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Dining Out During a Pandemic

COVID-19 has devastated the global restaurant industry. Developing effective strategies to recover from this major blow will be crucial in the coming months and years. One such strategy, according to Professor Brian King and co-researchers, may be media coverage. Public confidence in eating out can only be regained if and when restaurants and diners cooperate to reduce the spread of COVID-19, such as through sanitation- and hygiene-related measures. However, the precise influence of the media on the emotions, thoughts, and behaviours of diners has not been properly characterised. With crucial implications for the global restaurant industry, this timely study explores the potential of media messages to encourage COVID-19 preventive behaviours among restaurant-goers in Taiwan.

Restaurants have had a rough ride during the past couple of years, with grievous losses in both sales and jobs. “Consumers have shown extreme reluctance to dine out”, note the researchers, “due to lockdowns, social distancing measures, and general caution towards places where people congregate”. In Taiwan, food and beverage sales saw the steepest drop ever recorded in 2020. Clearly, restaurants in Taiwan and beyond must now regain lost ground and salvage what remains following the crisis.

Improvements are anticipated as restaurants finally begin to resume operations. “Strong, pent-up consumer demand has been forecast as dining room doors start re-opening”, the authors report. Yet public confidence in dining out can only be restored if and when measures for preventing the spread of COVID-19, such as hand-washing and social distancing, are fully implemented. This will require effort from diners as well as restaurants.

“However, customers are reluctant to change their habits”, the researchers warn, “thereby challenging the effectiveness of restaurant efforts to communicate their COVID-19 preventive measures”. If communication is key, the media may offer a useful channel. By making people more aware of the risk posed by COVID-19, the researchers hypothesise, media coverage may encourage restaurant-goers to behave prudently to reduce that risk.

So far, however, this topic has received surprisingly little attention in the literature. To fill this gap, the researchers set out to determine whether the preventive behaviours of restaurant-goers in Taiwan were influenced by exposure and attention to media coverage of COVID-19. “Understanding public perceptions of COVID-19 risks that have been acquired through media is critical for shaping future behavioural changes”, say the authors. Their findings enhance our understanding of “the deployment of media by and about hospitality in managing crises”.

In the absence of first-hand knowledge of COVID-19, individuals usually turn to the media for advice. Restaurant-goers are no exception. Many people in Taiwan, for example, have encountered guidance on dining out that has been released to the media by the Taiwan Centers for Disease Control. This public health body recommends “choosing restaurants that enact prevention and safety measures”, report the researchers.

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Other than fulfilling their duty to disseminate practical public health information, media outlets can magnify “the importance of what the public sees and/or hears in the news”. This, explain the authors, can bring about intense emotional reactions, such as fear. Reports that emphasise certain components of an issue can also stimulate public interest in and attention to those components.

Attention to media is distinct from simple media “exposure”. These two dimensions of media engagement could play completely different roles in shaping risk perceptions and preventative behaviours. It is thus essential to scrutinise the effects of both. “Media exposure measures whether individuals have come into contact with some form of media”, assert the authors, “whereas media attention provides a more deliberate measurement of content”. Yet few studies have compared the effects of media attention and exposure, usually opting to examine one or the other.

Noting the lack of research on the impact of media communications on the hospitality industry, the researchers sought to determine how media exposure and media attention, respectively, affected the preventive behaviours of restaurant customers during the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain more detailed insights, they also probed the roles of risk perception and fear in these relationships. Using the established Stimulus–Organism–Response model, the researchers predicted that exposure and attention to media coverage of COVID-19 would affect customers’ preventive behaviours through affective and cognitive pathways (fear and perceived risk).

In May 2020, the researchers administered a survey in Taiwan. Given the pandemic situation, the survey was completed online to limit face-to-face contact. The participants were 366 adults living in Taiwan. Most dined out one to three times per month (48.1%), followed by four to six times per month (23.3%).

In the 32-question survey, the respondents were quizzed about their fear of COVID-19 and their perceptions of the risks associated with the virus. Their views on risk-prevention behaviours in restaurants were also recorded. For example, the diners were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: “While dining out in a restaurant, I try to wash my hands or use hand sanitizer more often to prevent the risk of COVID-19 infection” and “I am willing to choose restaurants that follow preventative measures”. Finally, to assess the respondents’ COVID-19 media exposure, they were asked to indicate the frequency with which they engaged with traditional media, including newspapers, radio and TV, as well as new media, such as social networking sites. Media attention was measured by asking the respondents to describe their interest in and attention to media reports on COVID-19.

As expected, greater exposure to COVID-19 media coverage increased customers’ fear of the disease and their perception of the associated risks. This was also true for media attention, such that consumers who paid more attention to COVID-19 content reported more fear and perceived risk. These findings suggest that media coverage of the pandemic not only elicits an emotional response, fear, but also has the power to shape more rational or logic-based responses, such as risk perception.

Risk perception was further magnified by fear of COVID. “Because fear is one of the strongest emotions, it is unsurprising that the

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perceived seriousness of COVID-19 risks is magnified when it is present”, say the authors. In turn, this fear-induced increase in perceived risk boosted customers’ adoption of preventive behaviours in restaurants.

Interestingly, only customers’ perceptions of the risks posed by COVID-19 – not their fear of COVID-19 – directly contributed to their preventive actions. Therefore, “the management of health crises should take into account the cognitive responses of restaurant consumers”, say the researchers.

A key difference between media attention and media exposure was identified. Paying attention to COVID-19-related information resulted in more fear and perceived risk than simply being exposed to such information. This shows that these constructs should indeed be treated separately by researchers and practitioners investigating the role of media engagement in managing crises in the hospitality industry.

More generally, this work could help restaurants to develop media communication strategies that ensure appropriate preventive behaviours, using both new and traditional media channels. Restaurant businesses will benefit greatly from this, as “the incidence of restaurant closures may fall when governments, health authorities, and consumers are assured about careful and deliberate operations”, add the authors.

In examining both exposure and attention to media coverage of COVID-19 risk, this study affords timely and actionable guidance for both restaurants and policy makers on developing communication strategies to ensure customers’ compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures. Effective and targeted media coverage is especially valuable today, as the restaurant industry takes its first steps on the path to recovery, because its success will rely heavily on public confidence. Taking a wider perspective, strategies for encouraging customers to proactively safeguard themselves and others against COVID-19 will aid not only restaurants but every sector of the tourism and hospitality industry.

Sung, Yung-Kun, Hu, Hsin-Hui Sunny, and King, Brian (2021). Restaurant Preventive Behaviors and the Role of Media during a Pandemic. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 95, 102906.

Press contact : Ms Pauline Ngan, Senior Marketing Manager
School of Hotel and Tourism Management
Telephone : (852) 3400 2634
E-mail : pauline.ngan@polyu.edu.hk
Website : <http://shtm.polyu.edu.hk>