

**Attitudes and Behaviors of Pork Consumers During COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered food buying habits for United States consumers. In the spring of 2020, consumers faced unprecedented meat shortages and price spikes when purchasing animal protein in the grocery store. Increased meat prices were mostly the result of declining meat supply following the closures of meatpacking plants (Attwood & Hajat, 2020, USDA, 2020). According to Aday and Aday (2020), “production capacity of pork facilities decreased by approximately 25% in late April” (p. 170). Increased demand also played a role in pork shortages, as many consumers stockpiled protein sources from ongoing fears associated with food shortages and lockdowns (Attwood & Hajat, 2020, Hobbs, 2020). The purpose of this study was to describe consumers’ attitudes toward pork consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic and long-term consumer protein preferences.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The Total Food Quality (TFQ) Model examines the expectations a consumer forms prior to purchasing a food product as well as their perception of product quality which influences future purchases (Grunert, 2005). This model combines the various approaches taken to determine food quality including a means–end approach, expectancy value approaches, and economics of information approaches (Grunert, 2005). As consumers were faced with various protein supply disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the TFQ Model serves as a basis to gain understanding of important consumer factors in choosing protein for their diet.

### **Methodology**

This was a descriptive quantitative study utilizing survey research methods. The target population for this research was United States food consumers who had purchased pork from grocery stores during the COVID-19 pandemic. The accessible population was pork purchasers with access to Facebook. Researchers conducted a survey through social media targeted to rural females who buy the food for their families, 67 responses were received. Researchers utilized the TFQ model to develop a series of questions to determine the purchasing preferences of participants. The instrument was reviewed for face and content validity by a panel of experts ( $n=2$ ) with expertise in survey instrumentation. Specifically, researchers asked consumers to provide the following information: (1) How often do you think about where your food comes from? (2) How has COVID-19 changed your protein buying habits, specifically with pork? (3) Why do you choose to buy a meat product? (4) Where do you buy your meat products? (5) In the past week, how many meals have you prepared that involved meat? (6) In the past week, how many meals have you prepared that involved pork? (7) Which meats have you purchased in the past month? (8) Which, if any, of the following proteins have you been hearing more about in the news/media since the arrival of COVID-19? (9) Which proteins do you plan to purchase more or the same amount of in the future? (10) Why do you choose or choose not to purchase pork? Questions one through nine were multiple choice; question ten was a short answer question.

### **Results/Findings**

Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported thinking daily about where their food comes from, and an additional 30% reported thinking about their food source on a weekly basis. When asked how COVID had changed consumer’s pork buying habits, 3 in 4 (76%) reported no change in

buying habits, 12% purchased less pork, 6% reported buying more pork, and 6% reported buying in bulk. Consumer agreed taste (77%) was the most important factor in choosing a meat product, followed by price (61%), where meat was sourced (41.8%), health benefits (30%), convenience (25%), and label preferences (10%). A majority (79%) of respondents sourced their pork from local farmers or butchers, whereas 57% purchased pork primarily from grocery stores, and 27% from local markets. Over one-half (52%) of consumers reported eating pork at 0-5 meals in the past week, and 39% reported eating pork at 6-10 meals in the previous week.

In the previous month, 85% of consumers purchased chicken products, 82% purchased pork, 79% purchased beef, 33% bought seafood, 22% purchased turkey, 3% purchased plant-based alternative, and 3% had purchased none of these. When asked about future buying habits, 90% of customers planned to eat the same or more amount of beef, only 78% of customers planned to buy the same or more pork and chicken, 36% seafood, 24% turkey, 3% plant-based alternatives, and 5% none. Sixty-three percent of consumers reported hearing more about beef and pork in the news during the pandemic, whereas 28% reported hearing more about chicken, 8% about plant-based alternatives, and 20% hearing about none of these.

### **Conclusions**

Nine in ten consumers in our study consider where their food comes from at least once per week. Consumers reported chicken as the most purchased protein currently. A 2011 study of meat consumption in the United States which indicated that there is “a rise in poultry consumption beginning in the 1950s through recent decades to make up a high proportion of the total meat consumed in the USA” (Daniel et al., 2011, p.578). However, these data may indicate a plateau of chicken demand for these customers. Beef and pork dominated the news cycle during the pandemic; however, poultry was still the top choice for consumers. When asked about future purchases, respondents signaled intentions to buy more beef than chicken or pork. Researchers noted the large proportion of bulk pork purchases during the pandemic and attribute these habits to the mostly rural population. Consumers still prioritize taste when purchasing protein, and value is also an important factor in choosing meat.

### **Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession**

Our findings support the TFQ model in taste and value reign supreme in consumer preference for proteins. The COVID-19 pandemic food shortages and subsequent news coverage of supply chain issues may have impacted protein demand through agenda setting theory implications. Although beef and pork were front and center in the minds of consumers, they continued to purchase poultry protein as their top choice. An overwhelming majority of consumers in this study purchased pork from local butchers or farmers. Perhaps small, local butchers and farmers were less affected by nationwide supply chain issues. Are these buying habits permanent? Consumers still demand taste and prices. If pork is to remain competitive, marketing should focus on taste, preparation, and value to consumers.

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