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Factors That Affect Fast Food Consumption
A Review of the Literature

Course: MGMT5500 Business Information & Decision-Making

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Abstract

American rates of overweight and obesity are high, and the prevalence of obesity has continued to rise over the past few decades. Excessive consumption of fast food has been one of the multiple contributing factors driving the overweight and obese epidemic. This literature review summarizes the disadvantages of fast food on people's health, reveals common people's average fast food consumption. Based on this background, the paper is to explore factors why some people choose not to consume fast food, as well as factors why some people choose to consume fast food, and to summarize some recommendations that can help reduce the consumption of fast food from the studies that have been already done.

Keywords: fast food, consumption, motives, health.

Factors That Affect Fast Food Consumption

A Review of the Literature

Fast food is usually referred to hamburgers, pizza, or fries, or the kind of food that can be prepared and served quickly at low price. Since 1950's, fast food was penetrating the food market and becoming more and more popular. It is common to see a long line in a drive-through way outside of a fast food restaurant or a bunch of crowded clients waiting to order in front of fast food outlets. Even though nearly every customer knows the harm fast food brings to their health, we still can see every day in fast food restaurants customers come and order in an endless stream.

To explore what drives customers to consume fast food while realizing its impact on body, this literature review will present a brief explanation of fast food negative effect, analyze people's current fast food consumption, compare the two opposite decisions people make when they are faced with food choice, and finally offer practical suggestions against fast food high consumption. The following five parts are posed as five questions:

1. What are the disadvantages of fast food on people's health?
2. What's common people's average fast food consumption?
3. Why some people choose not to consume fast food?
4. Why some people choose to consume fast food?
5. What recommendations can help reduce people's fast food consumption?

Recognizing the current phenomenon and understanding the incentive why there is a large group of fast food clients can help parents, physicians, Health and Human Service to search for productive solutions to change unhealthy people's situation.

What are the disadvantages of fast food on people's health?

Even in the first boom of fast food, people have been knowing this kind of food is unhealthy. The labels people attach to fast food are always “high in calories”, “low in nutritional value”, “obesity” and “additives”. Now it is a common sense that fast food is harmful to body fitness. To be more specific, a study named “Local Concentration of Fast-Food Outlets Is Associated with Poor Nutrition and Obesity” was conducted in May/ June 2014 by Daniel J. Kruger and his colleagues. After 1345 complete data from random selected 1688 respondents through a computer-aided telephone interview, this study provided a result that habitants are “at greater risk for adverse consequences of poor nutrition because of the patterns in local food availability, which may constrain the success of nutrition promotion efforts.”(Kruger, Greenberg, Murphy, Difazio & Youra, 2014, p.340) Although the limitations of this study include the geographic character, the lack of data that households without landline, and some unmeasured factors such local access to exercise opportunities may influence the result, this study still has certain reference significance. It was conducted in the USA in 2014, so the data is closely connected to current phenomenon.

Still in 2014, Chandran and colleagues posed a hypothesis that breast cancer risk was related to fast food and sugary drinks. In this study, well-trained interviewers conducted interviews and questionnaires to 1732 NY and NJ. AA and 1487 EA women who were confirmed breast cancer, age ranging from 20-75. The result of this study shows a positive association of frequency of fast food intake with breast cancer, as it is described in the research “frequent consumption of energy-dense and fast foods that are

poor in nutritive value appeared to increase breast cancer risk”. In this study, the sample ranged from 20-75, the whole study continued several years — “case recruitment in NY began in January 2002...study recruitment in NY ended in 2008” and “study recruitment in NJ began in March 2006 and ended in 2012” and the food frequency questionnaire was developed by the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, all these added accuracy and precision to the data and result (Chandran et al., 2014, p.1187-1197).

What’s common people’s average fast food consumption?

Consumption of fast food has become a global phenomenon and is especially popular among young adults and adolescents. Several studies have been conducted to this focus group—university students. One recent research named “Self- Reported Consumption of Fast Food Meals by University Students” (2015) was to examine students’ daily consumption of fast food and to assess students’ perceptions of their weight status compared to computed body mass indices. The study’s finding showed that “36 percent of students eat fast food meals more than three times per day”. And the study result suggested that “48 percent of the students who were overweight and 23 percent of those who were obese perceived themselves as being in the healthy weight category” (p.26). This study was settled in Louisiana, in the form of a survey to 402 undergraduate students in Southern University and A&M College, with professor Patricia E. Mclean- Meyinsse, assistant professor Shervia S. Taylor, and research scientist Janet V. Gager. With assistance from a professional research scientist, the research method, and the questionnaire design is more accuracy. But some existed

limitations that may affect the fairness of result because of the sample size which wasn't large enough, and the focus group that was all in one school, while the subject title was to investigate fast food consumption among university students.

Another study with a similar purpose was conducted to find out “Fruit, Vegetables and Fast Food Consumption Among University Students”. This study indicated that “two thirds of the university students from Timisoara are not eating fruits and vegetables daily”, while guidelines recommend consuming 5 portions of fruit and vegetables each day to prevent cardiovascular disease. Besides, 26% of students from Timisoara university center were often consuming unhealthy products (Avram & Oravitan, 2013, p.55). The result of this study is not as serious as that of the last study maybe because of some following reasons. First, although the whole research was published in 2013, some statistics used by this research could be greatly changed now from the period 2005—200, when those statistics were collected. Second, this research was conducted in Romania, a Europe country, where the fast food consumption was reasonably lower than that in fast food origin—the USA. Third, the choice scales in the questionnaire were not accurate enough, it only had five choices, which are Never, Rarely, Once/ week, 2-3/ week, Daily. This kind of scale omitted other conditions such as 4-6/week, or 2 times/day, more than 2 times/day.

Why some people choose not to consume fast food?

Because fast food is widely known for its unhealthy effect, many parents are trying to constrict fast food consumption of their children. A study was conducted to figure out whether adult family members had an influence on their children's fast food

consumption. After data collection and analysis, this study listed four main points as result: adult family members who was greatly exposed to social media about discussion of fast food are most likely to limit their children's fast food consumption; adult family members who view seriously their children's childhood obesity are more likely to limit their children's fast food consumption; family members who consider their children to be more susceptible to childhood obesity are more likely to limit their children's fast food consumption; finally, family members who consider fast food advertisement to be less ethical are more likely to limit their children's fast food consumption (Lee & Lien, 2015, p.185).

This study offers a significant makeup to existing literature that contains little investigation into the relationship between adult family members' health concept toward their children's fast food consumption. Moreover, it is thoughtful that this survey used mixed approaches to collect data: the survey invitation was disseminated through popular online parental portals; email invitations were sent to administrative staff at a university; researchers also conducted a paper-based survey at two shopping malls. But as to the sample size, which was 124 valid responses in 143 responses collected back, and the response rate which was about 8%, it is suggested sample size be larger and researchers adopt a more effective method with high feedback to conduct this survey, such as changing the survey place from a shopping mall where customers are walking and looking for goods to a field where people are in leisure and waiting with fewer distractions, so that researchers will get more participants and more data for their study.

Why some people choose to consume fast food?

Many studies have been done to find out the factors that affect people to consume fast food. Some people hold a view that family provides an important context for the development of obesity. In other words, parents have a potential influence on their children's eating behaviors. A study named "Fast Food for Family Meals: Relationships with Parent and Adolescent Food Intake, Home Food Available and Weight Status" was conducted by Boutelle, Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story and French (2007) to evaluate family purchase of fast food for meals and home food availability and BMI among the parents and their adolescents. Some statistics were shown in this study, such as "after adjusting for the effects of parental race/ethnicity, the odds of having soda pop available in the home were significantly lower for parents reporting no purchases of fast food for family meals or 1-2 fast food meals per week than for parents reporting 3 or more fast food meals per week"; while "the odds of reporting vegetables served at dinner were significantly higher for families reporting 1-2 fast food meals per week than families reporting 3 or more fast food meals per week" (p.19). These study findings showed that more frequent fast food purchases for family meals were associated with the availability of less nutritious food at home (p.20). Significantly, this study extended beyond fast food consumption by individuals to examine factors that promote people's fast food consumption associated with the purchase of fast food for family meals.

As to family influence that affects people's fast food consumption, a study named "the Influence of Adult Family Members on Children's Fast Food Consumption: A Health Belief" also noted that many parents could not manage well their children's fast

food consumption, no matter for the convenience or for the inability to say no to their children when their children pestered them to go to fast food restaurant. The reason was related to the fun factor with the kid-friendly packaging, free toys and attached playground. This study also pointed out that children are fast food companies favorite target, because they “are less attached to traditional fare and develop their dietary preferences at an early age”, providing fast food companies with opportunities to target them. Besides these two reasons, fast food advertising was also mentioned as a factor that attracts people’s fast food consumption. This study agreed with the opinion that fast food advertisers had “unfettered access to make profits at the expense of children’s health” (Lee & Lien, 2015, p.185).

Similar to fast food advertisements which can be seen everywhere, fast food restaurant location is supposed to be another reason that affects people’s consumption. “Local Concentration of Fast Food Outlets is Associated With Poor Nutrition and Obesity” study, after collecting and analyzing complete data from 80% of 1688 randomly selected respondents, showed the result that “Survey respondents had 8 ± 7 fast food outlets within 2 miles of their home. Individuals living in close proximity to fast food restaurants had higher BMIs $t(1342)=3.21$, $p < .001$, and lower fruit and vegetable consumption, $t(1342)=2.67$, $p = .008$.” Based on this, the study concluded that individuals would be at great risk of consuming poor nutritious food “because of the patterns in local food availability, which may constrain the success of nutrition promotion efforts” (Kruger, Greenberg, Murphy, Difazio & Youra, 2014, p.340).

Each of the studies above was concerning one main factor that induces people to

conduct fast food consumption, the following studies were to identify the factors in a mixed way why people consume fast food.

“Why Do Young People Prefer Fast Food Restaurants? An Exploratory Study” is an investigation that intends to figure out the reasons that determine young people to choose fast food restaurant, as well as their criteria when they choose a place like this to eat, and why they are satisfied with fast food products. To accomplish this purpose, this study made up two focus groups, in which all participants were selected with the help of a recruitment questionnaire to make sure they eat fast food at least twice a month. This research took qualitative method, posed hypothesis and objectives ahead, then interviewed the focus group with a structured guide. As the result, three main criteria which young people brought into discussion several times were identified, those were: the taste of the products, their freshness and consistency, the physical environment and contact employees. Then the conclusion was drawn that fast food restaurants “succeed in adapting to young people’s needs and expectations” (Untaru & Ispas, 2013, p.33). Because fast food restaurants offer cheap products, advantageous locations, welcoming atmosphere- so young people enjoy the time spent there to socialize, home delivery services- due to lack of time young people cannot dine out of home, as well as extending daily program- 24 hours each day. All these fit well young people’s characters, which are usually known as low income, lack of time, convenience and need for socialize (p.27-33). In this study, it is thoughtful to make up a different focus groups, but the sample used might bring some inaccuracy to this study. One is the sample size, which was not large and lacked diversity. Only 13 participants were included in the interview,

and all of them were students from Transilvania University in Brasov. The other is the quality based on which researchers selected the participants. The requirement was that participants consume fast food at least twice a month. But this frequency is not high enough to reflect the attributes of those who favor fast food restaurant, even is acceptable by common people. For more precision, it is better for this research to use sample consisting of young people who consume fast food every day or at least more than three times per week. At least, from other studies, there exist groups of participants who eat fast food up to 3 times per day.

Another study “Factors Related to the Number of Fast Food Meals Obtained by College Meal Plan Student” explored whether days on campus, financial access and health consciousness were associated with the number of meals that college students obtained from fast food restaurants. This study took place in April 2013 by inviting all students who currently enrolled in meal plan to participate in an online survey. Finally, the sample size was 973, which is sufficiently large to produce useful results (Dingman, Schulz, Wyrick, Bibeau & Gupta, 2014, p.564). The result came out from this study was that “number of meals obtained from fast food restaurants were positively associated with finance access and negatively associated with health consciousness.” But there was no evidence to support the association between days on campus and number of meals obtained from fast food restaurants (p.567).

Similarly, three main determinants for choosing fast food identified in students from Timisoara University center: lack of time, lack of money and school program (Avram & Oravitan, 2013, p.55). “Fast Food for Family Meals: Relationships with

Parent-Adolescent Food Intake, Home Food Availability and Weight Status” study also added “a lack of education about the nutritional content of fast food” and “a lack of interest/ motivation to eat healthier food” to the factors explaining why people favor fast food (Boutelle, Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story & French, 2007, p.21).

What recommendations can help reduce people’s fast food consumption?

Due to different factors attract people’s fast food consumption, different recommendations have been proposed. First is about health consciousness, which is considered to offer a protective effect against frequent fast food consumption. Because many schools have on-campus fast food stores, one recommendation is for college administrators to “promote and expand menu labeling for all campus eating venues (to increase awareness of caloric amounts)”, and for student wellness staff to “implement educational programs that raise health consciousness by focusing on the importance of consuming nutritious, caloric-appropriate foods and using nutrition labels” (Dingman, Schulz, Wyrick, Bibeau & Gupta, 2014, p.568).

Another recommendation is to build a better local food environment by efforts in decreasing the local availability of unhealthy food, as well as increasing “programs to help customers identify strategies for obtaining healthy meals at fast food outlets” (Kruger, Greenberg, Murphy, Difazio& Youra, 2014, p.340).

Method to improve nutrition outcomes is also associated with parents’ behaviors. One implication of “the influence of adult family members on children’s fast food consumption” study is the “repositioning” of parents in “behavior change campaigns to reduce childhood obesity”. It is also suggested that “in acknowledging the centrality of

adult family members”, “health communication researchers can significantly boost the efficacy of their efforts, whether it is through health report cards, health news, public health campaigns, or interpersonal interactions” (Lee & Lien, 2015, p.193).

Conclusion

In summary, this literature review is significant in integrating former study achievements in the field of fast food. Based on the material collected, this paper reveals people’s fast food consumption during current period, identifies the reasons which determine people to choose fast food and analyzes people’s motivations behind their consumption behavior, at last offers specific recommendations for people against consuming fast food. While many studies concerning people’s fast food consumption have been conducted and are based on different stand points, existing research has so far rarely provided a comprehensive view of fast food phenomenon.

Furthermore, this paper provides a brief review of motives for people’s fast food consumption, based on this, more research on fast food can be conducted in the future. Figuring out customers’ motives behind fast food consumption phenomenon would also help physicians, Health Service to explore for more efficient and practical solutions to lead people’s food consumption toward a positive way, and finally benefit our society by reaching the goal of improving people’s living quality.

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