

How the Pandemic Ravaged the Food Retail Environment

Imagine for a moment a McDonald's franchise pre-covid. Line workers grilling patties, frying fries, and contributing to the preparation of meals for thousands everyday. Now think about a McDonald's franchise today. Not much has changed right? Sure there are a plethora of health and safety precautions being taken to ensure that the coronavirus does not wreak havoc on the restaurant and the community. But they still continue to serve their communities, sometimes receiving more traffic in their drive-thru windows than before the pandemic surfaced in Canada. One could say it's business as usual for McDonald's franchise.

Now picture your favourite mom and pop restaurant in your hometown. They'd surely get a few customers a day, enough to pay the bills and provide a fair quality of life. Then the pandemic hits and bam, no workers coming in because they fear contracting the virus or because government financial support suffices for them. Moreover, the owner of the shop has to navigate constantly changing health restrictions, and constantly adapt to whether they can serve customers or only provide takeout. The once steady flow of customers disappears while operating costs for the restaurant remain exorbitant. And suddenly, your neighbourhood mom and pop restaurant vanishes, never to be seen again.

This dichotomy in the ability for a restaurant to stay open amidst vast uncertainty was intriguing as a self-proclaimed food fanatic. With the ability to choose a summer research topic as part of the Undergraduate Student Research Internship (USRI) at Western University, I set out to work on a project that could help me satiate my desire to learn more about how COVID has impacted restaurants.

The Human Environment Analysis Laboratory (HEAL) had already commenced a project in the summer of 2020 that fit like a glove with the restaurant example. The Food Retail Environment Study for Health and Economic Resiliency (FRESHER) project studies the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food retail environment, specifically for outlets such as grocery stores, restaurants, bars, and cafes in communities across Ontario. To do so, this project uses a combination of GIS mapping, surveys, and interviews to answer two questions. First, the study aims to understand the struggles that business owners and their employees face as well as the strategies employed to navigate the current environment. The second question that's being answered is - what responses governments and other involved parties have taken to promote resilience in the food retail environment?

With the HEAL being a full year into the project, I was eager to help push their work forward and was able to do so through various mini-projects throughout the summer. With the intent to understand the spatial distribution of food retailers and the variance in policy across health units in Ontario, I set out to classify a list of food retailers based on a variety of factors. There were three levels of classification overall, the first being whether the business was in the

Anand Singh Kukreja

realm of hospitality, retail, or the local community. The second level of classification was meant to be more specific to each of the first level classifications and the third level of classification even more so.

For this task I completed over 3,000 entries during the summer while our entire team classified over 28,000 business all located in Ontario – it was quite the feat. What might seem like a monotonous and repetitive task was actually quite engaging. I got to see the breadth of food retailers; how they visibly look different across communities in Ontario, how the variety of food retail diminished as the towns became smaller and smaller, and much more. What was truly saddening was the sheer amount of restaurants and grocers that had their status on Google as *permanently closed*. What I suspected before I started the project was true – small retailers that didn't have multinational corporations supporting them were likely to fail.

The finding that so many small businesses were shutting down had me distraught but I was inspired when I started my next task. My job was to contact businesses in the Kingston, Ontario region and ask whether they would like to participate in an interview regarding how COVID has impacted them. While I didn't conduct the interviews themselves, I was thrilled to hear from business owners on the phone that they were willing to be part of our study.

The results of the FRESHER project will hopefully allow for small businesses to receive assistance that is commensurate with the challenges they've faced all through this pandemic. Change is something that is difficult to achieve even at a personal level which is why studies such as FRESHER are so important nowadays. With tangible findings, it is possible to engage with governmental or non-governmental organizations to enact change in a sector that has dealt with constant, and unwanted, change for the last year and a half.

Being involved with HEAL was a truly enriching experience this summer. Not only did I get to work with some of the top researchers in their field, I also got to know my fellow students who had similar interests. I can't stress how much that helped me do my work because with such an engaged community of people working on the project, it was easier to support each other in achieving our goals.

Overall, I'd have to say that this summer was an absolute success. Being able to work on a project that I was passionate about made it so much more engaging than I initially imagined. Moreover, the tasks I completed directly contributed to the success of the project. While my time with the lab is done, I'm super excited to see what the end result of the project is.