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## Article

# From marketing to crisis management : how key messages changed during corona pandemic in Saudi food industry

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## FROM MARKETING TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT: HOW KEY MESSAGES CHANGED DURING CORONA PANDEMIC IN SAUDI FOOD INDUSTRY

**Abstract.** *The paper summarizes the arguments and counterarguments within the scientific discussion on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marketing. The main purpose of the research is to analyze how COVID-19 has affected the critical messaging strategies in the Saudi food industry. Systematization of scientific background on the investigated issue indicated that pandemics and epidemics significantly impact business processes, including marketing activities. The motivation behind this study is derived from several observations on how companies have adapted their business goals to contribute to tackling the impact of COVID-19. With changes in consumers' behavior, companies had to readjust their strategies to address the anticipated short- and long-term changes in market dynamics. The research aims to reveal trends in marketing communication in the pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 eras. Therefore, the process of investigation of the topic in the paper is carried out using quantitative approaches. The article specifically focuses on the objectives such as 1) establishing how Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation interacted with their customer before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; 2) uncovering changes in social media messaging strategies used by Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation. Specifically, online survey on three major companies in Saudi Arabia, Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation. The paper presents the results of an empirical analysis of data from each of the above company's Twitter pages, which showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed how companies interact with their customers. Therefore, the author sought to identify the appropriate strategies adopted by the three major players in the Saudi food industry, Maestro Pizza, Hunger Station, and Shawarmer, to interact with customers. The research empirically confirmed and theoretically proved that messaging is a crucial aspect of marketing. The results of the study can be helpful in the development of customer-oriented marketing strategies.*

**Keywords:** customer-oriented marketing strategies, food industry, business communication, messaging, marketing, COVID-19.

**Introduction.** The prevalence of the global COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected consumer habits. In the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, many countries adopted policies, such as lockdowns, that minimized human interactions. As a result, businesses were faced with uncertainties, which prompted them to adapt their business and marketing strategies to the rapidly changing consumer behavior expected to outlast the pandemic. Many firms have responded to the crisis in marketing by managing how they connect to customers using platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others. In Saudi Arabia, one of the affected is the food industry. According to an online survey by a Dubai-based Choueiri Group, the decision by the Saudi government to shut down public venues and have the majority of its population work remotely resulted in at least 55 percent of Saudi consumers preferring to use online platforms for food purchases. This shift in consumer behavior presents an opportunity to analyze critical messages in the Saudi food industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has affected consumer behavior and how businesses undertake their process of marketing. Hoekstra and Leeftang (2020) noted that the changes in consumer behavior are reflected in how marketing has been carried out during the pandemic. In this case, it is observed that many companies in the Saudi food industry adapt their messaging strategies to address the consumer shift to online marketplaces. Several studies, such as Hoekstra and Leeftang (2020), have analyzed marketing effectiveness during challenging economic

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periods. However, COVID-19 presents some unique challenges to businesses as most economic sectors are expected to experience a fall in consumption levels. In response, companies have been forced to reinvent their customer connection (Ahmed, 2021). Therefore, this paper seeks to identify the appropriate strategies adopted by the three major players in the Saudi food industry, Maestro Pizza, Hunger Station, and Shawarmer, to interact with customers. The motivation behind this study is derived from several observations on how companies have adapted their business goals to contribute to tackling the impact of COVID-19. Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis has resulted in a health crisis and led to economic challenges. The noted economic challenges have led to a shift in consumer behavior as a result of economic instabilities. In every market, consumers are often considered to be the primary drivers of the competitiveness of the business environment and economic growth. Thus, with changes in consumer behavior, companies had to readjust their strategies to address the anticipated short- and long-term changes in market dynamics. Therefore, this paper is of significance to researchers seeking to uncover trends in communicating in pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 eras. Specifically, this paper endeavors to demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the changing marketing dynamics in Saudi Arabia's food sector companies. By studying the social media accounts of the major food companies in Saudi Arabia, the paper provides an academic reference, which future researchers could utilize to understand the sentiments of businesses in regards to marketing communication in times of pandemics. For meeting its main objective, this paper is designed to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: What was the level of business-customer interaction pre- and post-COVID-19 among major Saudi Arabia food industry players – Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation?

RQ 2: How did the COVID-19 pandemic change messaging in business communication in the Saudi Arabia food industry?

For narrowing the scope of the study, this paper specifically focuses on the following objectives:

1. To establish how Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation interacted with their customer before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To uncover changes in social media messaging strategies used by Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation.

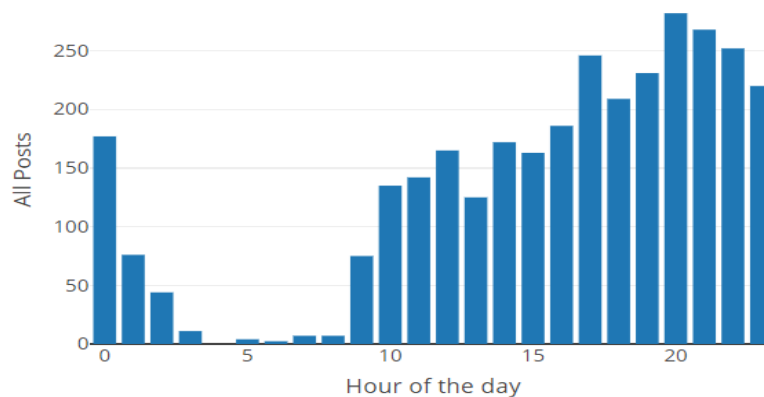
The survey conducted in this paper was limited to Twitter accounts of three enterprises in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the study is delimited to a specific industry what is the Saudi Arabia food industry. Due to the limited timeframe study, the data collection was restricted to qualitative, and the online survey had to be conducted on specific companies. Therefore, the study assumes that the attained data represents the Saudi Arabia food industry's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic from a marketing perspective.

**Literature Review.** A pandemic is not a novel phenomenon unique to modern societies, as similar occurrences were in human history. This phenomenon often results in significant changes in human behavior, government policies, and business and marketing strategies (Camilleri, 2021). Several studies have been completed concerning the impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic on business and marketing strategies. For instance, Ayush and Gowda (2020) analyzed the COVID-19 outbreak impact in digital marketing. These authors argue that the pandemic changed how businesses utilize digital platforms to communicate with customers. Specifically, companies have increased the use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram to connect with their customers (Francisco et al., 2021; Dias et al., 2020; Ayush and Gowda, 2020; Sheth, 2020). Furthermore, they expect that businesses would seek to improve their current marketing strategies post-COVID-19. Social media platforms would exceed the current marketing usage to include maintaining the online reputation and customer support. Several articles have echoed the above sentiments that have examined the impact of COVID-19 on business models and corporate communication (Pandey, 2021). For instance, in their analysis on how businesses have adapted to customer experience changes in the coronavirus time (Diebner et al., 2020). Argue that due to changes in consumer behavior, «digital-led experiences will continue to grow in popularity once the coronavirus is

quelled, and companies that act quickly and innovate in their delivery model to help consumers navigate the pandemic safely and effectively will establish a strong advantage». In other words, the pandemic has necessitated businesses to rethink their business models, which includes marketing platforms. In line with the theme of this paper, consumers prefer using platforms such as Twitter to interact with their favorite food outlets as it offers minimal risk of contracting the virus. Besides, the pandemic has necessitated brands to include messages that encourage coronavirus etiquette, as it safeguards their image and protects their future business interests (Ali Taha et al., 2021). Furthermore, Sheth (2020) concluded that the pandemic had significant managerial implications for businesses. Specifically, companies shifted to online services, such as cloud computing, as in Walmart and Target. Moreover, these retailers noted that due to strict health measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, it was necessary to encourage online procurement options. Other studies have examined how pandemics change the communication strategies of players in specific sectors such as the food industry. For instance, Telukdarie et al. (2020), Chowdhury et al. (2020) analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on the food and beverages manufacturing sector. The authors noted that the pandemic necessitated major players in the industry to develop measures of expediting their business growth. In other words, businesses have opted to use marketing platforms to drive sales and develop alternative collaborative solutions. Likewise, in their analysis of the pandemic's economic impact on small and medium-sized enterprises in the hospitality industry, Larsson and Gustavsson (2020) and Alhawal et al. (2020) argued that the imposed lockdowns resulted in a decline in consumer consumption among SMEs. As a result, these businesses were forced to adapt their marketing strategies to survive the prevalent economic crisis. One of the suggested methods is using platforms that focus on cutting marketing expenses providing a satisfactory customer experience. In this case, a firm's website pages and social media accounts have emerged as the main elements for promoting a company's services and products during the coronavirus period (Larsson and Gustavsson, 2020). These online channels reduce the dependence on intermediaries, making it cheaper and effective for customers to interact with the business. However, due to a lack of an understanding of how the pandemic has impacted sharing platforms, it is challenging to predict the long-term implications of the pandemic on online marketing strategies (Mont et al., 2020; Sulthana and Vasantha, 2020). Nonetheless, by exploring extant research on the subject, the impact of COVID-19 on marketing could be predicted.

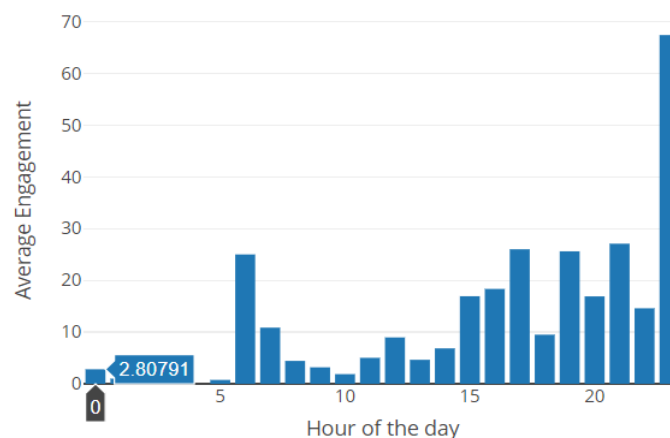
**Methodology and research methods.** This paper aims to develop an understanding of the marketing role during pandemics. The research method adopted for this study could be described as quantitative as it comprises the use of a quantitative instrument (survey) to gather relevant data for analysis. An online survey was used to describe how small- and medium-sized businesses had to change their marketing strategies, including critical messaging. This paper majorly focused on data from Twitter, in which the messages and level of engagement with customers. A comparison between the companies' pre-pandemic and in-pandemic messaging strategies. In this case, the focus areas were the business presence on Twitter during off-peak and peak hours of customer activity and the type of content in the company's message. However, the thematic analysis of the results is based on the three companies mentioned above. Data were retrieved using the Twitter search API between 1 May 2020 and 31 July 2020. Data on Shawarmer SA was gathered from the company's official Twitter account, @ShawarmerSA. Similarly, data for Maestro Pizza and Hungerstation was retrieved from @MaestroPizzaKSA and @HungerStation. Finally, a total of 3,851 tweets were retrieved. The collected tweets analyzed using R. R is a computer language that includes free libraries for statistical visualization and analysis. It is used widely between data miners and statisticians. The R Foundation for Statistical Computing supports it. For this research, ggplot2 library was used for data visualization. It is used since it highly improves the quality of plots and makes them more efficient. For Text analysis, Python Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) was used. It is considered one of the most efficient NLP libraries, and it serves the Arabic language.

**Results.** The survey established that Shawarmer majorly relied on Twitter to reach out to its customers. As illustrated in Figure 1, Shawarmer increased its presence on Twitter during peak hours of customer activity on this social media platform. Shawarmer employed a new strategy of engaging customers more during periods when customers are active on Twitter. Figure 2 illustrated the customers' responses to the new strategy. Notably, the customers highly engaged with Shawarmer's posts. At the same time, Figures 3 and 5 show that the other two companies' activities were increased during the pandemic period. However, the three companies share a similar profile regarding the level of engagement on Twitter. Maestro and Hungerstation did not ignite the customers' reactions, as shown in Figures 4 and 6. Figures 1-6 illustrate Shawarmer, Maestro, and Hungerstation. Respectively, the differences in customers' engagements proved that Shawarmer adopted different content strategies that attracted customers. An analysis of the content of Shawarmer's account on Twitter reveals several significant findings regarding hour-wise engagement on Twitter. In all three companies, the levels of engagement significantly rose from the 10th hour of the day, as indicated by the number of posts.



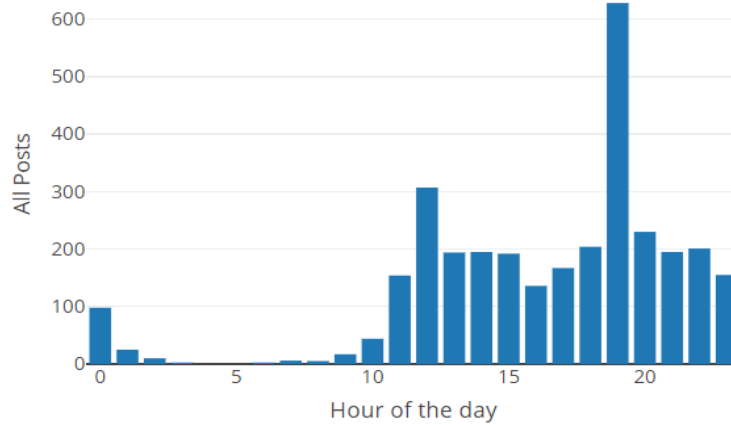
**Figure 1. Shawarmer's Presence on Twitter by the hour-wise posts**

Sources: developed by the author.

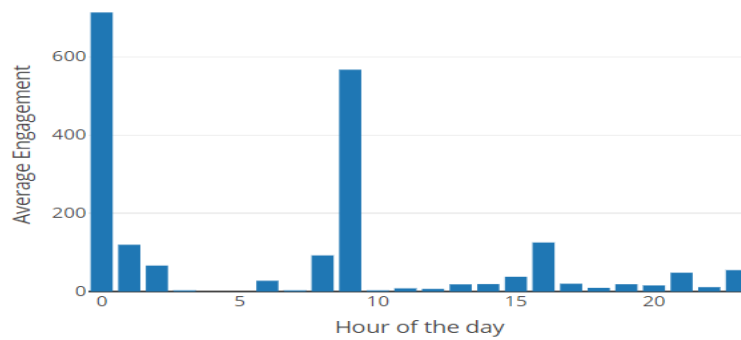


**Figure 2. Shawarmer's Presence on Twitter by the hour-wise average of customer**

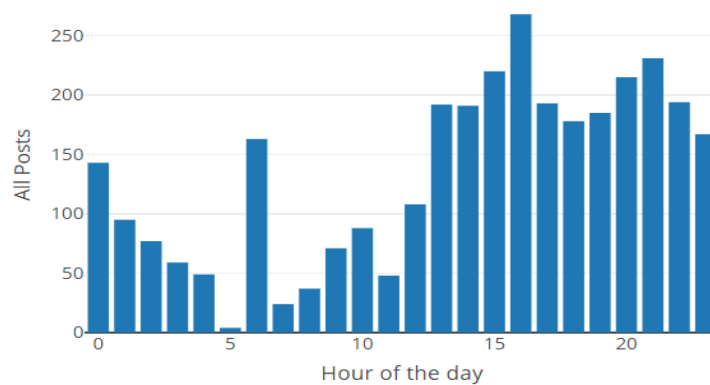
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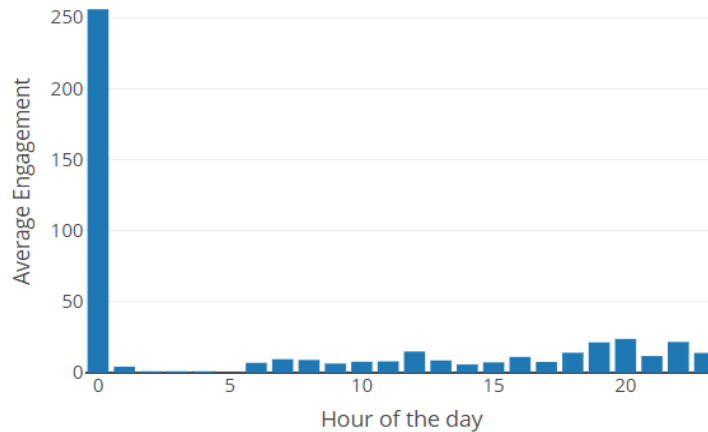
**Figure 3. Maestro's presence on Twitter by the hour-wise posts**  
Sources: developed by the author.



**Figure 4. Maestro's presence by the hour-wise average of customer engagement**  
Sources: developed by the author.



**Figure 5. Hungerstation's presence on Twitter by the hour-wise posts.**  
Sources: developed by the author.



Sources: developed by the author.

Figures 4-6 illustrate that three companies adapted their key messages after the pandemic. However, unlike Maestro and Hungerstation, Shawarmer SA significantly changed messaging (Figure 7, 8). Shawarmer highly engages with its customers. The interactions between Shawarmer and its customers play a vital role in igniting the customers' responses. On the other hand, Maestro, Figure 9 and 10, changed the tone of its messaging after the pandemic. Maestro's messaging style before the crisis was more of traditional marketing than of promoting products only (Figure 7).



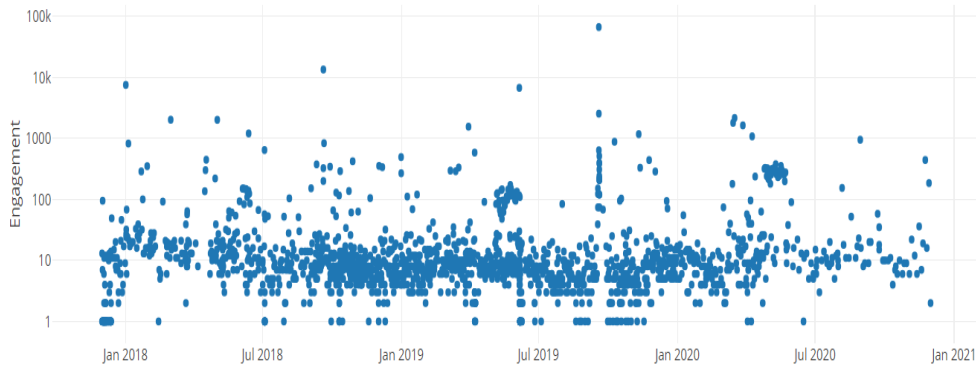
**Figure 7. Sample message before the pandemic (Shawarmer)**

Sources: developed by the author.



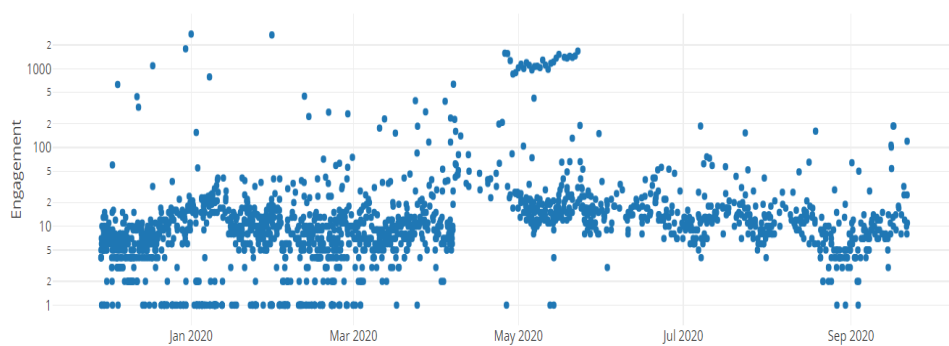






**Figure 12. Customer Interaction with Maestro on Twitter**

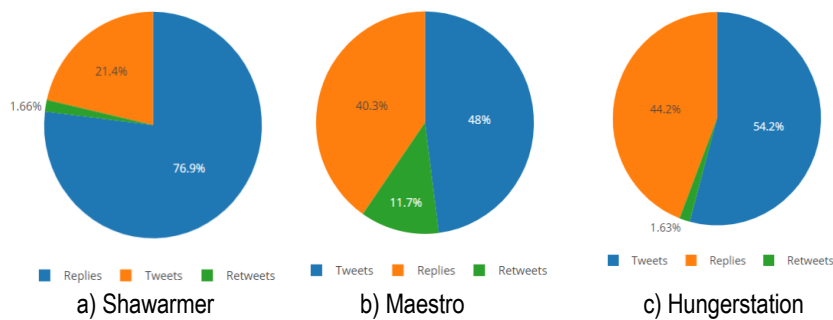
Sources: developed by the author.



**Figure 13. Customer Interaction with Hungerstation on Twitter**

Sources: developed by the author.

Tweets made up 21.4% of its account use and retweet only 1.6%. Moreover, Figure 14 shows that the company's tweets included very few hashtags. For Maestro Pizza, Tweets constituted 48 percent of total posts, while replies and retweets were 40.3% and 11.7 %, respectively.



**Figure 14. Types of Twitter Posts**

Sources: developed by the author.

For Hungerstation, tweets made up 54.2 percent, while replies were 44.2 percent, and retweets constituted 1.63 percent of the total number of posts made by Hungerstation's Twitter handle during the pandemic. Table 1 shows that most of Shawarmer's tweets included fewer hashtags (29) in comparison to Maestro Pizza and Hungerstation tweets, which had 1,200 and 952 hashtags, as shown in Tables 2-3, respectively. These results capture the characteristics of online communication of the studied companies on one of the popular social media platforms, which could analyze how major Saudi Arabia's food industry players managed their communication with the public.

**Table 1. Hashtags (Shawarmer)**

Hashtag	Number of uses	Hashtag	Number of uses
Prayer of The Day	29	Film Your Home	5
Baloot School (Cards Game)	16	Hungerstation	4
Straight Forward Shawarma	8	Shawarmer	4
The Bogyman	8	We Miss You	3
Uncovered	5	We are all responsible	3

Sources: developed by the author.

**Table 2. Hashtags (Maestro)**

Hashtag	Number of uses	Hashtag	Number of uses
We Enlarge it	1.2 K	Contest Thousand Pizza and a Pizza	20
The Tasty Pizza	47	Riyadh Season	24
Enlarge it	35	O Green, We with You	21
Thank You	31	Pizza	20
Enlarge it Green	30	We Are belong to It	18

Sources: developed by the author.

**Table 3. Hashtags (Hungerstation)**

Hashtag	Number of uses	Hashtag	Number of uses
Hungerstation	952	Stay At Home	77
You will Always Find it	321	Hungerstation Contest	57
We are all responsible	121	Celebrate From A distance	28
Technology Talk	81	We Celebrate in Safety	25
Ramadan Arrives	82	Hungerstation Free Delivery	24

Sources: developed by the author.

The paper demonstrates that major players in the Saudi food industry significantly increased social media for marketing purposes despite the pandemic. It was anticipated that a significant portion of the Saudi population increased their online presence due to lockdown. In turn, companies (such as Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation) took advantage of the opportunity to interact with consumers directly. In this case, the nature of interaction included replies to customer queries and status updates. As indicated, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected business performance and operational strategies. This paper demonstrates how the communication approach across online channels became crucial during the pandemic period. The analysis of data from Twitter handles of Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation created a cohesive communication avenue for the companies. In this case, the companies adopted their communication strategies to issue critical messages through their posts, retweets, and hashtags to provide COVID-19 updates and business policy procedure updates. Besides, due to the imposed lockdown in Saudi Arabia, businesses in all sectors needed to develop a response plan for external queries from their customers. Social media conversations ensured that companies could respond to common questions from their customers and the public in general during the

pandemic. Thus, incorporating marketing strategies related to COVID-19 was critical in maintaining a beneficial level of interaction with their customers.

**Conclusion.** In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a shift in how companies manage their marketing communications. As demonstrated by the online survey, the reliance on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook intensified due to their ability to interact with customers directly. The shift towards these platforms is indicative that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed how consumers behave. Thus, marketing managers need to be aware of such changes and adapt their business and marketing strategies to address consumer expectations. As demonstrated by Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza, and Hungerstation, businesses have embraced innovative marketing methods and services. However, in this case, the three companies used social media platforms (Twitter) to interact with their customers directly. Furthermore, the observed changes in messaging were necessitated by the COVID-19 restrictions. Importantly, to further understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted marketing and communication processes, future studies could expand on this paper's scope to include the correlation between changes in consumer behavior during a pandemic and marketing.

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**Маркетинг у системі антикризового менеджменту: вплив пандемії COVID-19 на харчову промисловість Саудівської Аравії**

У статті узагальнено аргументи та контраргументи в рамках наукової дискусії щодо впливу пандемії COVID-19 на маркетингову діяльність підприємств харчової промисловості. Основною метою дослідження є аналіз впливу COVID-19 на ефективність стратегій розсилки повідомлень через соціальні мережі на прикладі підприємств харчової промисловості Саудівської Аравії. Систематизація наукових напрацювань із означеної тематики засвідчила, що пандемії та епідемії суттєво впливають на бізнес-процеси підприємств, зокрема, їх маркетингову діяльність. Теоретичним підґрунтям даної роботи є низка досліджень, присвячених оцінюванню ефективності процесу адаптації бізнес-цілей компаній з метою зменшення впливу негативних наслідків COVID-19. Автором зазначено, що викликані COVID-19 зміни споживчої поведінки обумовлюють необхідність оновлення маркетингових стратегій компаній з урахуванням прогнозування коротко- та довгострокових змін на ринку. Емпіричний аналіз засновано на результатах онлайн-опитування трьох найбільших компаній на ринку харчової промисловості Саудівської Аравії: Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza та Hungerstation. Дослідження проведено з використанням кількісних методів. Для досягнення поставленої мети автором: 1) визначено особливості комунікації компаній зі споживачами до та під час пандемії COVID-19 на прикладі мереж швидкого харчування Shawarmer SA, Maestro Pizza та Hungerstation; 2) виявлено зміни стратегій розсилки повідомлень у соціальних мережах. За результатами аналізу сторінок компаній у соціальній мережі Twitter встановлено, що пандемія COVID-19 суттєво змінила спосіб взаємодії компаній зі споживачами. Автором систематизовано відповідні стратегії взаємодії зі споживачами. У дослідженні емпірично підтверджено та теоретично доведено, що розсилка повідомлень у соціальних мережах є одним із дієвих інструментів комунікації зі споживачами під час пандемії. Отримані результати можуть бути корисними при розробленні клієнтоорієнтованих маркетингових стратегій.

**Ключові слова:** клієнтоорієнтовані маркетингові стратегії, харчова промисловість, ділове спілкування, розсилка повідомлень, маркетинг, COVID-19.