

**Fast Food's Fattening of America:
A Review of the Literature**

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Introduction

This literature review addresses the issue of obesity in the United States and its relation to the fast food industry. For a number of years, the quick-service industry has been blamed for the rising number of obese Americans.

An overview of the Fast Food industry is provided, including a summary of the industry and its main markets. The literature review presents insight to the obesity issue in the United States and offers suggestions as to what restaurants should focus on in order to meet the needs of a health-conscious America. Also included is a discussion of perspectives on who is responsible for this health epidemic: the fast food industry or individuals. Ideas surrounding the fast food industry's ability to target various ethnic and social groups are provided, focusing on low-income individuals and the government's role to provide adequate funds for a healthy diet. Lastly, a discussion of how fast food companies have responded to the obesity epidemic and the future of the industry is presented.

Fast Food Industry Overview

The fast food industry is composed of restaurants that provide food products that can be consumed on the premises or taken out (Fast, 2007). Key drivers of demand in the industry include price, speedy service, personal income and demographics (Fast, 2007). With a wide range of menu items, fast food restaurants appeal to individuals of all ages. Grier, Mensinger, Huang, Kumanyika and Stettler (2007) reported that one-third of adolescents, ages 4-19, eat fast food on a typical day. Other studies found that youths,

ages 11-18, eat an average of two meals a week at a fast food restaurant (Grier et al., 2007).

Gregory, McTyre, Carmela and DiPietro (2006) noted that the fast food industry was accused of placing maximum importance on product taste and minimal importance on nutrition. Many agreed that fast food restaurants rely on a price sensitive, 'habit-forming' customer base created through strategic advertising (Grier et al., 2007; Fast, 2007; Gregory et al., 2006). In response, in 1990, the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act was passed by Congress which required companies to post nutritional information on packaged food products (Gregory et al., 2006). For a time it was considered that restaurants should also provide customers with this type of information, however it was later decided that it would not be as beneficial since restaurant menus and ingredients continuously change (Gregory et al., 2006).

Obesity in America

Obesity has been a rising issue in America since the early 1970s. According to Adams (2005), over 300,000 premature deaths in America result each year from obesity. Critics suggested that obesity, with the help of fast food, will soon surpass tobacco as the number one preventable cause of death in the United States (Binkley, 2006; Seiders & Berry, 2007). Adams (2005) also reported that the prevalence of obesity in children has tripled over the last 20 years. He stated, "Overweight adolescents have an estimated 70 percent chance of becoming overweight or obese adults. The likelihood increases to 80 percent if one or both parents are overweight or obese (Adams, 2005, p.299).

It is suggested that this rise in obesity is due to the fast paced lifestyle of Americans. Binkley (2006) reported that in the last 20 years, food eaten away from home has increased by 13%. Several authors attributed this to the increase of female workers in the labor force, the rising importance of time management, and the fast-paced lifestyles of dual-income families (Binkley, 2006; Adams, 2005; Seiders & Berry, 2007; Rashad, Grossman, & Shin-Yi, 2006; Berry & Seiders, 2006). Additionally, as Adams (2005) noted, "...as technology continues to change the workplace, jobs have become less physically demanding and the caloric intake necessary to support work has declined as calories consumed remains constant" (p.302).

Berry and Seiders (2006) suggested that restaurants should care about and consider the obesity rate when creating menus. Besides being a main target for blame, Seiders and Berry (2007) argued that restaurants should take advantage of this opportunity by creating new products to fit health trends. Binkley (2006) agreed that new, health conscious products will help obese individuals lose weight while producing a positive brand image that will increase company revenues.

Who is to blame?

In 2002, a class-action lawsuit was filed against McDonald's Corporation by a group of overweight children (Mello, Rimm, & Studdert, 2003). The children claimed that McDonald's was to blame for their numerous obesity-related health problems, and demanded compensation as well as nutritional labeling of McDonald's products and public funding to educate consumers about healthy eating habits (Mello et al., 2003). Grier et al. (2007) believed the children were drawn to fast food due to its convenience

and price. Grier et al. (2007) stated, "Because they fulfill consumers' desires for tasty, convenient, and inexpensive food, fast-food outlets have become a 'home away from home' for breakfast, lunch and dinner among consumers of all ages" (p.222)

Binkley's (2006) research concluded that meals eaten in restaurants are normally of lower nutritional quality than meals prepared at home. Adams (2005) agreed, and added that fast food companies promote the sale of food items high in fat, sodium, and sugar. He also stated that these companies "...unfairly target vulnerable consumers, encourage over-consumption, fail to provide patrons with the information needed to make informed decisions at the point and time of purchase" (Adams, 2005, p.303). Grier et al. (2007) concluded that fast food restaurants are found almost everywhere today such as in malls, zoos, gas stations, etc. This provides easy access to busy consumers looking for a quick bite to eat.

One key area of debate is advertising to children and its relationship to obesity among adolescents. Several experts believe that the high number of fast food advertisements shown on television result in childhood obesity (Mello et al., 2003; Adams, 2005; Grier et al., 2007). Freeman (2007) stated that children represent a long-term investment for the fast food industry since eating habits developed in childhood usually carry through adulthood (Freeman, 2007).

Seiders and Petty (2007) commented on research based on data from the Federal Trade Commission Bureau of Economics. The study focused on children's rate of exposure and responses to television advertising comparing programming in 2003-2004 to 1977-1978. The data revealed that in 2004, children saw approximately 5,538 food advertisements, 21.5% of all exposures, per year (Seiders & Petty, 2007). Compared to

1977, this was a 9% decrease in the amount of food advertisements viewed. With this study, Seiders and Petty (2007) concluded that food advertising to children is not a likely agent in the childhood obesity numbers in the United States.

A study done by Rashad et al., (2006) revealed that snacking habits among Americans has increased. They concluded that snacking has lead to the obesity in America, not fast food (Rashad et al., 2006). Grier et al., (2007) also believe that fast food companies should not be blamed. Parents, they feel, are important role models for children's eating habits; their food behaviors are mimicked by their children. Therefore, if parents eat healthy foods, so will their children (Grier et al., 2007). On the contrary, Mello et al., (2003) discussed the idea that caloric intake may be addictive and therefore believe that fast foods that contain high levels of calories, could be addictive as well. Not only has the accessibility and low cost of fast food restaurants caused customers to consume more, but Mello et al., (2003) also believed it has made the population less active (e.g., less likely to cook meals at home or travel further to buy a healthy meal).

Ethnicity, Fast food, and the Government

Several authors reported that fast food is a major source of nutrition within low-income neighborhoods in the United States (Freeman, 2007; Case 2007). Research supports the idea that access to fast food restaurants and exposure to promotions varies by ethnicity and income (Rashad et al., 2006). Grier et al. (2007) concurred that McDonald's has advertised a greater amount of less-healthy menu options and promotions in poorer African American neighborhoods compared to wealthier white areas. Freeman (2007) stated, "The overabundance of fast food and lack of access to

healthier foods, in turn, have increased African American and Latino communities' vulnerability to food-related death and disease" (p.2221). It has been observed that in Hispanic communities, parents take pride in being able to take their children to fast food restaurants, as it is a sign of having a higher disposable income (Grier et al., 2007).

Freeman (2007) argued that poor nutrition among the lower class is due to insufficient assistance from the government. Individuals simply do not have enough money to buy fresh food, therefore eat inexpensive meals at fast food restaurants (Freeman, 2007). As stated earlier, Americans views about government intervention are varied (Grier et al., 2007). Mello et al., (2003) found that 48% of Americans feel obesity is a private issue, while 47% believe it is a public issue and the Government must step in.

The response of fast food restaurants

Many authors agreed that regardless of whether or not fast food companies are the cause of obesity in the United States, they have, in fact, begun to change their menus and procedures, trying to inspire healthier trends (Seiders & Petty, 2007; Case, 2007; Adams, 2005; Grier et al., 2007). Adams (2005) added that the fast food industry is 'market driven' and companies have responded to consumer concerns about health and nutrition. Gregory et al. (2006) reported that most fast food companies are highlighting healthier food items on commercials and advertisements as well as providing nutritional information on company websites and food packages. Companies are also looking for healthier ways to prepare foods such as baking or broiling products and eliminating the use of animal or saturated fats when frying foods (Grier et al., 2007).

Gregory et al. (2006) pointed out that one of the first fast food chain companies to adjust their menus to benefit from health trends was McDonalds. French fries were substituted with fruit in the children's meal, and adult meals were commercialized as "Go Active" that included, a salad, a bottle of water, and a pedometer. In 2007, McDonald's also introduced 'premium salads', wraps and fruit parfaits to their menus (Case, 2007). In addition, beginning March 31, 2008, the New York City Board of Health required all restaurant chains to post nutritional information on their menus (New York chains to list calories, 2008). The Board hopes to inform citizens about the contents of popular foods as well as shock people into making healthier decisions when eating out (New York chains to list calories, 2008).

McDonalds began to alter food offerings worldwide in order to continue to spread the idea of 'healthy living'. In 2007, McDonald's began a campaign in Australia promoting new health-conscious meals that have earned the Heart Foundation Tick of approval (McDonald's promotes tick of approval, 2007). The campaign slogan, "you are what you eat," represented the healthier options available at the franchise (McDonald's promotes tick of approval, 2007).

The Future of Fast Food

Binkley (2006) suggested that the negative publicity that the fast food industry has experienced has caused some consumers to avoid quick service restaurants. In 2002, McDonald's announced it would change to trans-fat-free oil when frying foods. However, in 2006, it was reported that they had yet to switch (Mello et al., 2003). According to MacArthur (2006), french-fries are McDonald's signature item and by

switching the oil they may be jeopardizing the taste. MacArthur (2006) interviewed Baba Shiv, associate professor of marketing at Stanford University, who disagreed, stating the new oil did not create a noticeable change in taste, but admitted the placebo effect created could result in a decrease in sales (MacArthur, 2006). Shiv suggested McDonald's should publicize the change in a positive light and focus on the benefits of using zero-trans-fat oil. He believed that by doing so, McDonald's would not lose their customer base (MacArthur, 2006).

Even though fast food has received a lot of negative publicity regarding its harmful effects and correlation to obesity, individuals, worldwide still choose to consume it in high numbers (Mello et al., 2003). A survey conducted in 2008 demonstrated that 45% of residents in the U.K revealed they would not give up eating fast food. 37% of Canadians agreed with this statement, disclosing that due to the "taste" of the fast food, they would not be willing to give it up (Got fat?, 2008).

Conclusion

Many believe that the fast food industry has played a main role in contributing to the high rate of obesity found in the United States. In order to maintain its successful and high demanding customer base, a number of corporations have altered their menus looking to offer the public a larger variety of meals that include healthier choices. Corporations have also worked to modify procedures such as food preparation, choices of ingredients, and even advertisement, in order to appeal to a more health-conscious society as well as to create a positive brand image.

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