

A STUDY OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS PRODUCTS PROMOTING HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Background: *Recent years have seen a transition in consumer's buying behaviour for foods having better nutrition, transparent claims with more clean processes and ingredients.*

Objective: *This paper aims at understanding the factors that influence consumers' food buying behaviour, perceptions and healthy food choices. Methodology: Quantitative research was done in restricted cities of India through online media. Information was collected (targeting 21-40 years age group) from 470 respondents (64.4% males and 35.6% females). Responses were recorded through an online circulated questionnaire containing 15 close-ended questions, which were statistically analyzed through MS-excel using graphical representations. Results: A greater inclination was seen towards healthier options in staples such as multigrain flour. The survey findings reported that around 34.5% of consumers are taking the product quality claims and source of ingredients seriously, and also consumers do care about the environmental impact of the products, with 83.62% respondents preferring products which are environment friendly and socially responsible. Conclusion: It can be concluded that there has been a considerable shift towards healthier food choices. Companies should focus on strategies to promote healthier choices, clean labels, more transparency and reduce their environment and social burden. Marketing strategies may also be geared towards promotion of products through online platforms since millennial's, who comprise 48% of work force spend their major time online.*

Key Words: *Consumers, Millennial's, Healthy food choices, Claims and Labels, Environment-friendly, Sustainable.*



INTRODUCTION

The buying behaviour and consumer food trends in India are undergoing a major transition. This is mainly driven by increased visibility and access, better product positioning which is more consumer focused and provision for more customized options available in the market encouraging innovation. The food product choices are changing rapidly in terms of nutrition, health and the ever-growing demand for clean and sustainable products. The food labels are becoming more transparent due to explicit regulatory framework around labeling norms. The current trends reflect choices and preferences and may be more influenced by the largest cohort of our country-millennials. The new markets are providing ample choices to the consumer related to selection and use of ingredients, processes and packaging to provide better benefits and experience. The trade channels are seeing demand for specific products as low carb, low fat, free from, gluten free, GMO free, clean and vegan products. According to the International Food Information Council's 2017 Food and Health Survey, 55 percent of millennials say convenience is a top driver while making a food purchase. Pandemic and quick access to online has changed the market dynamics. There is a greater emphasis towards healthcare and wellness (Rani, 2020).

The most emerging platform for retailing is the e-commerce. According to the latest report by Deloitte and Retail Association of India (2021), e-commerce sector is all set to grow to \$84 billion in 2021 from \$24 billion in 2017. The rapid thrust on food e-commerce with trend setter of "you eat what you see" has gained momentum during the pandemic and has influenced consumer trust (Chawla & Kumar, 2021).

Throughout the world, major shifts in dietary patterns are seen, even in the consumption of basic staples towards more diversified diets (Kearney, 2010). Studies have revealed that there is a prominent influence of consumption pattern on the nutritional profile of the people and pose them to the risk of CVD and other lifestyle disorders (Mathanghi et al., 2013). Food choices have been greatly influenced in the last few years with growing awareness that food caters to not only hunger but nutritional well-being of a person. The change in demand and consumption patterns have also been attributed to positive health influence of diverse grains such as millets in the diet (Alekhya & Shravanthi, 2019). It has been observed that there are many factors that influence food choices. Food decisions and buying behaviour of a person rely on need and preferences of the family members, habits and perceptions established in childhood, convenience, food safety and health (Bailey et al., 2018).

Along with these factors, some segment of the consumers these days want to understand the sustainability aspects of products they consume based on the carbon and water footprint of the products. It was noted in a study that around 52% of the consumers were inclined towards purchasing food products that were sustainable but couldn't possibly make that choice because of limited availability of such products (Robinson & Smith, 2002). Many studies have also indicated that sustainable products have a little edge or advantage over the regular products in the market in influencing consumers purchase (Grankvist et al., 2004). As stated by FAO in Lappo et al. (2015) it has been seen that consumer food choices are shifted beyond sensory, quality and nutrition domain to environmental considerations. Therefore, food product having fewer burdens on the environment and produced sustainably may have a positive influence on the purchasing behaviour of the consumers.

The strategies of food companies are being positioned according to determinants like health benefit, convenience, sales platform, and consumer preferences. However, it is also very imperative to understand how choices get influenced and how a product is perceived to be healthier.

The objective of this paper were:

- The determinants that influence food buying behaviour.
- Perceptions and their understanding of healthy and sustainable food choices available in the market.

METHODOLOGY

Consumer buying behaviour is influenced by various internal, external and marketing factors which motivate the consumers in their decision making.

Research Design: A quantitative research method was undertaken to gain knowledge about consumer perceptions and buying behaviour towards food products promoting health and sustainability.

Locale: Since, the questionnaire was mainly administered through the social media platforms and mail, the locations were restricted to a few cities to represent all four zones namely North, East, South and West of India.

Sampling Design: The survey conducted through online media was targeted more towards millennials, with trends revealing that they spend an average of 17 hours per week online with



social media influencing choices to a large extent (Sinha et al., 2018; Rani, 2020). A sample size of 500 was targeted and the 470 responses received in a period of one month were taken under the study for data analysis.

Tools and Technique: The survey questionnaire administered through Google Form had a set of 15 close-ended questions. The questionnaire incorporated questions related to factors that influence consumer buying behaviour namely psychological factors, market stimuli factors, social factors as reported in a study by Sonwaney & Chincholkar in 2019. The questionnaire was run through a pilot sample of 10 consumers in the age group 21-40 years to understand the interpretation and time. It was finalized for clean, non-ambiguous choices and entire survey took only 2 minutes to select choices. To make this more attractive for the consumer it was provided a heading ‘Are you concerned about the food you eat?’

The questionnaire was targeted towards millennials who make up the major portion of the working class and thus, one of the main groups who influence the purchasing decisions. Since secondary data had reported that millennials’ buying behaviour is more online owing to their online time spent on social media and convenience desired at the click of a button, the survey questionnaire was administered on various online platform like Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, mail network.

A survey questionnaire was created in Google Form and shared to the respondents through email and google form link on various social media platforms. The survey was opened for a period of one month starting August 2020 and it was also promoted through Facebook ad for 5 days targeting the age group 21-40 years. The ad reach was found to be 24,664 people with total clicks of 215.

Data Analysis and Statistical Analysis: A total of 470 responses received were recorded and analysed to understand the consumer behaviour patterns, the awareness about environment friendly and sustainable foods. Simple statistical analysis was done using Microsoft excel and represented through graphs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey was majorly focussed to be spread through online platform and as expected maximum responses were recorded in the age group of 21-40 years, that also covers the millennial population (Figure1).

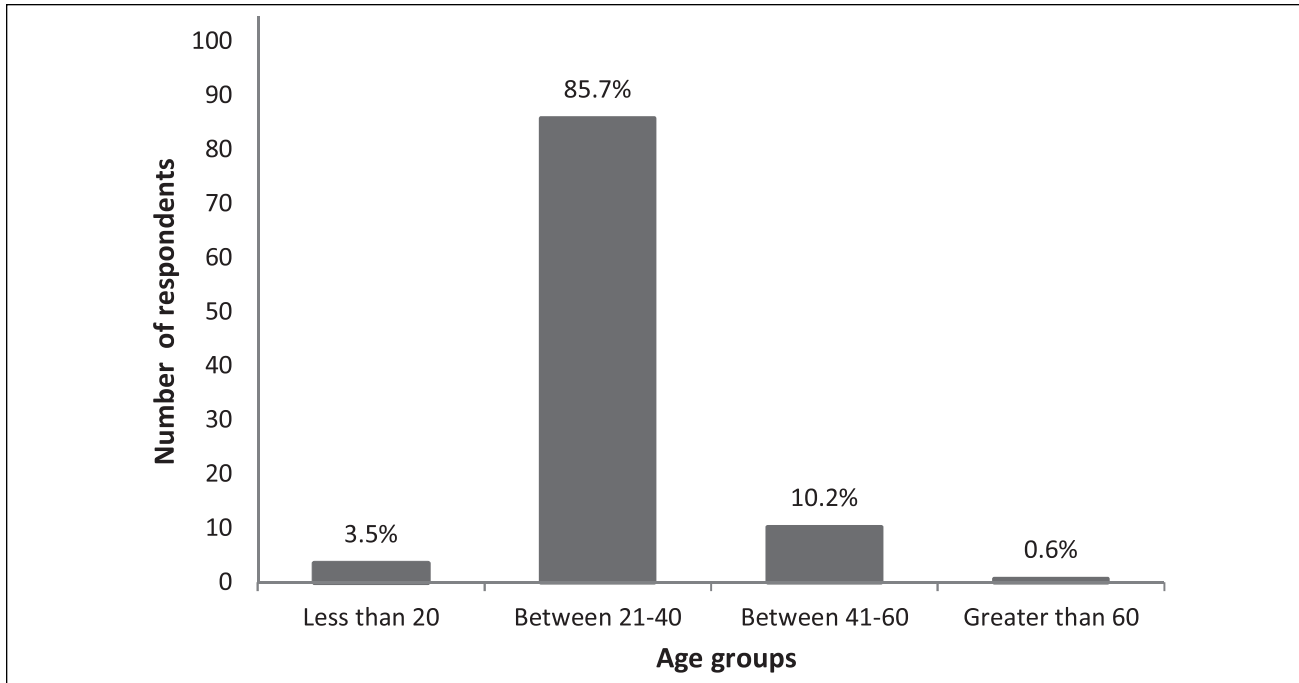


Figure 1: Respondents age group

It was observed that the highest percentage of people responded through Facebook (Figure 2). This may be more attributed to the ad that was also run on facebook attracting consumers to fill up under ‘Are you concerned about the food you eat?’ More response on facebook was also in line with the social media statistical data that indicates that Facebook is the most influential digital platform among millennials. The survey findings also reported that of the total respondents 64.4% were male. And also, it was observed that 10.1% of the respondents had the nutritional background by the field of their profession.

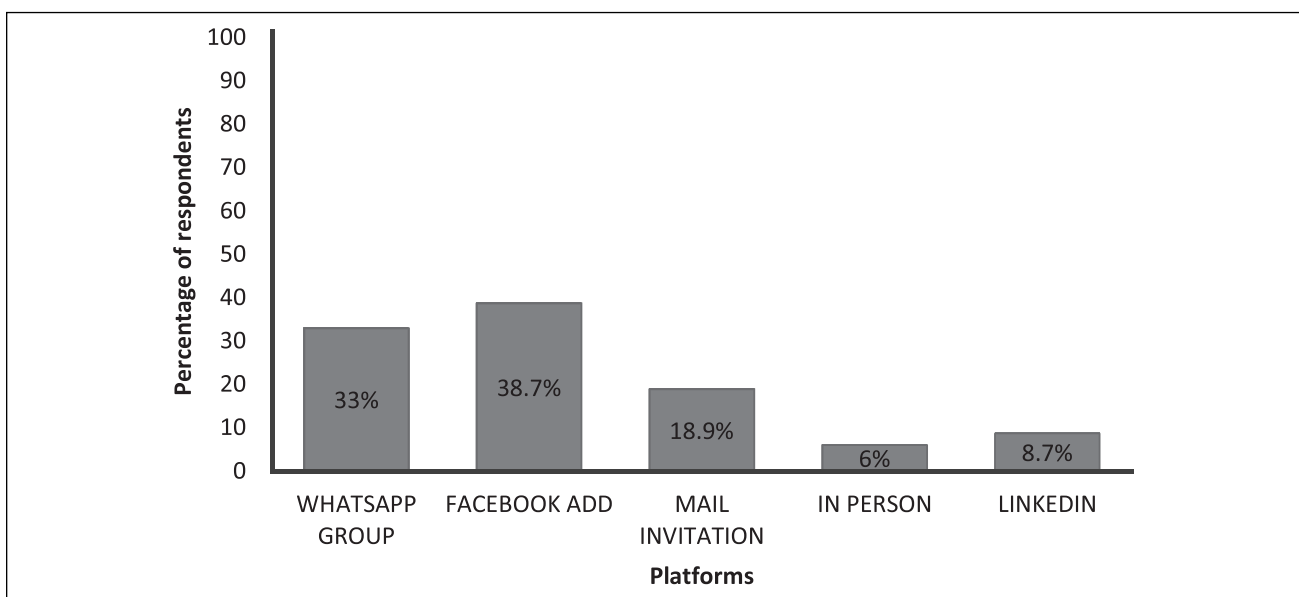


Figure 2: Percentage of survey responses through different platforms

The demographical questions were asked to categorize the participants on the basis of age, gender and their state of residence. A total of 470 responses were received from various geographical locations.

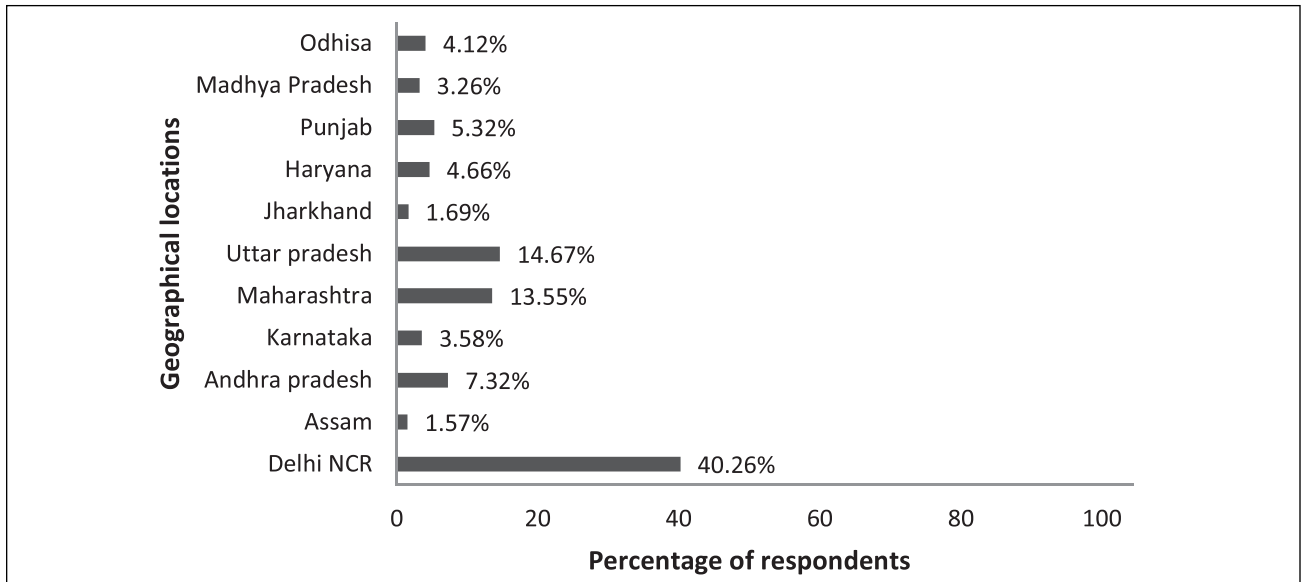


Figure 3: Geographical locations of respondents

40.26% of the respondents were from Delhi indicating a large data representation from this metro city. Since, staple grains form the major part of Indian diet, thus when asked about the kind of flour one would prefer to consume, 57.2% of respondents (Figure 4) shared their preference for a multigrain compared to regular whole wheat flour. It was evident from the survey that consumers perceived multigrain to be more healthy. therefore it can be assumed that consumers eating habits are moving towards health based approach.

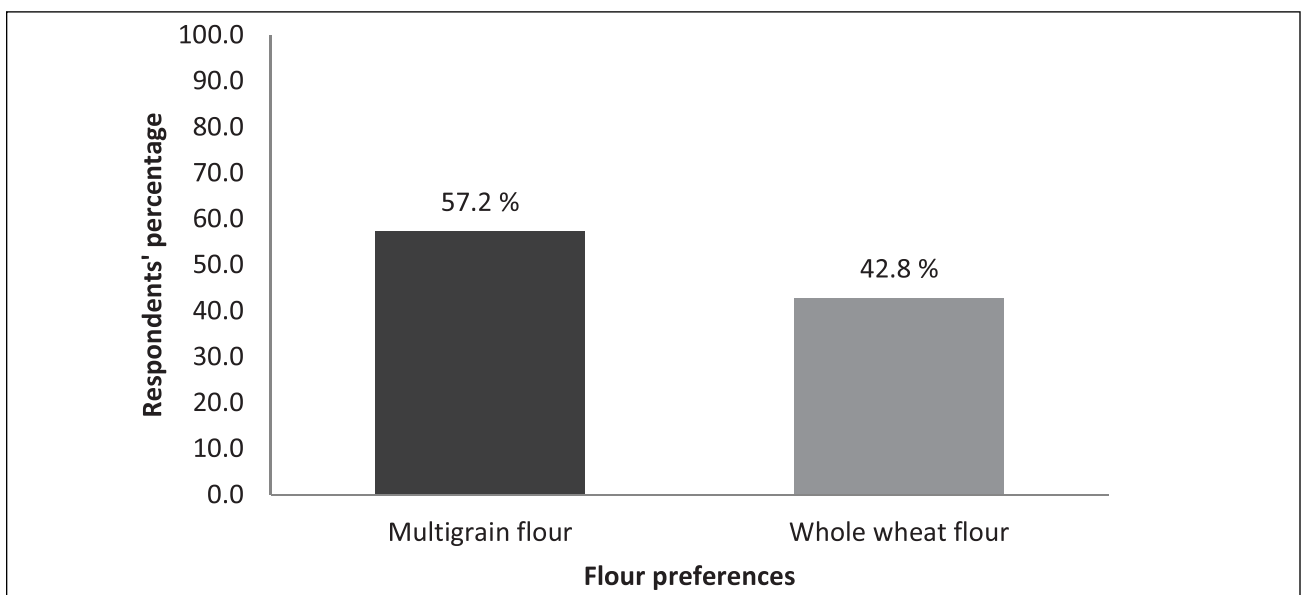


Figure 4: Flour preferences of respondents

To check their understanding for the composition of a multigrain, it was evident from the responses that the consumers are not fully aware of percentage of ingredients in the flour (Figure 5). It also depicted the need for better information and campaigns that can help consumer to read the labels for making food choices. It was observed that 36.6% of respondents perceived multigrain flour to have wheat flour proportion in a multigrain to be more than 50% and around 20.4% percentage perceived a multigrain to have more than 70% wheat. 11.7% respondents considered multigrain flours to have a larger proportion of wheat only (greater than 85%) closer proportion to the popular choices of multigrain available in the market. The scattered responses also reflected their desire to have better ratio of other grains to wheat flour.

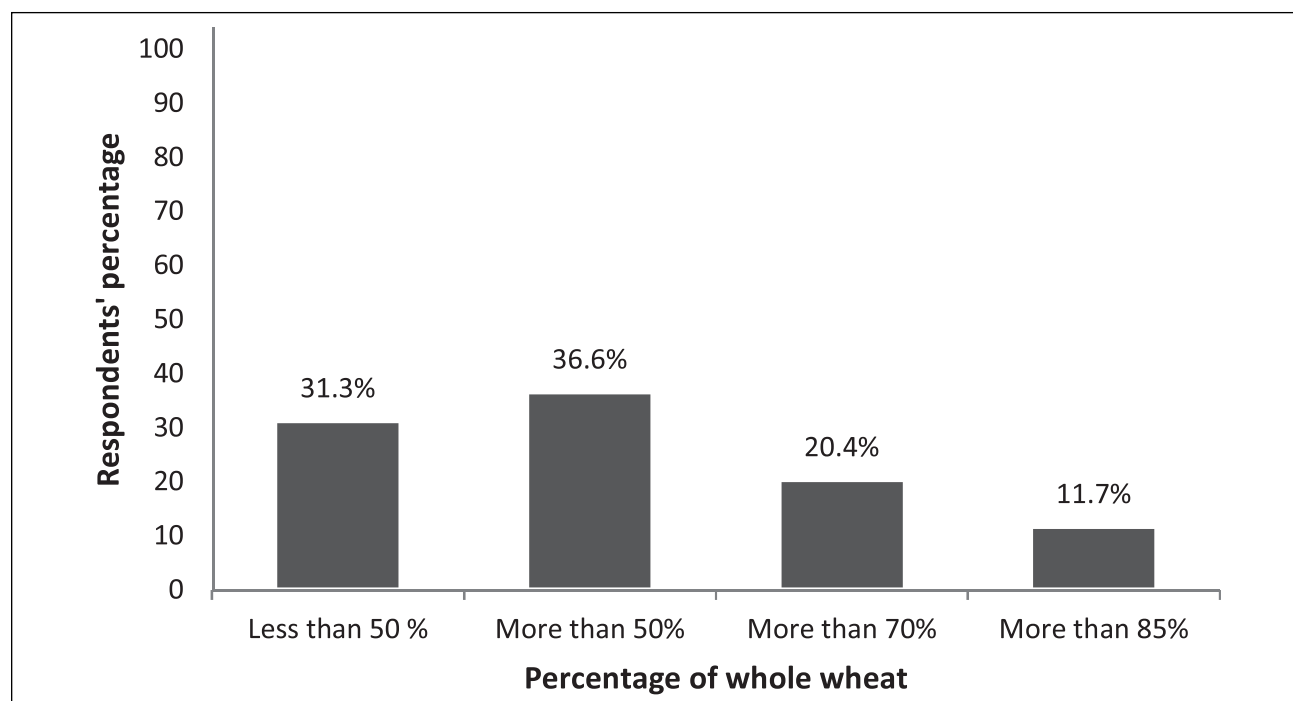


Figure 5: Percentage of whole wheat in multigrain flour as per respondents

In the recent years campaigns like #vocalforlocal and #makeinIndia are providing impetus to traditional grains and better food choices for health. There has been an increased awareness regarding consumption of traditional grains like millet with government promoting their cultivation. The survey also attempted to understand from the respondents about the diverse grains. It was observed that around 26% of respondents had selected maize, quinoa, sattu and amaranth under millet showed their confusion around grains. The categorization of all grains as millet may also be attributed to positioning of these grains as super foods in the market (Figure 6). Similar surveys have also reported that though, millets are highly nutritious and sustainable crop, there is a need for more awareness to encourage identification, use and incorporation into regular diets (Prathyusha et al., 2021). Also, poor knowledge of traditional grains may be more reflective of different nomenclature these grains enjoy, in different parts of India. It was felt that better awareness or

knowledge may result in better acceptability of these grains in the households as respondents were open to adopt alternates to wheat and rice for better health. Earlier studies have also stated that promotion of such grains by stating the health benefits is necessary as consumers are shifted towards healthy lifestyle (Rezai et al., 2012).

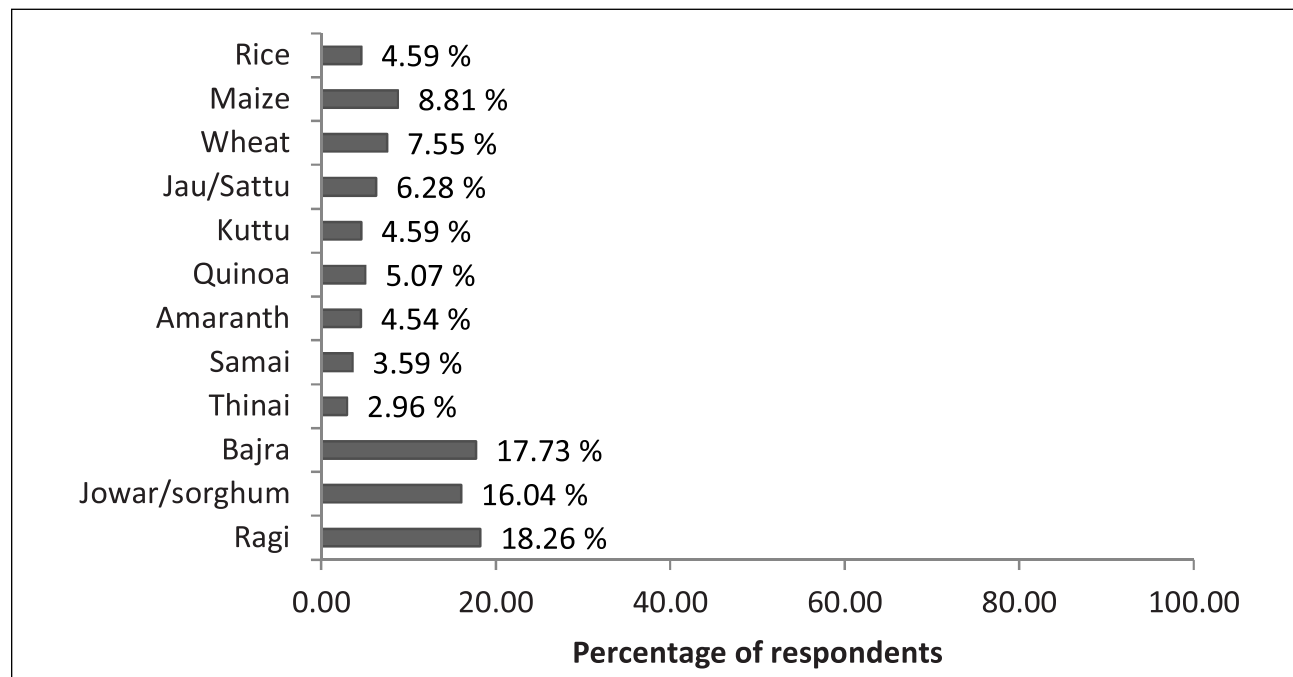


Figure 6: Millet grain and it's identification

Responses were recorded to find out how the consumers' choices were influenced while purchasing food. According to Figure 7, it was observed that that nutritionists and wellness instructors and doctors are also influencing choices to a greater extent (25.18%). This also reflects that consumers are becoming more health conscious and are seeking professional help to guide for food choices. Around 14.5 percentage of respondents were influenced by parents followed by label information (13.9%), product brand (12.05%) and friends (11.87%). The influential choice trend also observes that product labeling can also be seen has a promising indicator to promote one's product as consumer relies on the information and is ready to explore the product for trial and adoption. Survey reported that parents had a greater role in influencing purchasing behaviour, this may also be attributed to the fact that the joint family system has not only persisted but also got further strengthened in the face of urbanisation and industrialisation in India and most importantly during the pandemic. Due to rising awareness, time constraints and better purchasing power, people are demanding healthy convenient food alternatives and this has led rise in new market trends such as foods having claims of low in fat, high in protein, diabetic friendly among others. There has been a boom for foods promoting health and wellness (Euromonitor, Health and wellness in India, 2020).

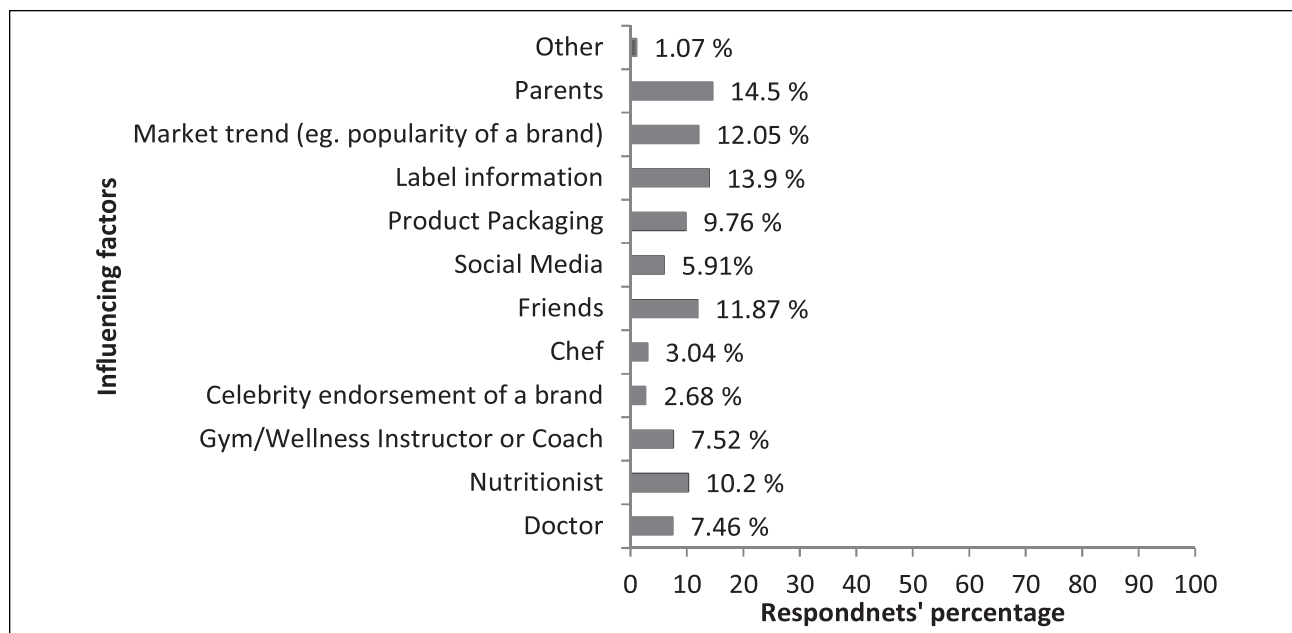


Figure 7: Factors influencing choices

Also, to understand as to consumers actually desire to see on their food labels, their choices were recorded from an array of options. It is evident from Figure 8, that 34.5 % consumers are taking the product quality claims and the ingredients source information seriously. Ingredients, health benefits are observed as valuable information that may influence consumer’s choices. Interestingly, it was observed that though calorific or nutritive value is observed as an important health information on the label, 12.8% of the respondents consider fat and sugar percentage as a better indicator for making a healthy choice.

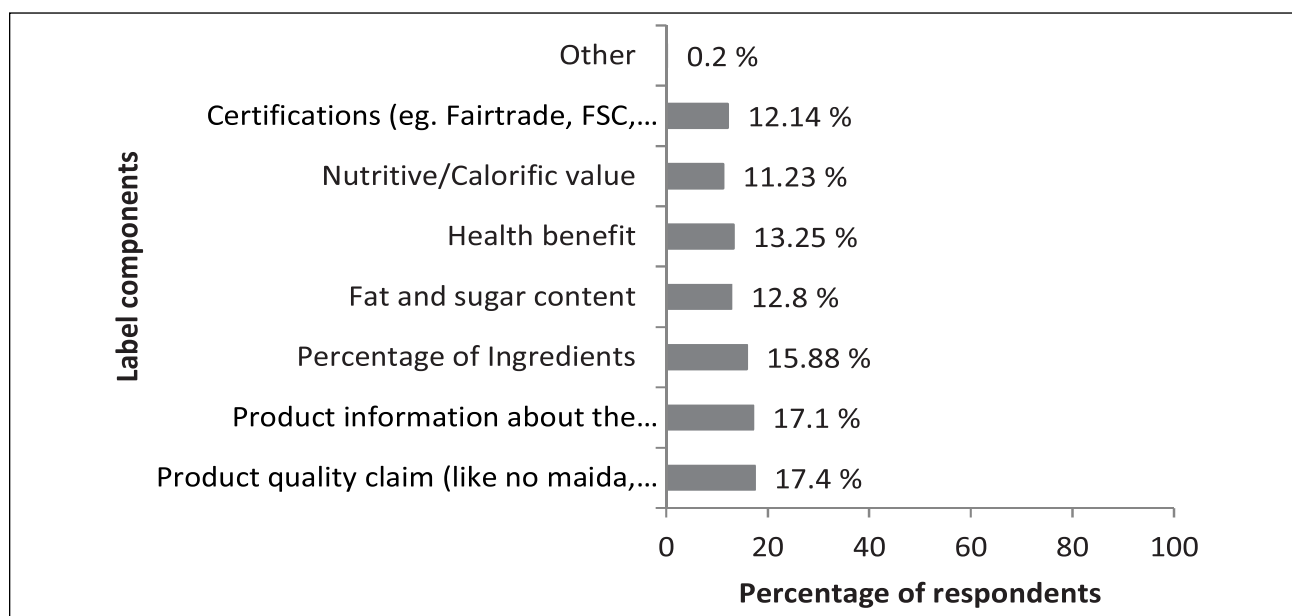


Figure 8: Food label information influencing purchase behaviour

From figure 9 it can be observed that for the purchase of grocery items like flours, the retail stores like Big bazar, Reliance fresh and kirana stores continue to be the top preferences (33.69% and 30.27% respectively).

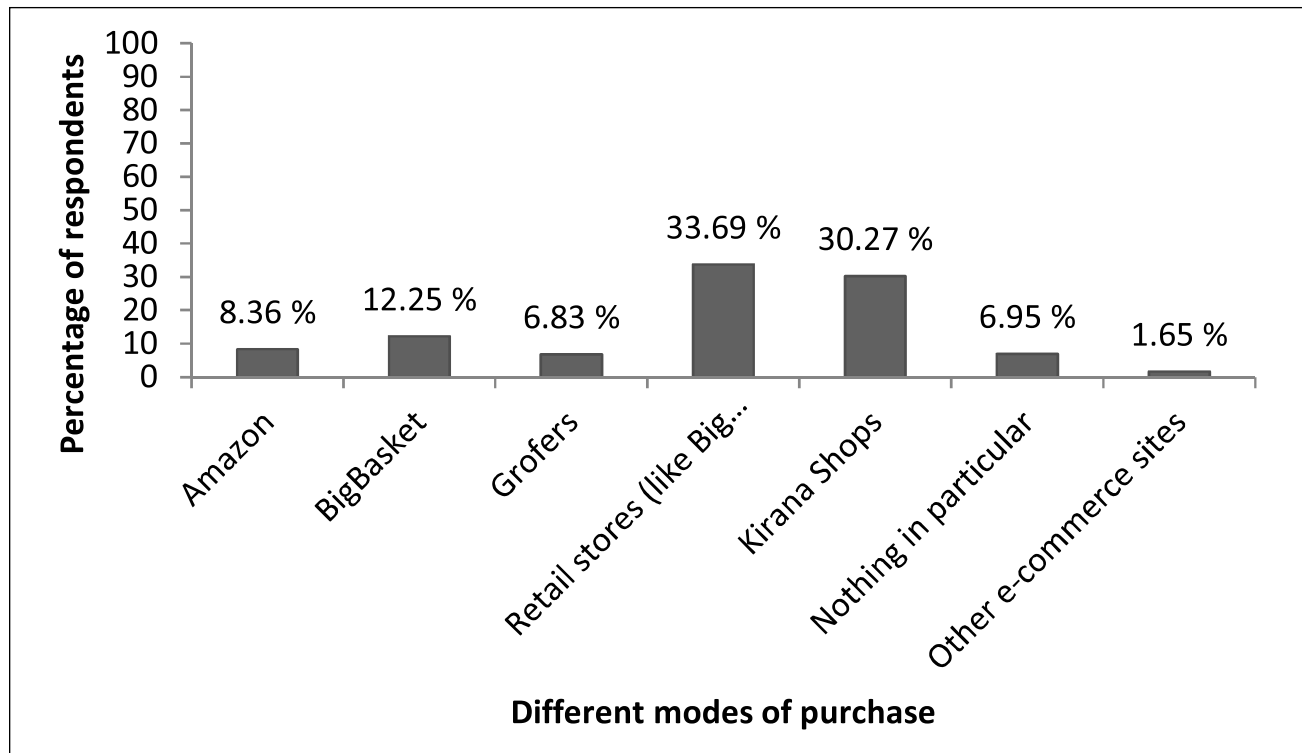


Figure 9: Mode of purchase preferred by consumers

The survey findings reported that consumers look for some quality claims on the labels. They prefer claims like no maida and preservatives and also want to know if the ingredients used are natural or organic. Earlier surveys and studies (Padulosi et al., 2015; Nandi et al., 2017; Patil, 2019) have also reported similar trends wherein consumers have given importance to claims like free from pesticides and preservatives, responsible ingredient sources. The studies have also reported that people are willing to pay for food which is natural or organic. Therefore, clean label approach and transparency are more valued.

The present survey also reported that 83.62 % of respondents preferred products which are socially responsible and more environment friendly (Figure 10). Of these, 70.43% of the consumers were also aware of the related terms as carbon and water footprint and expressed desire to see some related indices for better product value. A study by Rani (2020) stated that millennials like to make informed choices and value the environmental impact made by the goods. Therefore, the companies should include strategies to help reduce their environmental burden by the virtue of their ingredients and production practices. And it is important to communicate these practices with the consumers to make their products more marketable.

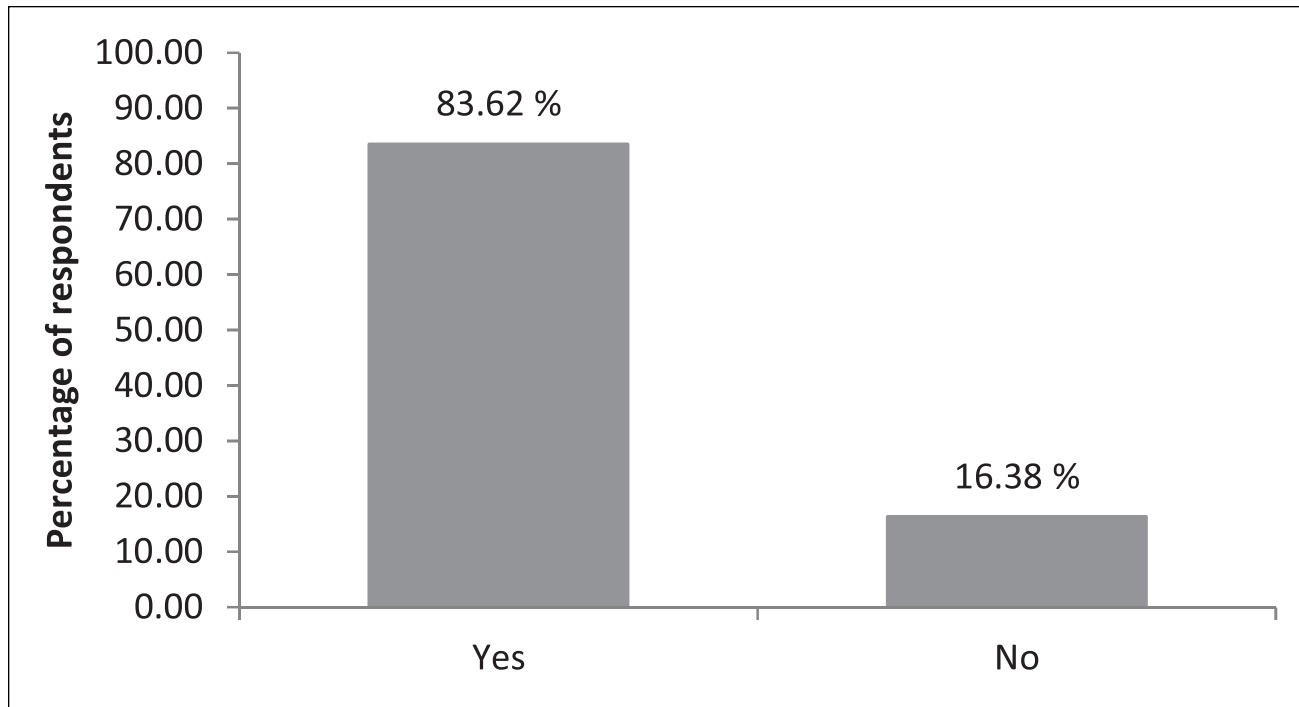


Figure 10: Preference for socially responsible and environment friendly products

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the consumers are getting aware and educated these days due to which there is a considerable shift towards healthier food choices. Companies or the food enterprises need to focus more on innovative and convenient healthy food alternatives for the people. Also, ancient Indian grains should be promoted as they are grown locally and are highly nutritious. Foods which enhance health and increases immunity would also prove out to be more favorable in the upcoming market. A great focus should be made in maintaining transparency in the ingredients used and their sourcing as consumers demand the origin of ingredients used. This point should be important as after this pandemic, the consumers are more skeptical in purchasing foods based on the quality, healthy and which are environment friendly and sustainable. The major factors that consumers seek on labels, while buying food are claims, quality, ingredients health benefits, clean foods, low in sugar and fat.

Also, the food enterprises need to have an e-commerce strategy to promote foods on the online platforms due to a notable trend in the e-commerce industry and also as millennials spend their major time online and they comprise a major percent of the consumer and about 48% of the work force. Therefore, this population sector may be kept in target while making business strategies by the enterprises.



Listing out the water and carbon footprint percentages would also make the product more noticeable as today's consumers are aware and also concerned about the environment.

Product claims like “no preservatives”, “without additives” can be great factors to attract consumers and with rising awareness enterprises should focus more upon providing healthy options, giving a clean label, working upon environmental impact made by their production houses as consumers value these claims.

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