

How COVID-19 affected consumers' preferences and attitudes toward foods with Protected Designation of Origin (PDO)

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Abstract – This study assesses the impact of COVID-19 on consumers’ preferences and attitudes toward local food products. To this end, a survey was conducted in Barcelona (Spain) among 240 consumers in February 2020 (Before the coronavirus lockdown) and among 600 consumers in November 2020. The survey collected information on purchasing and consumption habits, knowledge, perceptions, preferences, and willingness to pay for the Reus hazelnut Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and L’Alt Urgell - Cerdanya Cheese Protected Designation of Origin (D.O.P.). A comparison of the data collected in February and November was undertaken to assess the impact of COVID-19.

Keywords – Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), COVID, 19, Consumer behaviors, consumer preferences, willingness to pay.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has created one of the biggest public-health, social, and economic crises in the world, especially in the most affected countries (China, Italy, Spain, France, United Kingdom, and the United States, among others). Several countries were forced to order nationwide lockdown with different drastic restrictions to stop the spread of the pandemic. The consequences of this uncertain situation are drastic and are reflected by the increase of unemployment, the decrease of wages, and purchasing power, among others. This unpredictable and unexpected situation has created an atmosphere of fear, panic, and uncertainty among consumers. Literature (Kelly and Schewe, 1975; Zurawicki and Braidon, 2005; Ang et al., 2001) has shown that times of crisis alter consumer behavior.

The behavior alterations are mostly reflected by a decrease of consumption, a fall of expenditure, a change in spending allocation, and elimination or postponing of major purchases, an increase of brand switching, a decrease of brand loyalty, an increase of price sensitivity, an increase of the use of discounts, price reductions and neighborhood shops, a higher emphasis on information process, shift in shopping place, a change in the relative importance of product attributes, an increase of preference for home products, and a decrease of waste, among others.

This study assesses the impact of COVID-19 on consumers’ preferences and attitudes toward local food products. The impact of COVID-19 is assessed comparing consumers’ preferences before and during the COVID-19.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

To this end, a survey was conducted in Barcelona (Spain) among 240 consumers in February 2020 (Before the coronavirus lockdown) and among 600 consumers in November 2020. The survey collected information on purchasing and consumption habits, knowledge, perceptions, preferences, and willingness to pay for the Reus hazelnut Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and L’Alt Urgell - Cerdanya Cheese Protected Designation of Origin (D.O.P.). A comparison of the data collected in February and November was undertaken to assess the impact of COVID-19.

The survey included different blocs of questions on knowledge of DOPs, importance of the attributes “local”, D.O.P. I.G.P., perceptions, purchase and consumption habits, WTP and participants’ sociodemographic characteristics.

Both samples used in February and November 2020 were representative of the population of Catalonia in terms of sex and age.

RESULTS

Before the COVID-19, 52% of consumers usually buy Hazelnuts. This percentage increases with the COVID-19 and it reached 60% in November 2020. However, we can not affirm that this increase of the purchase of hazelnuts is due to the COVID-19.

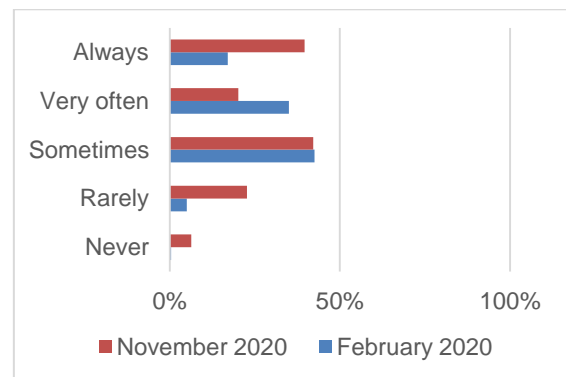


Figure 1: How often do you usually buy HAZELNUTS?

The percentage of consumers who know the REUS D.O.P. HAZELNUTS increased significantly with the COVID-19. In the study conducted in February 2020, 54.17% of consumers know the REUS D.O.P. HAZELNUTS, while in November 2020 this percentage reached 72.16%. This demonstrate clearly that the COVID-19 had a positive impact on consumer familiarity with the local products (the REUS D.O.P. HAZELNUTS). This is due in part to the increase of consumers’ interest in local products.

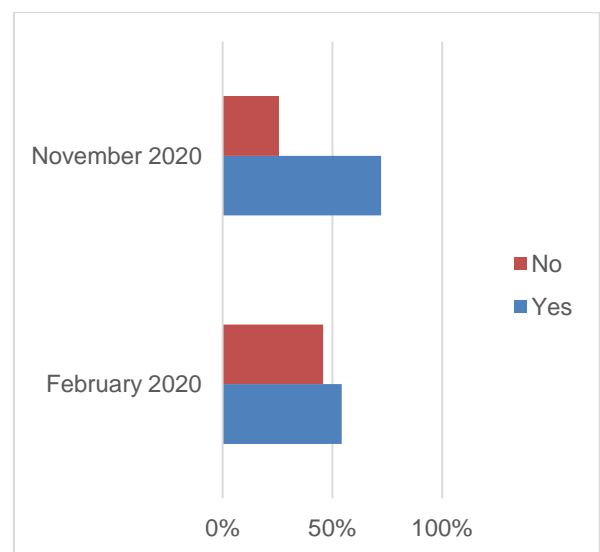


Figure 2: Do you know the REUS D.O.P. HAZELNUTS?

The percentage of consumers who purchase the REUS D.O.P. HAZELNUTS also increased with the COVID-19. In the first study, 54.16% of participants confirmed that they have bought the REUS D.O.P. HAZELNUTS, while this segment represented 65.97% in the second study.

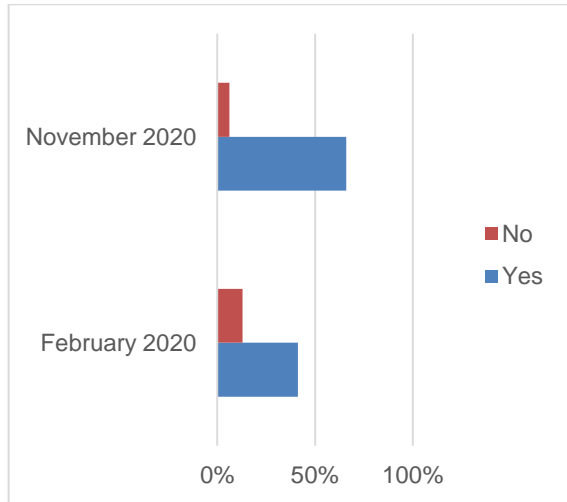


Figure 3: Have you ever bought the REUS D.O.P. HAZELNUTS?

Consumers' WTP for the local products with D.O.P has not changed. This means that the COVID-19 has no effect on consumers' WTP for the local products.

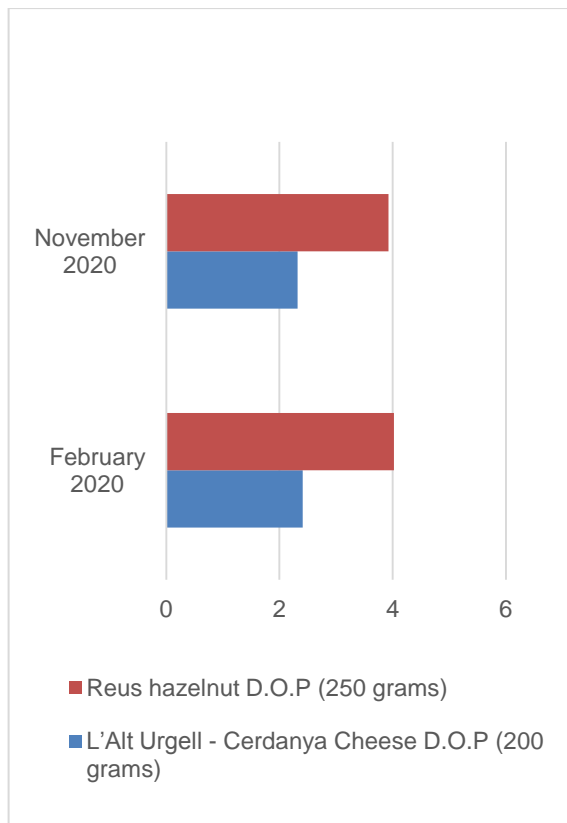


Figure 4: WTP (euros)

CONCLUSIONS

Results showed that the COVID-19 increased significantly consumers' interest, preferences, familiarity and purchasing intentions of Reus hazelnut Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and L'Alt Urgell - Cerdanya Cheese Protected Designation of Origin (D.O.P.). These positive shifts in consumer behaviors are in line with the different actions conducted by local authorities in the last years to promote the purchase and consumption of local products. Many of these shifts will form new consumer behaviors for years to come. Moreover, most of these new consumer behaviors are still forming, giving companies an opportunity to adapt to the new reality and to meet the new consumers' needs.

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