by the participants during the lockdown. Like, what were the main issues faced by the interviewees during the lockdown? How did they manage to approach suppliers and customers during the partial lockdown? What were the main issues faced by them to attract the customers? Finally, they were asked to discuss the way forward to improve the revenue of their respective business. For example, in their opinion what could be done to revive the industry? Whether government must intervene and provide certain bailout packages or not?

3. Data analysis procedure

The data of all the interviews conducted are analyzed using a five-stage process. The five stages include compilation, disassembling data, re-assembling data, interpretation, and conclusion (Yin, 2015). A coding structure was designed before conducting the interviews. It was later refined

Figure 1. Main themes identified.



through a systematic assessment of transcriptions and coding (King, 2004). The transcription and coding were done separately by different experts of the field to identify the main themes of the study. The main themes identified in the interviews are presented in Figure 1. The discussions and key findings for each area are also provided. The narrative arrays are also given in the quotations in Table 1 (Flick, 2009).

The anonymity of the interviewees is also maintained in the study. Each quotation presented in the study is followed by a code having three unique parts. The first part of the code presents the participant number; the second part is the designation, while the third is the number of years spent on this job title. For example, “P1-Owner-2” presents participant no. 1 who is the owner of the restaurant, and is on the same designation for the last 2 years. Similarly, “P2-Manager-2” presents that participant no 2 is a manager of the restaurant and is on the same designation for the past two years. The same is applicable for the food street vendor as well. The language of the interviewees is also translated from the native Urdu language to English to make it more understandable and part of the study. The data were independently coded by the two researchers to ensure accuracy and reduced unbiased results.

4. Findings and discussions

The success of the restaurant industry depends on a lot of factors including taste, presentation of the food, menu, and ambiance, etc. This was true in the pre-COVID-19 period. However, COVID-19 has completely changed the rules of the game. In the pre-COVID-19 period, restaurants only had to rely on the number of foods selling techniques, which unfortunately will be obsolete in the post-COVID-19 world. This pandemic has changed the thinking pattern of the population. People are now more worried about their health. They are trying hard to find new ways to boost their immune system which could help them to fight against this serious disease. This pandemic has changed the overall paradigm. This new paradigm involves more care and more innovational strategies to cater to the customer needs and wants. In the post-COVID-19 world, where social distancing will be the norm, the restaurant industry will have to reinvent itself altogether. The situation is more alarming and vulnerable for the food street vendors. They may find this time more difficult because of the transparency involved in preparing the food. This is a hard time for the whole industry ranging from high-class restaurants to the small street food vendor having a small stall over the corner of the street.

Table 1. Themes identified

Themes	Quotation supporting each theme
Sitting Area	<p>“It’s a challenge for me to use the space effectively manner. I do not want to compromise on the revenues but still, have to maintain social distancing.” [P10owner 3]</p> <p>“Social Distancing needs to be maintained otherwise customers won’t come. But what about us as an owner of the business. How to meet the expenses?” [P3 Owner 4]</p> <p>“We can accommodate more customers and we are willing to do so. But due to social distancing, we have to accommodate fewer customers.” [P7 Manager 5]</p> <p>“When people come to buy anything from my stall if they see 4 to 5 people already standing they just go away without buying the food.” [P8 street food vendor 6]</p>
Cooking and Boosting Immunity System matters a lot	<p>“I am working in the restaurant for the last five years. It never happened earlier now customers are more inclined to see how their food is being cooked. Whether we take care of the hygiene of the food or not.” [P5 Manager 07]</p> <p>“Some customers even prefer to stand with chefs to see how things are going on in the kitchen.” [P18 Owner 9]</p> <p>“Now people ask me when I have a stall how often do I wash my hands? They are now more concerned about the way I cook the food. [P14 Street food vendor 3]”</p>
Proper Sanitization	<p>“Oh My God! People nowadays are too much curious about proper sanitization. They keep on asking and commenting on the quality of the sanitizers being used in the restaurant.” [P9 Manager 4]</p> <p>“When customers come to buy some food they even ask us that whether we properly sanitize the whole restaurant or not, if yes how often.” [P17 Owner 5]</p> <p>“One day I forgot my sanitizer at home. Many customers came to my stall but they did not buy anything just because sanitizer was not visible.” [P21 street food vendor 7]</p>
Reduction in Staff	<p>“I always feel sorry whenever I have to make decisions regarding layoff. But nothing is in my hands I cannot afford more staff in such circumstances. I wish and pray that things get better and I call all of them.” [P18 owner 10]</p> <p>“It’s always heartbreaking to say goodbye to even hard working staff but that’s the way things are.” [P20 Owner 8]</p> <p>“Due to less order and less work we, unfortunately, had to lay off a few members of our staff.” [P3 Owner 4]</p>
Government Law	<p>“Government have already issued SOPs related to the opening the businesses. We are adhering to them.” [P3 Owner 4]</p> <p>“We believe that it is important to follow the SOPS issued by the government. But I guess agencies must be more vigilant as far as implementation is concerned.” [P27 Manager 8]</p> <p>“For us, safety of all the staff and our customers comes first” [P1 Owner 3]</p>

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Themes	Quotation supporting each theme
Innovative ideas to serve the food	<p>“Time requires us to be more innovative to attract more customers.” [P5 Manager 7]</p> <p>“We no longer can attract the customer by using the old marketing techniques. It’s a time to change and think out of the box.” [P24 Manager 3]</p> <p>“Environment is changing rapidly so we need to adjust ourselves accordingly.” [P22 Owner 11]</p> <p>“This is the time to entirely change our business model. We need to keep in mind this pandemic changed the way people used to think. Change in paradigm needs a new business model for a successful business” [P3 owner 4]</p>

Let us now have a look at the main themes identified by the participants of the study. The themes were determined based on the responses of the interviewees and experts. These suggestions may help the restaurants in bringing back the customers.

4.1. Sitting area

Gone are the days when restaurants could accommodate as many customers as they wanted in a small space dine-in environment. People had no problem sitting close to each other pre-COVID-19. But now the situation has changed the social norms of interaction. As per World Health Organization (WHO), social distancing requires a minimum distance to be maintained between the individuals. So restaurants either need more space or have to accommodate fewer individuals at a time. Majority of the participants raised this concern. Fewer customers or fewer tables within a restaurant mean less revenue for the restaurants. They even need to re-arrange workstations and require marking spots where people can stand to maintain social distance. Social distancing is very important in straightening the infection curve and cutting down the number of infected cases (Kim et al., 2020)

4.2. Cooking and boosting immunity system matters a lot

Several restaurants would require changing their menu. Now customers are most concerned about how the food is being cooked. Customers would like to see food being cooked live from scratch in front of their own two eyes. Many respondents believe that restaurants would now need to pay more attention to improve the overall hygiene of the food to gain back the trust of the customers. Similarly, in the post-COVID-19 period, the customer would change their choices or preferences of food. Customers not only require delicious food but also require boosting their immune system as well. A strong immune system would help them to fight against such contagious diseases (Güney & Sangün, 2021). COVID-19 has changed people’s taste for food. For example, people now have started preferring organic food over processed food (Qi et al., 2020)

4.3. Proper sanitization

All the respondents had this concern that the restaurants and street food vendors have to invest more in sanitization. They need to keep sanitizing their restaurants and all the essential utensils being used. Even street food vendors need to keep a watchful eye on proper sanitization methods to gain the trust of the customers. As mostly discussed, the availability of sanitizers and disposable gloves is an essential part of the whole industry. It is an essential requirement for the staff members to be wearing gloves, masks at all times, and washing hands on regular basis is a must. Also, staff must keep on sanitizing their hands at regular intervals throughout the day. This whole process of sanitization will increase operational cost of the business.

For example, Starbucks, Dunkins Doughnuts' and McDonald's are focusing highly on regular hand washing to prevent the spread of the disease (Lucas, 2020). They also advertise that their employees frequently wash their hands and sanitize the surfaces like door handles, table tops, etc. to prevent the spread of this contagious disease. The majority of the restaurants also have started health screening of their employees, keep a strict check and balance on proper mask wearing, avoiding contact with live poultry, and environmental sanitization (Lai & Wong, 2020).

4.4. Reduction in staff

Pakistan is a country where salaries are low and there would be hardly a few among the restaurants that would be paying overtime to the staff. Now because of this pandemic and fewer customers in the restaurant, the many owners believe that now restaurants would need less service staff. This is the most dangerous outcome of this pandemic. People are losing their jobs and lots of people are facing economical turbulence because of this pandemic. Jobs are lost and even there are cut down in the compensation as well. This crisis has also lead to the reduction of the workforce in the service industry as it has reduced the demand in the tourist and restaurant industry (Gurtner, 2016; Ivanov et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2019; Walters et al., 2016, 2019).

4.5. Government law

The SOPs issued by the government is already being shared with all the business community including restaurants. Few participants thought that the law imposing agencies must become more vigilant and stringent as far as its implication is concerned. For example, proper sanitization of the restaurants and even street food vendors is very much important for the health of every individual. As per SOPs, no employee or staff must be allowed to work or come on premises if having fever or any symptoms of COVID-19. This cost needs to be bear again by the restaurants themselves. Government assistance is also important in postponing the payment of local taxes and other fees (Israeli et al., 2011; Israeli & Reichel, 2003; Perl & Israeli, 2011)

4.6. Innovative ideas to serve the food

Most respondents believe that restaurants have accepted the paradigm shift and started attracting customers by using different innovative techniques. The majority of the restaurants were utilizing their car park space to serve the food along with the takeaway and home delivery. Customers were directed to eat within their cars. The drive-through service is also a new initiative taken by a few restaurants these days. They also provide small table sets, which can easily fit in the cup holder between the two front seats of a car. Thus, providing customer a feeling of dining out in a safe and protected environment is the need of time as well. More innovative ideas are needed for safety to minimize the spread of disease (Kim et al., 2020).

The pictorial presentation of themes identified in the study is listed below:

5. Conclusion

COVID-19 has completely changed the norms of life. All economic activities were shut down during the pandemic. Now the government of Pakistan has announced to lift the lockdown to resume the economic activities in the country. However, the world is still not COVID-19 free. Therefore, preventive measures are to be ensured by the general public for safety. Even after relaxing the lockdown and even bringing everything to the normal restaurants and food street vendors need to change the existing business model. The economy of Pakistan has suffered from income fall so the people today are worried about the basic necessities of life rather than luxuries. In such a scenario, it becomes even harder for the restaurants, small hotels, and street food vendors to attract customers.

Due to the economic conditions of Pakistan, the government did not announce any bailout package for the industry that means the industry themselves have to work hard to go back once again to the earlier position. Therefore, the main aim of the study is to assess the problems faced by the restaurant industry during the pandemic and suggest a way forward that may help them to survive during these hard times. A total of 30 interviews were conducted with the owners and

managers of the restaurants and street food vendors. Few street food vendors were also part of the sample. The major issues identified by the managers and owners of the restaurants include a reduction in the revenues, layoffs. The respondents highlighted the need to bring innovation in the existing business models followed by the restaurants and food vendors. They not only need to change their existing menu but to change the ambiance as well to maintain social distancing.

These are a few suggestions that may be applied by the restaurant industry to survive in post-COVID-19 days. There is no doubt that time is hard for every individual. Nothing can bring lives at a normal pace. Things will take time to settle down. Even ease in the lockdown will cause a dent in the earnings, but still, it will be better than closing the operation and having no economic activity at all.

6. Managerial implications

The fact remains the same, even when things settle down; they will not be the same as they were in the past. Even when dining out becomes permissible, people may still be hesitant to eat out, and their disposable income may also be much lower. Additionally, social distancing will require tables to be spread far apart, meaning the same rentals and utilities but the capacity for much lesser customers at a time. The new paradigm may require that restaurants need to change their menus, cutlery, crockery, seating arrangements, etc. There is a need to bring some innovation in the existing businesses to attract customers. The more sanitization and disposable equipments being used in the business increases operational cost of the restaurants. The increased hygiene requirements, more usage of disinfectants, and the general overheads will skyrocket, while revenues are expected to decrease. The other major unavoidable factor is the simultaneous shrinking of the economy, causing general income levels of the individual to fall. Since dining out or eating foods from the restaurants food is generally considered a luxury expenditure in Pakistan.

The findings of the study are important for the policymakers, regulators, management of restaurants and food street vendors. The findings highlighted the main issues faced by the restaurants and food vendors. The findings also suggested few ways forward to increase the revenues of the concerned businesses.

7. Limitations and future research

The recent study is a dedicated effort to present the way forward to the restaurants and food vendors. The main limitation of the study was that it was conducted during the lockdown period in Pakistan. Access to the participants was very difficult during that phase. Now when partial lockdown prevails in the country same exercise can be done to investigate the changes done by the restaurants in their business in the current scenario. Further, future research can also be done to investigate the new changes adopted by the restaurants to protect their customers and employees from this contagious disease.

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