

## COVID-19 and ethnic-oriented shopping

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### Abstract:

The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) impacted daily life for residents of the majority of countries worldwide. In this research note, we explore how the pandemic is changing religious-oriented shopping with a focus on Muslim shopping. While supermarkets provided online shopping and home delivery services, Islamic store, as small business, could not opt for such services in Belgium and many other countries. Therefore, we designed and conducted a consumer survey with a special target of Muslim shoppers between April 27 and May 6 2020 in all Belgium regions. We found that despite stay-at-home directives that is effective since early March 2020, Muslims are still leaving their homes to buy Islamic groceries “Halal”. Most importantly, the daily pattern of shopping has significantly been changed, which helped in reducing the density of shoppers in the stores.

## COVID-19 and ethnic-oriented shopping

The novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) impacted daily life for residents of the majority of countries worldwide (Hasanat et al., 2020). Millions of people have been forced to stay at home, which has led to a slowdown and imbalance in the world economy (Barua, 2020; Gruszczynski, 2020). In this research note, we explore how the pandemic is changing religious-oriented shopping, focusing on Muslim shopping and using Belgium as an example. As this new virus is widely spread in Belgium since early March, the authorities are implementing strict social distancing measures between 13 March and 11 May 2020. These measures imposed the closure of all businesses, except food supply businesses (hypermarkets, grocery stores, retail stores, etc.), pharmacies, service stations and banks. Although authorities allowed consumers to leave their homes to buy groceries during stay-at-home orders, a growing number of people are making grocery orders online from large grocery chains such as Intermarché, Delhaize, Colruyt, Cora, and Albert Heijn. While large supermarkets provided online shopping and home delivery services (Kim, 2020), Islamic store, as small business, could not opt for such services. Our hypothesis is that ethnic and religious-oriented commerce that provides particular goods for their consumers may not be highly impacted during the pandemic time. The term ethnic appeared as a portrayal of contemporary urban phenomena and a representation of a culturally distinct group from the majority population (Kaplan, 1997). In regards to ethnic commerce, Kesteloot (1987) considers it the cultural distinction of its owner, employees, and customers from the majority. Guillon (1986) sees ethnic commerce as a practiced trade by a particular ethnic group for its community. Ethnic trade is related to migration with general nourishment as the main focus while food occupying only a fragment from it. This commerce has succeeded to expand into clothing, body care, jewelry, housing, and others. In terms of Muslim entrepreneurs, the subject of our study, they have settled in Europe over the last decades and developed an environment convenient for their religious practices (Göle, 2011). The Islamic stores make available some Halal food, a dietary standard prescribed in the Muslim scripture "Qur'an", for Muslims in many European countries. These are not available in traditional store chains and, therefore, the consumer will continue making trips to those stores to secure their needs of such goods. However, the shopping patterns and habits have certainly changed. In order to examine our hypothesis and understand the shopping pattern during COVID-19 social distancing orders, we conducted an online consumer survey targeting Muslim community in Belgium. We used the Google forms platform with 35 questions. Our questions are grouped into four categories: buying habits, COVID-19 measures, socio-economic status and level of satisfaction.

We found that despite stay-at-home directives that have been effective since the beginning of March 2020, Muslims are still leaving their homes to buy Islamic groceries "Halal". Most importantly, the daily pattern of shopping has significantly been changed, which helped in reducing the density of shoppers in the stores.

This consumer survey is designed with a special target group of buyers frequenting Muslim trades. Conducted during the period of quarantine (between 27 April and 6 May 2020), this survey allowed us to collect the opinion of 315 households living throughout Belgium. We chose to consider only those shops that were open during the period of quarantine. Figure1 shows the type of grocery stores that respondents frequently visited before and during the pandemic. Around 90% of the respondents to our survey made frequent trips to Muslim-oriented stores because they offer halal products (Figure 2). This also explains the rate of attendance at butcher shops that provides halal meat. The survey shows that this type of trade remains the most frequented by the Muslim community in regular times (95.7%), but also during the application of the containment measures in Belgium (92%). This frequentation rate, which remained almost stable during and after the quarantine, is explained by the products offered by the trade: halal meat. Next to butchers, Muslim food stores managed to attract

more customers during the stay-at-home period and increased from 27.3% to 49%. This increase is explained by the fact that these shops offer a variety of choices (for 44.3% of respondents), and that these shops are located close to the place of residence (for 43% of respondents). It is worth mentioning that the beginning of COVID-19 outbreak in Belgium was just before the month of Ramadan, a key month for an increase in consumption of meat and ethnic products among the Muslim community. As a consequence, a decrease is observed for bakeries. This type of business lost customers during the period of quarantine and it went from 64.7% to 45%. This can be explained by the fact that the customers of these bakeries find these products in supermarkets, hypermarkets and also in general food stores that offer similar products as those sold in the bakeries. Another argument can explain this decrease. For hygienic reasons and fear that the virus will be spread, people started to make bread themselves, especially since the majority spend all their time at home.

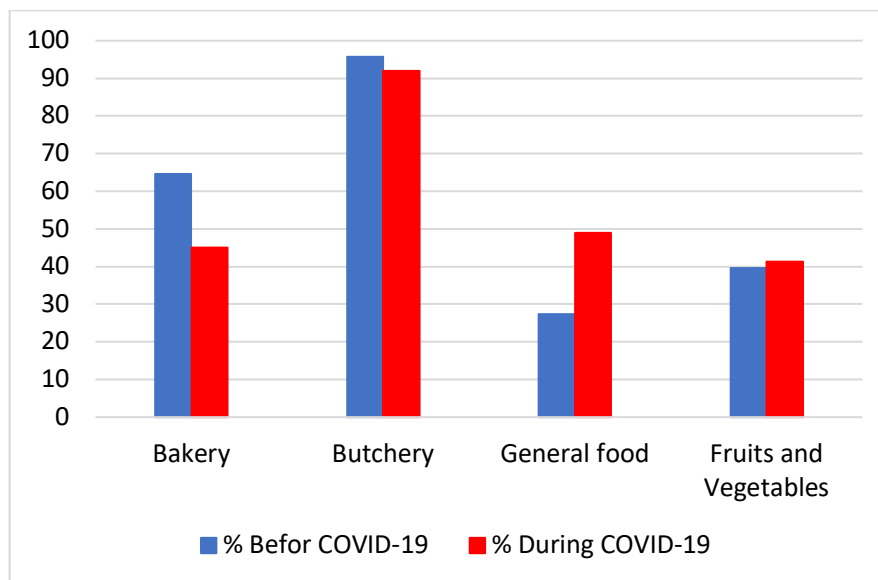


Figure 1: Percentage of trips per shopping type by respondents.

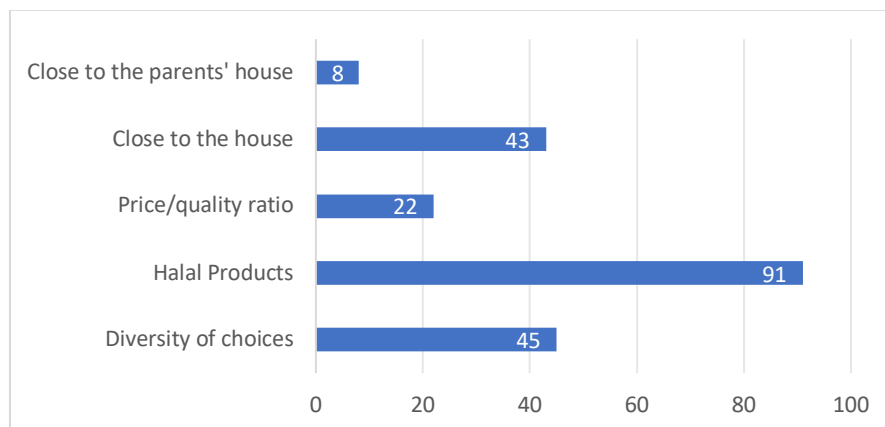


Figure 2: Motivation for the choice of Islamic stores (%).

We found it interesting to distinguish the number of times consumers in this type of store make their purchases (Figure 3). At the time when the majority of consumers were visiting Muslim businesses once a week (36%) and twice a week (26.7%) prior to lockdown, COVID-19 related preventive measures influenced this attendance. Approximately 31% of the respondents made a shopping trip every other

week and 29.2% made a trip to Islamic grocery stores once a week during the pandemic. Even more significantly, those who made such trips once a month increased from 3% to 21%.

In terms of the days chosen by consumers to shop, Figure 4 shows that Saturday is the day most chosen by consumers (52.3%) to shop before the lockdown. The other two days chosen were Friday (33.3%) and Wednesday (31.3%). During the lockdown, the Saturday peak was spread over the whole week except Sunday.

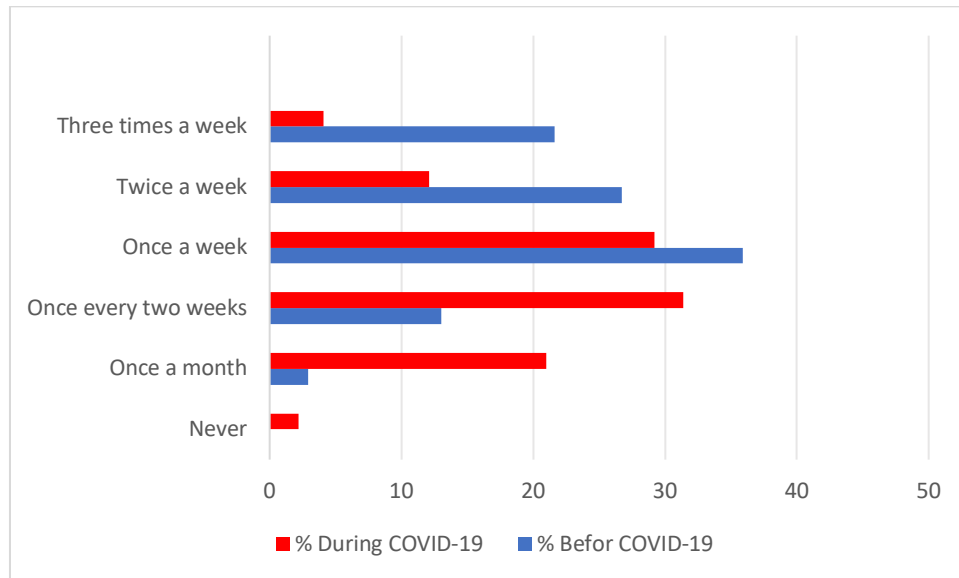


Figure 3 : Number of times shopping is done.

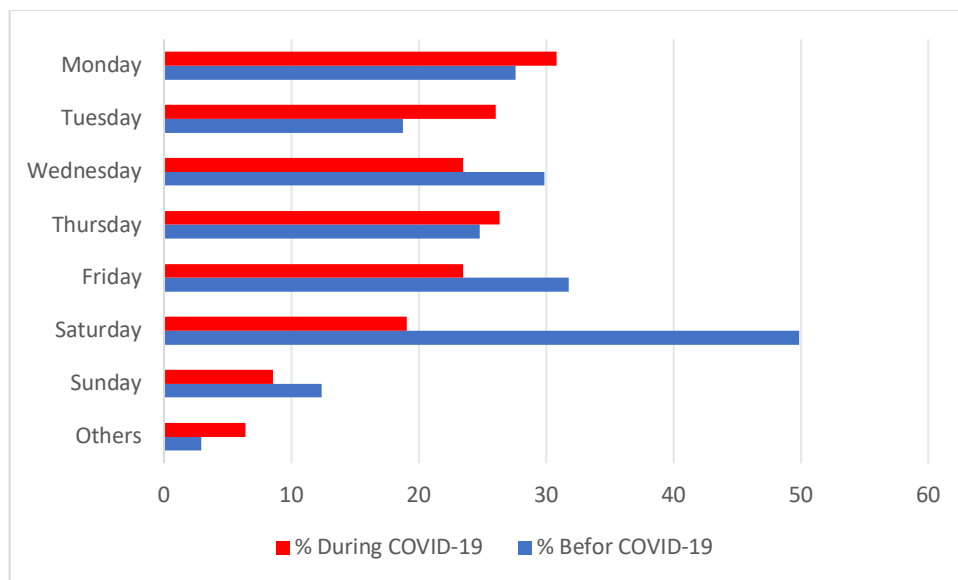
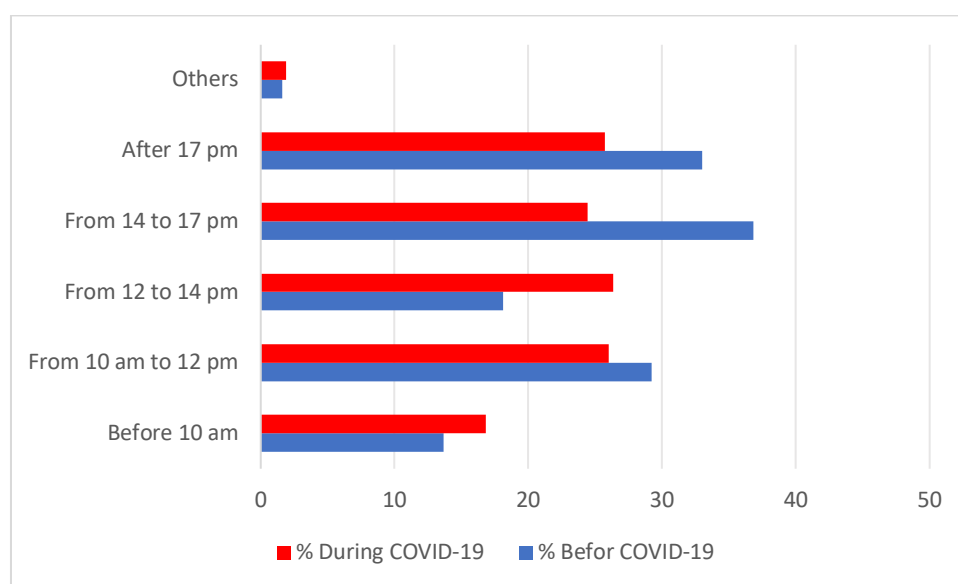


Figure 4 : Days chosen for grocery shopping.

This distribution over all days of the week, observed with the application of the COVID-19 measures, is reinforced once again by a distribution in terms of hours of attendance (Figure 5). Indeed, before quarantine, the majority of consumers preferred to shop in the afternoon. About 38.7% chose to shop between 2:00 to 5:00 pm, 34.7% shopped after 5:00 pm and about 30.7% preferred to shop between 10:00 am and 12:00 pm. While with the quarantine, the attendance was spread over the whole day: from 10:00 am until the shops closed. This made it possible to have fewer people in the shops and to

manage the number of customers attending. This dispersal of customers over the days of the week and the hours of the day explains other satisfaction criteria that we dealt with in our survey. According to the survey, 70% of consumers found that the number of customers in these shops was respected, compared to only 16% who found that this criterion was not entirely (or always) respected.

In terms of preventive measures adopted by shopkeepers, about 53.7% of shopkeepers were wearing masks and gloves, 24% wore only gloves, while 11% only masks, and only 9% of shopkeepers were wearing nothing at all to protect themselves and their customers. This allows us to distinguish 38% of the consumers who are satisfied with the preventive measures taken by the traders within the Muslim business, and 25% which are very satisfied. On the other hand, 24% are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 11% find these preventive measures rather unsatisfactory. These criteria also refer to the respect of social distancing and waiting time before being served by the trader. With regard to the respect of the 1.5 metres between people, 60% of respondents find that this measure was respected. For the waiting conditions in Muslim business during the quarantine period, 76.5% found it acceptable, while only 10% found it uncomfortable. We would like to point out that social distancing and the number of customers within the trade were well respected in butcher's shops and bakeries, whereas in Muslim food stores it was difficult for shopkeepers to apply it.



*Figure 5: Hours chosen for grocery shopping.*

Regarding the service time in ethnic Islamic shops during the quarantine period, 63.8% of the customers find that there is no change compared to the period before COVID-19 and that the service time is as usual. While 15% find it a little longer and 16% find it faster. This criterion varies depending on when the customer is running his errands. Indeed, the service time can be long if the customer comes on a weekday after 5pm. While the service time will be very fast if the customer makes his purchases on the weekend before 10am.

For this survey, 56% of the respondents are married and about 71% are active in the society and had a presential work before the confinement period. Only 18% of these workers were forced to work on site. The measures related to COVID-19 thus obliged 30.8% of these active people to telecommute, while 12.4% lost their jobs.

The fact that approximately 80% of the respondents work from home or stayed at home (unemployment, retirement, etc.) has a positive impact on the rate of frequentation of this type of business. Thus, moments of concentration or peak periods are avoided because these people have flexibility in terms of the time they have to make their shopping.

During our survey, we also asked respondents to tell us which businesses or services they would like to frequent after the lifting of the containment. Restaurants and hairdressers' salons are the two types of businesses that people look forward to open (about 55%). Clothing stores come second (47%). The other types of shops that people want to open (about 30%) are cafés, bookstores, decoration shops, body care services and mobile phone, computer and multimedia sales & repair shops.

To conclude, our survey showed that Islamic commerce, as an example of religious and ethnic-oriented commerce, has not been highly impacted by social distancing and stay-at-home orders despite that those stores do not offer online shopping or home delivery. This highlights consumers' belief in halal products as over 90% of our respondents mainly shopping from Islamic grocery because they offer halal products. Muslim groups in Europe and other non-Islamic regions are diverse, especially in terms of their origin, so more detailed studies are needed to give more valid conclusions. For example, the majority of Muslims in Belgium are Moroccan and Turkish and each has different preferences. However, we believe that this research will generate new knowledge in understanding and tackling Muslim groups' behavior and social aggregation under severe events, like pandemics, in a foreign environment.

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