

Blessings on a Cart: Ramadan and Street Vendors in Dhaka

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Abstract

Ramadan not only has a religious value to the community but also adds value to the economy through formal, structured as well as informal unstructured employment. As during Ramadan, food consumption patterns change as well as people's tendency to buy religious items also heightens, it is an important month for the street vendors and impacts their socio-economic position for the year. This paper deals with gaining insight on social orientation, business modality, perception on the effect of festivals and the real effect of Ramadan and pandemic on the revenue and cost. The evidence suggests that despite the presence of other religious and non-religious festivals, Ramadan remains the most critical time for street vendors to generate additional revenue. However, the effect is greater for carts selling processed foods and religious items. The selling of religious items usually face a steep downhill during non-Ramadan times which makes it unsustainable throughout the year. However, although the pandemic hit the regular review of the street vendor, during Ramadan times they didn't have to lower the prices of items being sold due to the persistent demand.

Keywords

Iftar, Bazaar, Ramadan • Street Vendor • Hawker • Floating Business • Food Cart • Old Dhaka • Informal Economy

Introduction

Dhaka-the capital of Bangladesh-holds a population of approximately 20 million people in its metropolitan area. According to World Population Review 2021, the total metropolitan area of 301 square kilometer has more than 20 million people in it. Due to the high population density and great demand, street vendors are found in great numbers too. In Ramadan however, the street vendors do not deal in a scattered manner. Different areas set up zones where all the vendors offer their goods [1].

In this densely populated country, the informal economy plays a vital role in the life of marginalised communities. According to the international Labour Organization Bangladesh's 87% labour force is involved in the informal economy (ILO, 2010). Being a business hub since the Mughal empire from 400 years ago, Old Dhaka, is a center for many informal and formal businesses. Not only for the business operation, but also for the availability of flavourful traditional foods, old dhaka has created a name for itself. (The daily sun, 2016). Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country and as a result, every year Ramadan is observed by almost 80% of the total population. According to expert 2020, in expert demand for essential commodities, especially foods, goes up as the consumption pattern

changes. In addition, this pattern does not take place only in Bangladesh, rather this is the scenario of all the muslim majority country Dhaka - the capital of Bangladesh - holds a population of approximately 20 million people in its metropolitan area. According to World Population Review 2021, the total metropolitan area of 301 square kilometer has more than 20 million people in it. Due to the high population density and great demand, street vendors are found in great numbers too. In Ramadan however, the street vendors do not deal in a scattered manner. Different areas set up zones where all the vendors offer their goods [2].

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importance Ramadan has over the economy, especially in the food sector [3].

Materials and Methods

Selling inexpensive and mostly non-branded items to the public through the usage of semi-permanent or completely mobile spatial arrangement in the streets, more commonly known as street vending or hawking, is one of the largest income-earning sources for the less affluent in Bangladesh. Considered as an informal job opportunity due to, although not exclusive of, the little or no presence of proper rules, regulation, structure, operational process or collaborative approach. The hawkers or vendors usually identify themselves belonging to a certain product category or confine themselves to a locality of their convenience. However, street vendors who roam around different localities or switch to different product categories or altogether a different work is also present. A study done in Sylhet City Corporation revealed that about 81.9 percent street vendors work on a full-time basis and about 87.9 percent are usually independent self-employed personnel. The same study concluded that during 2014, there were about 5 lac hawkers in Bangladesh [4].

Street vendors, while being a common phenomenon in most Asian cities, show differences in terms of background, gender etc. For example, 11% non-agricultural informal employment is attributed to street vending whereas in India it's about 4-6%. In far-east Asian cities, street vending is largely owned by women whereas in the Indian subcontinent, it's more prevalent among men[5].

However, despite the number of employment this activity provides, street vendors are seen as an obstacle to urbanization in many countries. Although there are exceptions, the global northern view of clean city concept usually has no space for street vending and thus is considered spatially and hygienically unstable. However, in few countries, like Malaysia, Columbia, Singapore etc, street vending is recognised as a legal business or at least given the chance to become so, a feat achieved through years of political and economic alignment. In many countries, however, such associations have not been possible or even if there are associations, it usually gets controlled by the ruling party and thus are not much able to voice its concern to make the hawkers working conditions better. In Bangladesh the association is known as Bangladesh Hawkers League [6].

However, the association is usually not somewhere the hawkers can go for financial investment to become street vendors. Poverty, rural-urban migration, low education, higher labor supply in manufacturing facilities are the forces that typically compel an unemployed person to become a street vendor. Some vendors also have a history of involvement in other menial labour especially in facilities in semi-urban areas with irregular flow of work and low-paid activities against which street vending, although informal, gives the autonomy to link the hard work with more chances to earn. Thus, some street vendors shift from place to place to attract better markets and increase their daily earnings. Usually, most street vendors set up the business using personal savings or by selling assets or lend from other cooperative associations as there is no formal credit facility by either banks or non-banking financial institutions for such an informal job category. This however raises concern on whether the cash flow originated and circling in street vending scenarios should be made

bankable with advanced financial services curated to such category only. While street vendors provide products at a much lower rate through informal transactions, they may also contribute to generate demand or influence the price level of similar products by formal sectors and channel the cash flow to the formal shops and suppliers/wholesalers. For example, during Ramadan there is a demand of 40-50 thousand tons of dates in Bangladesh, which is about 70% of the total yearly demand and is largely sold by hundreds of thousands of mostly makeshift roadside street vendors enabling the final consumer to purchase it conveniently (The Daily Star, 2021). For consumers too, street vending provides comfort, convenience, helps curbing transportation cost to attain goods & saves time for the primary wage earner. However, street vendors do not always have a shining day as fear of eviction, harassment, insecurity and confiscation impact them significantly which multiplies the usual risk of having goods unsold or perished. Any other national problems on the top-strikes for example-may severely affect their earning capacity creating challenges for not only the street vendors & their suppliers but also the consumers who depend on them and the suppliers too. The global pandemic of Covid-19 virus has seen lockdown scenarios in Bangladesh which in turn created new poors. Street vendors are one of the most negatively affected groups of income earners in this scenario.

However, after almost a year-long hit, street vendors were hoping to see better days in Ramadan, where consumption of different food and other non-perishable items for Iftar creates chances for more product purchase while the effect of looming Eid the biggest festival of the year creates opportunity to sell non-perishable lifestyle items for the moderate and lower income level people. Many street vendors usually take the month of Ramadan as the opportunity to earn additional income through festival-inspired buying tendency of the customers and use the savings from those earning to survive or be better throughout the year [6].

In few Asian countries, there are also instances of new street vendors who become hawkers only for the time of Ramadan and traditionally belong to other professions the rest of the time of the year. Such phenomena is stronger in Dhaka too & has been seen in several popular joints for street vendors which includes A forgotten business hub of Dhaka from the British Era. Such places, during Ramadan times, hustles and bustles with numerous street vendors out of which a significant percentage deal with food products and sits during the time of 5pm-7pm every day for the month. However, there are other types of vendors too who sit after Iftar with non-perishable items which include religious scriptures, accessories, fragrances etc. In Chawkbazar area alone, thousands of street vendors are found roaming throughout the day and night- with their daily tenure depending on the type of products they are selling (BBC News, 2019). A big percentage of these shops are food vendors who sell iftar items made from meat, vegetables, milk or other ingredients [7].

Results and Discussion

In spite of being a common phenomenon during Ramadan and also being one of the major means of livelihood for the lower end of the economic class in urban areas, street vendors in Dhaka have not been studied thoroughly yet. Especially, due to the pandemic, this informal economy has suffered due to the restrictions imposed on public movement. Without properly structured authority to provide

them with financial support, it was difficult for them to sustain the usual practice. Considering such turmoil, experts were thought to be a turnaround time for the street hawkers, particularly for those who provide services in popular Iftar Bazaar spots.

Hence, the study is undertaken to gain insight on the street vendors in Iftar bazaars to learn more about their geographic, demographic orientation along with the perceived & actual effect of Ramadan. Such insight may help other researchers as well as policy formulators to propose different or better ways to make the iftar bazaar economically sustainable [8].

This might also help to suggest profitable and safe investment through recognised and licensed means of street vending activity. However, considering the type of the issue, there might be further research to be undertaken on a larger scale. As an initiation, the scope of this study is thus limited to the street vendors in selected few Iftar Bazaar spots only. The research is conducted through a mixed method approach.

In the research, a combination of qualitative and quantitative primary data collection was done. A face-to-face interview was conducted with each case to collect data. The Interview was taken with a set of questionnaires prepared beforehand and the same for all the cases or street vendors who were interviewed.

Cluster sampling was followed in the probabilistic sampling method. The population set was divided into several zones based on the geography of Old Dhaka. The total number of zones is slightly more than 150 which includes more than 3000 street vendors or sample cases. In this study, 15 zones were interviewed, which totals into 120 people from the population set. This means 4% of the population is set based on the number of cases.

Zone wise which is 10%. 3 zones were formed into a cluster with a varied number of street vendors selected in a random probabilistic method from each cluster [9].

Total 5 clusters were there including: Lalbagh, Chawkbazaar, Rahmatganj, Bakshibazar and Azimpur. The types of products sold by the interviewed vendors and their locality are given below:

Zone	Ingredients	Ready to eat	Processed Foods	Drinks	Religious Items
Lalbagh	7	21	13	4	2
ChawkBazar	5	12	8	2	1
RahmatGanj	2	8	9	2	1
Bakshibazar	3	2	3	1	0
Azimpur	4	4	5	1	0
Total	21	47	38	10	4

Table 1. Zone Wise vendors

The unstructured interview questions were a combination of different types. Which includes dichotomous questions and open questions. The interviews went for 10 to 8 minutes on average per interviewee and the interviewee was interviewed without any prior notice. The collected data were analysed further to understand the

situation. According to the data presented above, geographically and historically chawkbazar is the hub of Ramadan in Old Dhaka. However, with evolving time and population the tradition has spread all over old dhaka. Now specific areas have their own iftar bazaar due to convenience and demand. Amid covid pandemic Chawkbazar has not been able to conduct its glorious and traditional 400 years old iftar bazar officially. The nearby areas of chawkbazar took the opportunity. Hence, the street vendors who were situated informally at the usual site of the Iftar bazaar and the adjacent space were taken as survey respondents based on the availability and density. Also, the representation from each area-wise cluster varied in numbers based on the willingness of the survey respondents to respond [10].

Analysis Procedure

Information was collected from the sample population on four key research areas -

- The spatial and service orientation of the Street vendors during Ramadan
- The demographic and business orientation of the street vendors,
- The perception regarding the effect of festivals and pandemic on the street vending business
- The business cost and revenue scenario of the street vendors in Ramadan compared to usual non-Ramadan time considering both times are affected by the imposed lockdown.

For statistical observation, mixed tools using MS Office-Excel and Google Spreadsheet were used to find graphical representation of the numbers associated.

Findings

Spatial and Service orientation

As seen from the Figure 1: Cluster wise cart distribution, the preferred zones for the street vendors to have their mobile/moveable cart or likewise temporary adjustments are closely around the Chawkbazaar and Lalbagh area which might be due to the Iftar Bazaar myths created around the place [11].

The density of the carts in clusters thus is higher in these two areas, represented in figure 1 and 2.

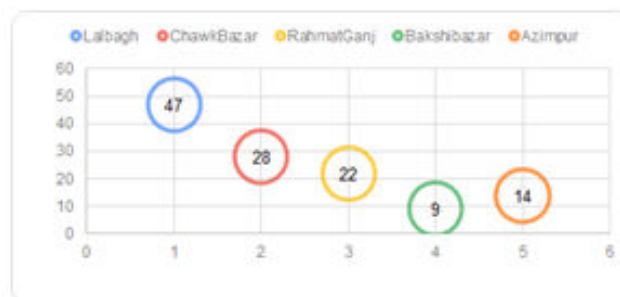


Figure 1. Cluster distribution of carts.

Also the respondents in these areas were more available, open to discussion and had more variety in nature of the products sold. Based on the products sold, the street vendors most active during the Ramadan, and especially the Iftar/evening time, were further classified into 5 Figure, as shown in Figure 2 to see the variation of profit and cost in each of the categories in later parts of the study. The Figure 2 and 3 has the most active and large number of street

vendors which might have resulted from the demand of readily edible natural food items and the cultural tendency to consume more fried food after day-long fasting. The clusters benign popular for selling historical royal food items also may bring more consumers for such items and thereby a fair quantity of vendors are interested to sell items belonging to category. Figure 2 and Table 2.

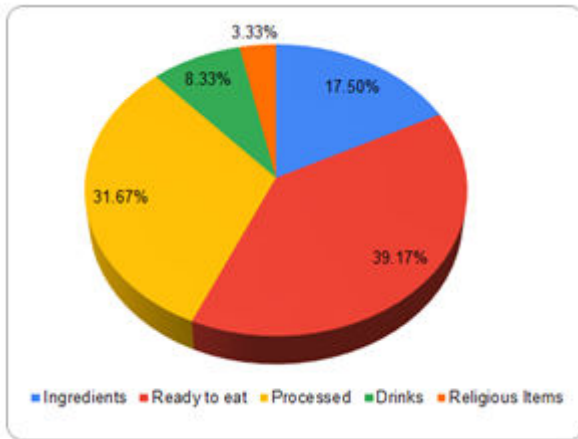


Figure 2. Distribution of total Sales per category

Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4	Category 5
Ingredients	Ready to eat natural food	Processed Foods	Drinks	Religious Items
Lemon, Coriander, Mint, Tomato, Ice, Chilli, puffed rice, Cheese	Mango, dates, Oranges, Pomegranate, Apple, banana, cucumber, Watermelon, coconut, muskmelon, Pineapple	Ghugni, Chickpeas, Jilapi, Nimki, Samosa, other Fried food	Matha, Sugar Cane Juice, Lemona de with basil seeds	Atar, Tupi, Tasbih, Meswak etc.

Table 2. Category of Products

Although small in number, carts selling religious items and scriptures also are seen in the clusters which might have resulted from the increased piousness of people during the holy month of Ramadan.

Demographic and business Orientation

Considering the timeline of Ramadan which exists for 1 [12] month only each year, the street vendors in iftar bazaar also have only this timeframe to generate business for their products. Rest of the year selling the same products might not be as profitable. Also the clusters might not be as profit-generating as seen during Ramadan. That's why, there is a tendency to float in and out of street vending in Ramadan time. The term Floating or seasonal here refers to the vendors who might be street vendors only during Ramadan and rest of the year may be doing some other work. Even during Ramadan, there are vendors who sell in moveable carts only during iftar bazaar and have other daily jobs/mental labour at other times of the day figure 3.

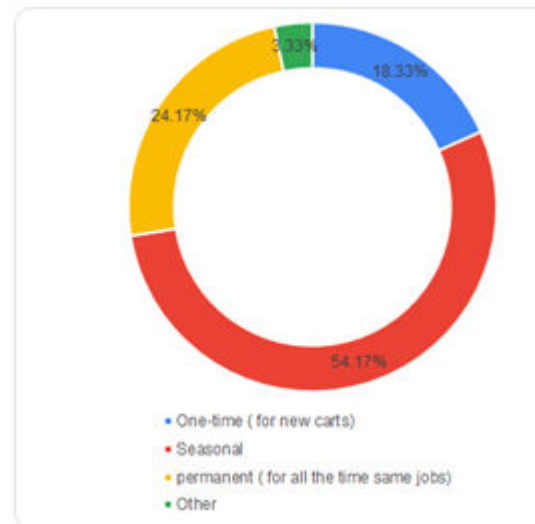


Figure 3. Type of street vending

As the above figure 4 suggests, the majority of the street vendors during Ramadan are only seasonal street vendors along with many first-timers and thus it might pose difficulty for any authority figure, be it Hawkers League or even the food inspection committee to bring them under year-round policies. They depend on the revenue generated through the street vending activities as the primary and only income source during the period of Ramadan, [13] if not for the rest of the year too, as seen from.

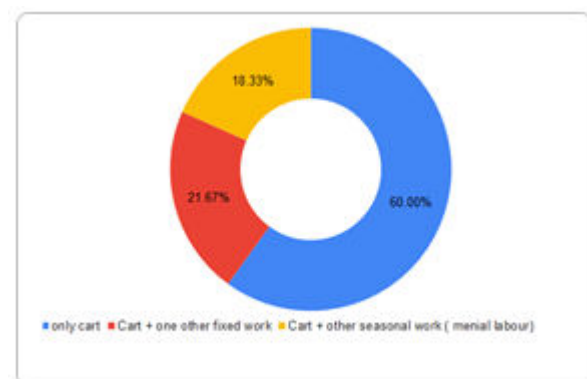


Figure 4. Employment pattern of the vendors

The gender observed in the study was predominantly male and as can be seen from B3 below, about 80% of the street vendors belong to the age range of 24-42 which might be explained from the fact that street vending requires the ability to withstand rough weather, crowd, heat for a longer period of time which might not be feasible for a person of slightly higher age. Also, consumers usually give less weight to the vendors of younger ages and might have credibility issues, Figure 5 [14].

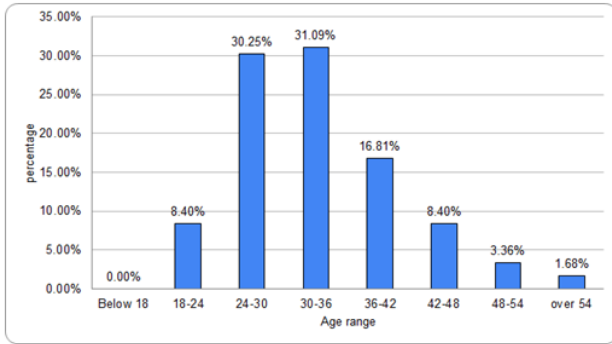


Figure 5. Age range of the street vendors

The street vendors, however, do not always have their own cart paddling through the Iftar bazaar clusters. About 47.5% have their own carts whereas the rest, as observed in are mostly rented carts from another cartowner and some traditional and more modest means of moveable arrangements cane baskets, mats are seen in the area too. Such arrangements usually are made for items belonging to Figure 6.

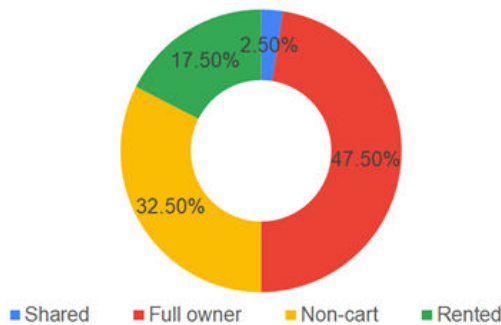


Figure 6. Type of ownership of the cart

Perception of festival and Pandemic

Whether and why Ramadan is a big time for street vendors to ensure financial security for the month can be seen based on their experience about Ramadan in Business. As answered by the hawkers and shown in Figure 6, despite having another Eid and other religious or secular celebrations, the profound effect of Ramadan in revenue cannot be matched by other festivals. This might be resulting from the long tenure of Ramadan - 30/31 days to be precise as no other festivals or ceremony has that long time duration Figure 6.

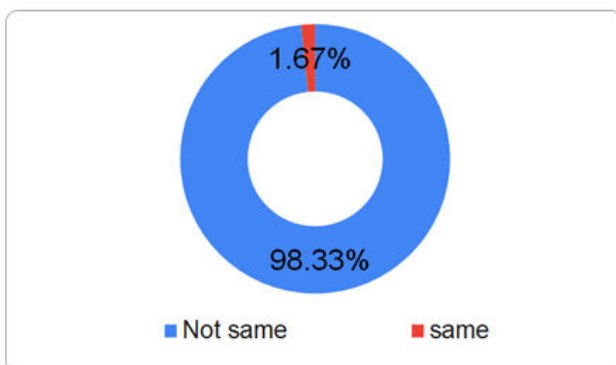


Figure 7. Impact of festivals except Ramadan

However, the positive effect of Ramadan in revenue earning by the street vendors might have been heavily shadowed by the presence of global Covid-19 pandemic. The phenomena and government attempts to curb it by measure of lockdown and cancellation of Iftar bazaar has affected the street vendors not only in the regular non-ramadan time but also during Ramadan, Figure 7 [15].

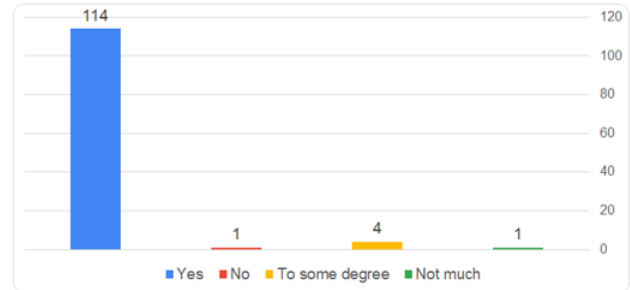


Figure 8. Effect of COVID on street vending

As can be seen from Figure 9, from the total 125 respondents, 114 street vendors agree that the pandemic has negatively affected their chances of higher revenue. Meanwhile, pandemic or not, the business generated during Ramadan is important for the street vendors not only to sustain for the month but also for their other financial decisions. Below Figure 9: Usage of Revenue earned during Ramadan, shows that the profit during Ramadan is also kept for small-scale Asset purchase or further capital building or is deposited into savings schemes as a way to insure against future risks.

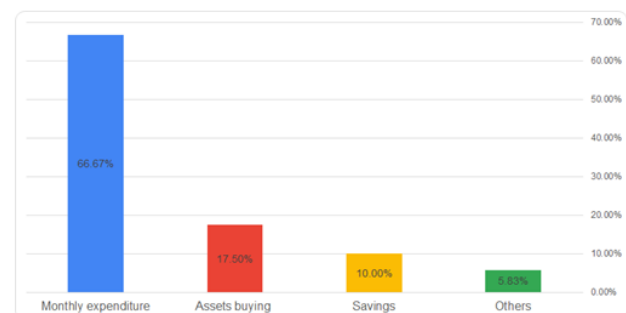


Figure 9. Usage of Revenue earned during Ramadan

Business cost and revenue scenario

Depending on the vendors feedback regarding the effect of festivals and effect of the pandemic, further study was made to determine to what extent the Ramadan Income has been affected by the pandemic as opposed to income earned by that category during non-Ramadan time. Different categories have shown different effects. Hence, the usual difference is counted for Non-Ramadan and Ramadan Timeline where the difference is equal to the gap between expected income (found based on non-pandemic period revenue study) and actual income (based on the current sales data) in Non-Ramadan Time. For Ramadan, the same procedure was applied to find the usual difference in Ramadan. In case of income/profit generation, a positive number on the usual difference means less income whereas a negative number on the usual difference leads to more income. Based on these and the graphical representation in 10, it can be inferred that Figure 6, 7 and 8 are facing a bigger threat of less revenue during the non-Ramadan period due to the presence of

the pandemic. These three categories are also most closely related to the cultural and religious heritage of Ramadan and thus face volatility, Figure 10.

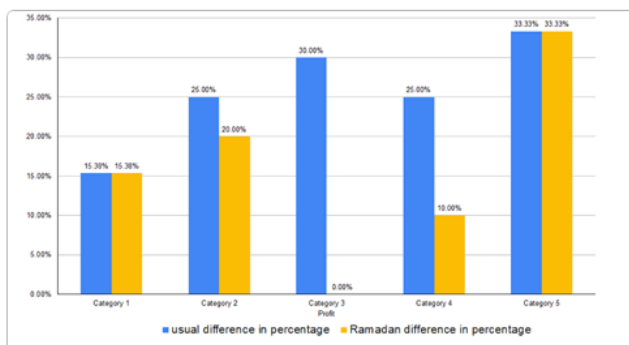


Figure 10. Effect of the pandemic on the variability of profit during Ramadan compared to Non-Ramadan

Whereas, during Ramadan, the scenario is more favorable for Figure 10, which faces a surge of revenue stream even though the pandemic exists and in fact enjoyed a higher sales as opposed to Ramadan of previous year. As most business owners, street vendors or even businesspeople in permanent shops have faced difficulties to get the required raw materials, inventories, supplies of different kinds in time due to the nationwide lockdown, the cost of procuring or producing these items might have been higher. Hence, the usual difference of cost during non-Ramadan time and Ramadan timeline is also found. Here the usual difference equals the gap between expected cost (found based on non-pandemic period revenue study) and actual cost (based on the current sales data) in Non-Ramadan Time. For Ramadan also a similar approach is taken. Here, the negative number denotes more cost and positive number refers to less cost, Figure 11.

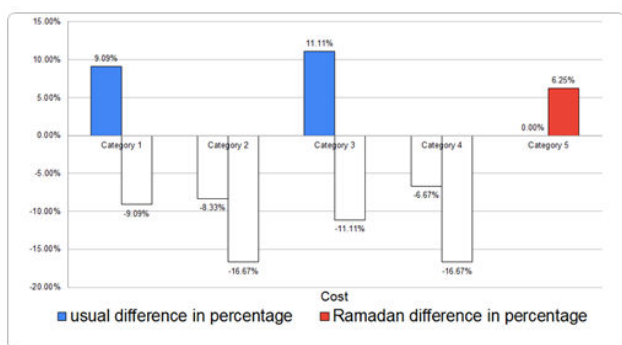


Figure 11. Effect of the pandemic on the variability of cost during Ramadan compared to Non-Ramadan

Hence, if cost is higher the overall profit will be low for that particular timeline and category. As can be seen from above Figure 11, Figure 1, 3 and 5 shows a tendency of lesser cost during both Non-Ramadan and Ramadan timeline. However, the cost is lowest for category 3 during non-ramadan time and for Figure 5, Ramadan times. Hence, judging by the two figures, category 3 might have more sustainability to endure the difficulties of the pandemic around the year. Although, why this phenomena occurred might need to be researched as there might be cultural influence of people's natural tendency towards such food products around the year causing this [16].

Conclusion

The study reflects the nature and the unpredictability of the revenue stream faced by the street vendors of Dhaka during Ramadan as caused by the pandemic. It also looks at the type of products most sustainable for the year-round in these clusters whereas the study does not deny the importance of other categories either. However, the study itself is an initial overview of the condition. In order to find the motivation and need of the street hawkers or to propose policy wise possible changes and avenues of a better structured Iftar bazaar by the authority, further research needs to be undertaken with a larger scope to make street vendors socio-economic status and income security in the coming years.

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