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Are we Pavlov's dogs? A study on Consumer Behaviour and Food Trends Online

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ABSTRACT

Social media has a lot of potential and powers whether it be in terms of connecting people, or awareness generation amongst masses, yet the most powerful one has been in terms of influencing and creating trends. From giving us portals to book tickets to exhibit talent, or in ordering food, to buying clothes to some portals that may even take us to another world (the NASA inter-galaxy portal) there have been a creation of certain trends and consumption patterns. The most recent “egg post” that went viral breaking all other records of being the most shared, liked and reposted thing on the internet not only highlights the potential of social media in influencing masses but also in creating a new consumer behaviour and reception of trends. This consumer is not only affected by the market factors but also by social perception. The present study attempts to identify how social media plays a part in becoming the stimuli for us as it creates a false perception of hunger and consumer behaviour in the food industry, conducted over a pan-Indian sample size of 150 respondents, 16 years and above of age (who are most exposed to socio-economic trends). While Pavlov's Experiment in psychology gives us a brief understanding about the classical conditioning and how brain tends to react in a particular fashion to a given stimulus. On the other hand, Hunger Motive theory talks about the fashion in which 'hypothalamus' controls our biological feeling of hunger and points out that it is not restricted to the stomach.

The research borrows from these theories of Psychology and compares the results of the survey with the general opinion as floated amidst the net savvy population. Thus the attempt is to answer the question, “Are we Pavlov's dogs?”.

The limitation of the study lies in the diverse food habits and understanding of the questionnaire.

Key Words: Pavlov's Dogs, Food as a trend, Hunger Motive, Food, Social Media, consumer behaviour

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Economists believe that consumer behaviour can be monitored by reading the utility derived from the consumption over a period of time. The utilitarian study assumes that the more a thing is consumed the satisfaction (utility) derived from it decreases. While generally, the total utility derived during a consumption period rises at a negative slope after reaching its maximum and marginal utility turns negative, we can't predict the same for the recently emerging trends. Fuelled by the social media and accepted by people as norms and 'fitting-in' techniques, we see that social media posts, including food blogging, reviewing and food making (cooking) and tasting videos are highly viewed by consumers across the globe. These visuals tend to become stimuli for us as they make us think more about consuming and possessing certain food items that create a perception of status symbol/ lifestyle symbol. Pavlov's Experiment and the recent trend: Ivan Pavlov, a Russian psychologist studied conditioning while conducting his study on dogs. He noticed that the dogs didn't salivate only while having food but also when they even just saw it, noticed the man who usually brought it and even when they heard the footsteps of their feeder. He conducted several experiments and gave us terms like 'Unconditioned Stimulus' and 'conditioned stimulus' (181), further elaborating on how one learns through associating and substituting. He mentions that after a period of learning, the natural stimuli can be substituted by conditioned stimulus to achieve a natural response. The study borrows on the same principle, highlighting that the modern audiences have learnt to adapt to digital stimuli and replaced it to the natural stimuli (here an image of a hotdog as presented on a food site becomes the digital stimulus v/s a real hot dog at a vendor would become the natural stimulus). The consumers of internet ages, who have resorted to apps and websites for ordering food rely on their visual perception to back their perception of taste and often respond similarly to both online and offline stimuli (here food). The strategy helps different food chains, suppliers and cooks to create false demand for their continuous supply, gaining profits out of perception illusion created on the social media. Sometimes they also play along the social acceptability cards and present their goods as the most consumed and publically favoured commodities creating another level of class-consciousness. On looking at these facts, one ponders over the question, "Are we Pavlov's Dogs?" being conditioned to look at stimuli and connect it to our taste and hunger perceptions, adding to the newer trends and patterns of food consumption and reception. **The role of Instincts:** Instincts have been classified in a variety of ways by different psychologists. M.C. Dougall insisted that an "instinctive behaviour is associated with some emotional experience"; he linked instinct of food seeking to emotion of appetite, implying an "innate urge compelling an organism to make attempt for getting food and to devour it".

(M.C. Dougall as qtd by Mangal, 73) This shows that the visual stimuli of food images, videos, and/or words that highlight the reception of a certain item (including advertisements) all contribute in evoking our instinct of hunger, making us want to consume a certain food commodity, as it looks appealing.

Cognitive theory and Activation Theories of emotion playing a part in consumption Cognitive theory:

"Our physical arousal together with our perception and cognition jointly determine which emotions we feel" (Schachter and Singer) Magda Arnold added, that "cognitive processes control how we interpret our feelings and how we act on them."

Dominant cognitive element of our behaviour in the form of our previous knowledge and our interpretation of the present situation directly affect our emotional experience. (80)

Activation theory:

Donald B Lindsley, refers to the view that emotion represents a state of heightened arousal rather than being a unique type of psychological, physiological or behavioural process. "Arousal is considered to lie on a wide continuum ranging from a very low level such as deep sleep to such extremely agitated states as rage or extreme anger." (Lindsley, 1951) The theory, in other words, refers to the view that emotion represents a state of heightened arousal.

This state of arousal and our instincts of consumption, along with social perceptions of the food add to the overall

value of the item in terms of taste, social value and even add to our 'acquiring of tastes'.

Perceptual illusions and a play via visuals

Represent gross misjudgment or false perception, the sensory information received by our sensory receptors is interpreted and given some meaning through the process of perception, sometimes this interpretation goes wrong so that the resulting perception fails to correspond with reality, such false perception is called perceptual illusion.

This includes: Illusions of Size, illusions of length, Illusion of curvature, horizontal- vertical illusions and illusions of movement.

Illusions of perspective (Ponzo illusion)- caused on account of misleading perspective cue as we hasten to add a third dimension to the stimulus. (Mangal, 119-122)

Ponzo illusion contributes to the false perception of a food image to appear as tasty or “worth the value”

There are several advertisements that play on the very foundation of this thought. The perception of a business and its products or service on consumers has a dramatic effect on their buying behavior. It is because of this reason, businesses spend a lot of money marketing themselves, honing their customer service and doing everything they can to favorably influence the perceptions of target consumers. With careful planning and execution, a business can influence those perceptions and foster profitable consumer behaviors, which is exactly how the food business these days target audiences via building a virtually glamorous perception,. This also includes the hyping of a commodity making it a social symbol, a Weblin good (like diamonds) and a must have had experience that creates a false class division.

Zimmerman and Shimoga in their study conducted a survey of 350 individuals on “The effects of food advertising and cognitive load on food choices” and concluded that televised food advertising strongly impacts individual food choice, and these impacts are magnified when individuals are cognitively occupied by other tasks.

Survey and Results

The present study borrows from all the theories mentioned above and apply them to a survey of people from across the country, with varied ages and consumption patterns who were asked certain questions regarding the social media and its impact on consumption patterns. The common thread between these individuals was their use of social media. There were recorded differences in opinions of different age groups, while some elder consumers didn't mind in experimenting with different food items, the younger consumers (restricted by budget constraints) were not as open to experimenting and feared the trap of false perceptions on the Internet. There are around 149 recorded responses of individuals from the country living in different cities, from Metros, to small towns like Jodhpur, Dehradun, and Meerut. The study also saw that the place of residence too influenced the food consumption patterns, wherein Metros had better availability of food variety and delivery options, small town had restricted options and even though the individuals felt like the salivating Pavlov's dogs, responding to the visual stimuli, they could not contribute to the demand generation process in the food market. Presented below are some of the recorded responses and an analysis of the charts.

When asked whether they thought that food blogging/ reviewing and digital portrayal of food has changed eating habits, a majority voted for yes, closely followed by a doubt on the occurrence of such an event.

Do you think food blogging and reviewing and tv shows on food have created a false palate and changed eating habits?

149 responses

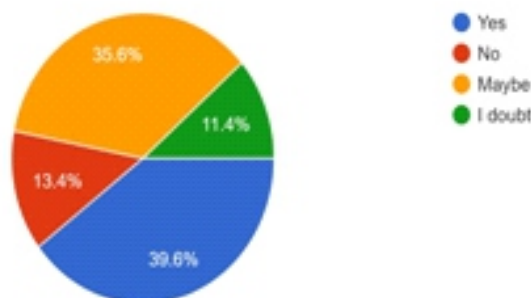


Fig. 1: A majority answered a definite 'yes' while next big share of support went to 'maybe'

While on the other hand when asked if they would provide incorrect reviews to the food they eat/ post a majority replied negatively. This shows a result of social norms affecting the responses of individuals. While the recorded responses show that a majority would not fake the posts, when interviewed individually, in an alone space some of the respondents admitted that they would fake their review or even had done it in their past.

On questioning about the difference in recorded responses, they pointed out the dilemma of 'correct' choices and presentation in public forums as these would lead to incorrect perception of their image in social spaces.

Given a chance would you lie about the food that you ate and post a fake review to get free food?

149 responses

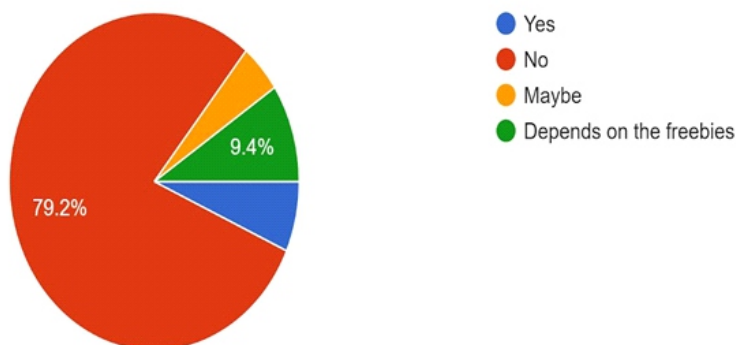


Fig.2 : The dilemma of right or wrong

To record the perception illusion, when the group was posed with a question, “how many times have you been duped by the online portrayal of food?” the answers highlighted that a majority of them felt cheated yet they didn't stop experimenting (trying new eateries/ food menus)

Have you ever felt cheated when you tried an online "recommended" dish and it turned out to be bad?

149 responses

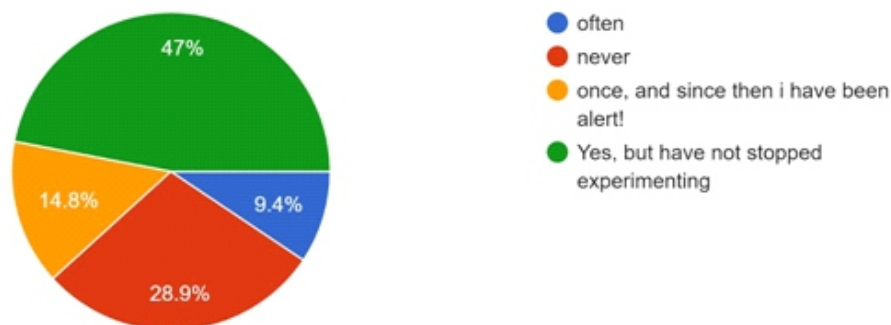


Fig. 3: the representation of misinformation

The recorded responses for the next question pointed at the demand created by the online presence of stimuli like pictures or praise words like 'recommended' and 'must try' that make us feel the need to consume similar/same items, thus creating a new demand chain for the already existing supply. This response validates Say's Law, which states that "Supply creates its own demand".

Do you feel the need to try out something when labelled "good" / "recommended" / "must have" online?

149 responses

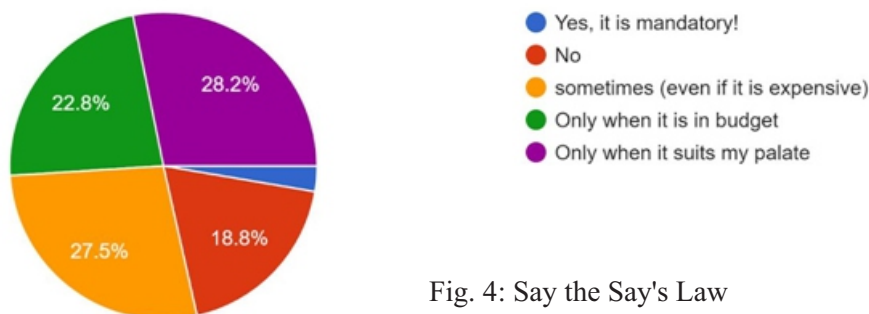


Fig. 4: Say the Say's Law

Do you salivate looking at the food presented by tv shows and social media posts and feel the need to eat something immediately?

149 responses

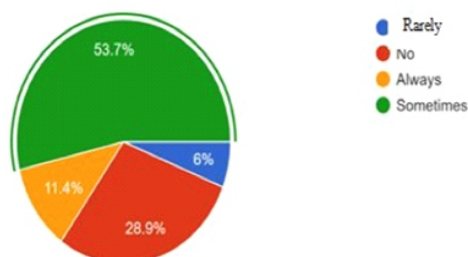


Fig 5: The Pavlov's Dog condition!

In a research conducted on adults and children in USA, researchers found, “adults consumed more of both healthy and unhealthy snack foods following exposure to snack food advertising compared to the other conditions”. The research affirmed that “the power of food advertising to prime automatic eating behaviors influence far more than brand preference alone.” (Harris et al, 2010)

Do you feel that sometimes reality is being hyped in terms of flavours and quantity of a serving by the reviewers?
149 responses

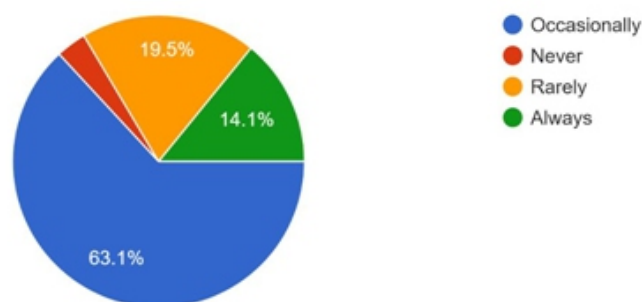


Fig.6 : To see or not to see!

The hyped up reality created by the visual representation of food items leads to the increase in demands and greater consumption.

Through the study of recorded responses one gets to understand that impulses and the motive of hunger come from the stimuli present in the virtual reality and it is impacting us in ways we are unaware of. While most of us believe that we have a control over our appetite and consumption pattern, close observation reveals that there is a hidden shift in eating patterns post exposure to strong stimuli, (often disguised as offers on food, branding, emotional connect, hype about taste, reminiscence- connecting to memories) targeting emotions of the individuals.

The virtual world has successfully ingrained in consumers with certain tropes of food consumptions including the famous 'beer-popcorn and pizza' for a movie night to 'green tea' and 'oats' consumption for a healthy lifestyle. While these items were already in supply, the social trends and effective advertisements added to the demand creation, adhering to Say's Laws of Market.

The study concludes at the affirmation of the nexus of psychological and economic theories in creating a 'false'/ 'renewed' consumption pattern amongst virtually adept populations. The limitation of the study lies in the acceptance of the fact that perception illusion is a trap unidentified by most consumers who fall prey to excellent marketing strategies and are ready to create trends based on social acceptance under/ without peer pressure. Another limitation lies in the study's number of participants, the small random sample can not be a true representation of the nation-wide food consumption patterns and also the study can't predict future trends and hence considering the two facts there is a scope for further study on a larger sample section on specific food trends.

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