Indicators

Coronavirus COVID-19

Early clues on the post-crisis consumer & market realities
April 20th

#10 Mood Food.

How we are choosing food that make us feel good

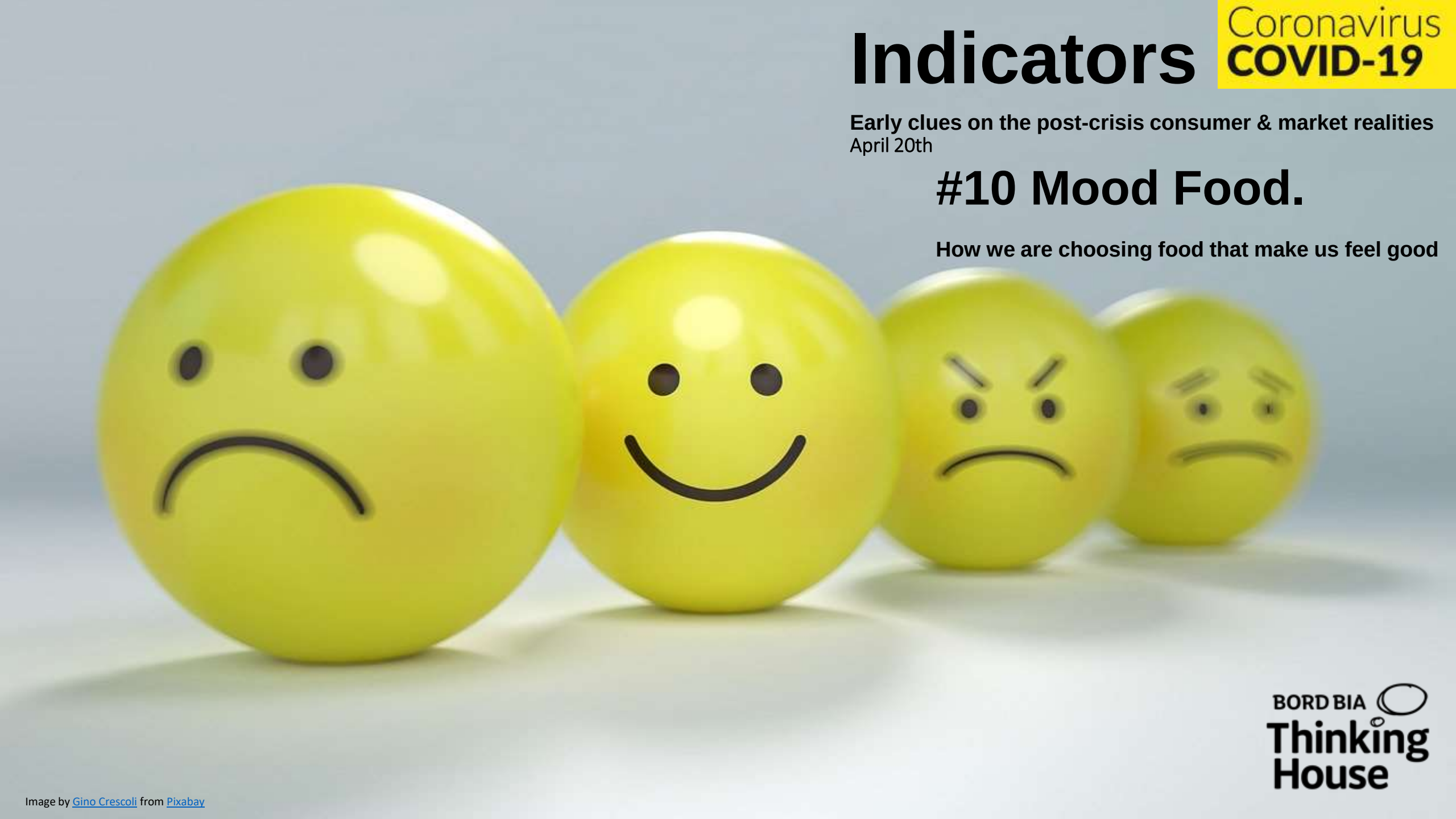

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Image by Gino Crescoli from Pixabay

#10 Mood Food.

We've probably all heard the phrase 'emotional eating' before but do we really understand the science behind this phenomenon? Is this consumer behaviour as simple as 'treating'? Are we all doomed to seek out chocolate to that serotonin boost the longer this lockdown goes on?

Emotion definitely plays a role in the food choices we make and is central to **Coping Strategies** we all adopt in times of crisis. **Escapism** is one such **Coping Strategy** that can reveal some clues to how consumption behaviour may be shifting since lockdown began.

Behavioural Science and **Hedonic Consumption** shows us that consumers may be seeking out sensory pleasure from their food and drink choices. The science of **Reward** shows us that **Hyperbolic Discounting** drives people to 'smaller' more immediate benefits from their choices.

We can't be sure just yet how consumption behaviour has shifted in the midst of this unique time in all of our lives but we can look at some early clues.

We call this indicator MOOD FOOD.

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Image by Sasin Tipchai from Pixabay

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The Science of Escapism

Escapism functions as a coping mechanism when consumers are confronted with external stressors that threaten either their sense of identity or control. According to the Journal of Consumer Research there are two forms of escapism – Passive and Active.

Passive Escapism involves consumers acting as observers; classic examples here would be watching TV or a watching a movie. However, **Active Escapism** provide a more interesting mode of behaviour to help us understand the impact of this phenomenon on food consumption behaviour.

While other forms of emotion-focused coping relieve stress through psychological avoidance (i.e. refocusing of attention away from stressors), Active Escapism provides the benefits of affirmation and empowerment.

The consumer who engages in **Active Escapism** enjoys a sense of achievement, the DO something that brings them to better place. In current context that is away from the world of lockdown and potentially off on their travels to a better 'imagined' other…

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Image by C.Cagnin on Pexels.com

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Travel through food

With people unable to leave their homes during lockdown, Google have found a dramatic decrease in search terms related to travel and outside activities.

These included such terms as 'city breaks' which has fallen by 99% since the lockdown began, 'travel insurance' (-98%), 'taxi to airport' (-97%), camping sites (-87 %) and flights (-86%).

However, searches for food recipes from far flung destinations have exploded as have ‘food journeys’ with many virtual platforms being created to enable people learn the art of cooking traditional foods from around the world.

The rise in scratch cooking is being coupled with food playing a critical role in **Active Escapism** for consumers deprived of travel…

23%

of Irish adults are learning to cook from recipes as a result of Covid 19.

Source: Bord Bia Indicators Barometor

32%

of Irish adults are scratch cooking more as a result of Covid 19.

Source: Bord Bia Indicators Barometor

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If Mohammad won't go to the mountain…

…home delivery is bringing the exotic to people's homes. Hyperbolic Discounting refers to the tendency for people to increasingly choose a smaller-sooner reward over a larger-later reward as the delay occurs sooner rather than later in time. Recreating your holiday food through delivery of that cuisine is the quickest way to reward yourself for that missed trip.

The home delivery picture varies depending upon where you live. In France, Spain and the UK, Just Eat and Uber Eats saw drops in average daily users ranging from 2% to as much as 23% in March, compared with the averages for January and February.

However, in the US, as people are unable to dine out in their favourite restaurants, delivery and meal kit businesses have seen a surge in sales. HelloFresh said it's expecting first-quarter sales of between 685 million euros ($750 million) and $710 million euros, up from $420 million euros a year earlier. (Washington Post, April 1st 2020).

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A little luxury

What does appear to be a real phenomenon is the endurance of ‘high-end’ experiences being maintained for those with the spending power. There is a split between consumers when it comes to spending power so far – with estimates suggesting just under half of most workforces around the world already experiencing a drop income.

For those who haven’t yet felt the pinch, **Hyperbolic Discounting**, can see spending on food delivery shift to recreating fine-dining at home. Even Michelin star restaurants are reinventing themselves to target those consumers who ‘can’t wait’ for their favourite fine dining experience so attempt to ‘replicate it themselves’ at-home.

There are lots of examples of the high-end players moving into delivery. For example, a Michelin star restaurant in Dublin Liath launched a take away menu for €19 euros and sold out in minutes (Irish Times, March 2020). These kind of behaviours are being replicated in major urban-centres around the world.

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Treats time

Treating ourselves has become a key behaviour for many consumers getting themselves through the long days of lockdown.

Hedonic consumption focuses on consumer behaviour which seeks sensory pleasures or hedonistic benefits and can go a long way to explaining treating behaviour.

As more of us are working from home, normal routines are out the window and with the ability to pop into the kitchen for a sugar hit.

And relatedly **boredom** has been proven to driver hedonic consumption and, in turn, snacking behaviour.

37%

of Irish adults are having sweet treats and snack food as a result of Covid 19.

Source: Bord Bia Indicators Barometer

34%

of Irish are snacking more outside of mealtimes as a result of Covid 19.

Source: Bord Bia Indicators Barometer

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Treating and self control

Self-Control Bias shows us that as many individuals have a preference for immediate consumption, individuals may struggle to sacrifice consumption for future reward. There is evidence that lockdown is having a serious knock-on effect on consumers' ability to 'hold-off' on what once may have been a once a week treat.

As people get through another day, there is often a "back clap" to oneself or the family that everyone has survived. Food and drink indulgence is the order of the day for many with the hashtag #fattening the curve seeing many people post stories of their over indulgence.

An example is **The Quarantini**, a zeitgeist cocktail that emerged the second week in March, had over 25,000 Instagram posts by the end of March. US sales of alcohol in the off-trade rose 55% in the week ending 21st March, according to Nielsen with spirits like Tequila, gin and pre-mixed cocktails leading the way with sales up 75% compared to the same period last year.

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In favour of fresh.

While treats are a key part of mood food, at the other end of the spectrum, the need to eat well is being much documented during the Covid 19 lockdown. Eating well can help “improve the mood” and stave off stress and fresh fruit and vegetables play a role here. **Myopia Bias** can go some way to explaining this behaviour.

Myopia Bias refers to the tendency for individuals to focus on the present or immediate rather than the near or far future. As we discussed in our STOCKING-IN Indicator, consumers are going to different stages of stocking up. A focus on the ‘here and now’ (Myopia Bias) may well explain at least partially when consumers move into a ‘fresh food’ phase.

Much is also being made by nutritionists of good food and the role of good food in boosting immunity. It’s interesting to note that 89% per cent of Chinese mainland consumers say they will be more willing to buy daily necessities/fresh products online once the pandemic is over (Nielsen 2020).

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Implications for Irish Food & Beverages

- Brands have permission to allow consumers lose some self-control
- Deliver “Active Escapism” through flavours of the world cuisine
- Develop ‘small rewards’ in food service & retail
- And still find healthy ways to deliver ‘fresh rewards’ for immediate consumption

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