Physiological, Social, and Economic Influences on Fast Food Consumption

As a nation, America loves fast food. Each year, Americans spend approximately $100 billion dollars on it, and over 25 percent of Americans eat this junk every day (Brown). There are 50,000 fast food chains across the United States. What factors compel people to eat this way despite the grave social and personal repercussions?

Generally, fast food has very poor nutritional content. The average fast food burger, side of fries, and soda add up to around 800-1,000 calories. Assuming a daily intake of 2,000 calories, these meals take up about half the FDA’s Daily Value recommendations for fat and sodium, while providing only about a fifth of the recommended daily intake of fiber (“Guidance for Industry”). Therefore, it is not surprising that fast food consumption has many negative health consequences; for instance, it is an important factor leading to obesity (Etherton, Russo, and Hossain 1). Over one-third of adults and 17 percent of children in the United States are obese (“Obesity and Overweight”). Not only can obesity lead to ill health in the individual, putting people at a higher risk for heart disease and diabetes, but high rates of obesity also raise the country’s medical costs (Etherton, Russo, and Hossain 1). Although fast food is extremely popular in America, its popularity has serious consequences.

Most people care about their health and the health of their families, and few are entirely unaware of the negative health effects of eating fast food. Yet the abundance of fast food restaurants in the United States demonstrates that their popularity continues. This does not mean that individuals are putting health considerations entirely aside; rather, evidence shows that various physiological, social, and
economic factors encourage people to eat fast food despite their being aware of the negative consequences. Some of these factors are beyond the control of the individual, and some can be attributed to poor public policy and shrewd advertising.

First, we are drawn to tasty fast food for physiological reasons. Highly palatable foods—those rich in sugars or fats—are shown to have stress-reducing effects on our minds and bodies (Ulrich-Lai 20531). This is because consuming appetizing food alters neuronal activity in the brain. There is much evidence for the stress-reducing qualities of fast food, including a study on women with posttraumatic stress disorder that linked PTSD symptoms with higher consumption of soda and fast food (Hirth, Rahman, and Berenson 1143). The connection between fast food and stress helps explain not only why people crave delicious and unhealthy food, but why overeating is so common. Even when we have had enough to eat, we may continue to eat to combat stress.

It should be noted that these studies on the stress-reducing effects of eating fast food tend to assume that most individuals find fat-dense and sugar-dense foods enjoyable. The studies seem to imply that the positive response in the brain only occurs because sugary and fat-rich foods taste good; it is not the nutritional properties of the foods that cause that physiological reaction. Presumably, then, this reaction would not occur in individuals who do not find those foods appetizing. However, since most people (and animals) seem to enjoy foods high in fat and sugar, this research can still be considered significant.

In some individuals, highly palatable foods can have addictive properties similar to drug use (Fortuna 58). Like drug dependence, food dependence can result in cravings and loss of control (Fortuna 59). According to Fortuna, there is evidence that, for certain individuals who crave carbohydrates, “bingeing on palatable foods is a form of self-medication for a mildly dysphoric mood state” (60). Therefore, food may provide relief from depression as well as stress. Knowing that fast food is
addictive, it is easy to see why it is so difficult for people to stop eating it, even when they know that it is damaging to their health.

In addition to physiological reasons for consuming fast foods, there are also social reasons. These include peer influence. Research supports the common belief that teenagers in particular are very susceptible to the influence of their peers (Kinard and Webster 39). Peer influence has been found to be the strongest predictor of drinking and tobacco use among teenagers, compared with parental influence or self-efficacy (Kinard and Webster 39). It seems reasonable to hypothesize that the same is true of fast food consumption as of drinking and tobacco use. Therefore, if teenagers believe that eating fast food is common among people in their age group, they will see it as something that is popular and they are more likely to eat fast food regularly themselves.

Research also suggests that youth generally associate healthy food with family and junk food with friends (Guidetti, Cavazza, and Graziani 360). These findings may help explain the positive feelings many people have about fast food. If people often eat fast food when they are with their friends, their positive associations with the food—which they likely already enjoy—will be strengthened. Additionally, choosing to eat like their friends, rather than following the healthier diets their families encourage, may be one way that youth rebel and show their independence from their parents.

The popularity of fast food among the youth population is likely sustained by advertising that takes advantage of the power of peer influence. Studies have shown that teenagers are extremely susceptible to advertising. According to Story, Neumark-Sztainer, and French, adolescents are more likely to be smokers if they are exposed to cigarette advertising than if they are not exposed to those advertisements, and are also more sensitive to that advertising than are adults. It seems likely that the same is true of fast food consumption. The fact that so many advertisements focus on adolescent friendships and relationships shows that companies are well aware that peer acceptance is a preoccupation among many
teenagers. Advertisements have been shown to influence viewers’ behaviors, which strongly suggests that such campaigns work. According to this evidence that real or perceived peer behavior influences eating habits, people are more likely to eat fast food and ignore the consequences if they believe—correctly or incorrectly—that their peers do.

Additionally, when teenagers are out with friends, it can be difficult for them to opt out of eating what everyone else is eating without feeling isolated and “different.” In many ways, society encourages them to conform and to do what is considered normal and acceptable. Despite American culture’s emphasis on fitting in with a peer group, the United States is considered an individualistic society (Sharma, Sivakumaran, and Marshall 241), meaning that we value independence and individual goals. Evidence suggests that America has seen an increase in individualism since 1960 (Twenge, Campbell, and Gentile). To say that this individualistic mindset encourages fast food consumption may seem contrary to the argument that many people eat junk food because their peers do; however, evidence suggests that the two factors can, and do, exist simultaneously.

Individualistic culture encourages self-indulgent behaviors such as overeating and consuming unhealthy, palatable foods. The United States showed the highest body mass index levels among 13-15 year-olds in a survey that included fifteen countries (Lissau et al., 29). Sharma, Sivakumaran, and Marshall linked individualism to habits of self-indulgence, observing that “[c]onsumers from collectivistic cultures differentiate between the deliberate and involuntary aspects of their impulsive behavior and tendencies, whereas those from individualistic societies are unable or unwilling to make this distinction, and for them both these elements merge under a single hedonistic dimension” (241-242). Individualistic societies encourage the individual to think and behave in terms of his or her own well-being and pleasure, which may lead to more self-indulging eating habits despite possible negative
effects in the long term. This could help explain why obesity, which is one result of high rates of fast food consumption, is so common in the United States.

The theory of individualism as a factor in fast food consumption does not exclude the theory of peer influence. In some cultures, asserting your individualism includes choosing with what peer group you will associate. An individual can base her behavior and her sense of what is normal in terms of her friends, but that does not mean that she is thinking of herself as part of a collective entity. Therefore, a person might eat fast food both because it is what her peers do, and because as a member of an individualistic society, she is comfortable making self-indulgent decisions.

Finally, there are economic considerations that lead to fast food consumption. Fast food is generally cheaper than healthy alternatives. This serves as a strong disincentive to eat healthfully, particularly among low-income families. In one analysis, it was determined that healthy food costs about $1.50 per day more than fast food, which is equal to $550 more per year (Rao et al.). In 2012, 4.3 percent of all hourly paid workers made $7.25 per hour (the federal minimum wage) or less (“Characteristics” 1), which is equivalent to making $15,080 annually working full-time (“What Are the Annual Earnings”). Even families and individuals who make above the minimum wage can have serious financial concerns, so it is reasonable to assume that inexpensive fast food is an economically appealing, and sometimes even necessary, option for many families. Even if people are fully aware of the negative health effects of fast food, healthy alternatives are sometimes not affordable for them.

Economic considerations have been particularly relevant since the recession starting in 2008. During the first two years of the recession, the unemployment rate doubled, going from 5 percent to over 10 percent, and over 8.3 million jobs were lost (Connaughton 1). When faced with a serious financial crisis such as unemployment, people are unlikely to choose healthy food over fast food if it is
significantly more expensive, no matter how serious they are about their health. It is important to consider such economic factors when studying what motivates people to eat fast food.

Looking closer, however, it does not seem logical that fast food should be more expensive than healthy food. On the contrary, fast food meals should be generally more expensive, since they usually contain highly processed ingredients and meat. It takes 6.7 pounds of feed to produce one pound of beef, so meat is not resource-effective or cost-effective (Barclay). Yet fast food has become the more affordable option. Government subsidies help to explain this counterintuitive cost disparity. Since 1995, more than $19 billion of subsidies went to producing high-fructose corn syrup, cornstarch, and soy oils. In contrast, apples—one of the few fresh fruits or vegetables that receive government subsidies—received only $637 million in subsidies (Etherton, Russo, and Hossain 1). Therefore, when considering low cost as a motivation for eating unhealthy fast food, it should be noted that this is something that might reasonably be changed by shifting subsidies towards healthier foods.

In conclusion, there are many complicated factors that influence fast food’s popularity. Studying the motivations behind our society’s actions is important. If we understand what motivates our own behavior, we have a better understanding of how we can reclaim our decisions as our own. If we know how fast food advertisements are designed to tempt us, we are better able to decide whether or not we are really making our own choices when we stop to buy a meal at a fast food restaurant, or whether we are being unwillingly influenced by marketing. If we understand that we are craving unhealthy food because we are experiencing stress, we can seek other, more healthy ways to reduce stress. Perhaps, most importantly, if we understand what motivates our society as a whole to consume fast food, we can help make positive change for others as well as for ourselves. If we are aware of the problematic effects of subsidizing the wrong foods, we can influence policy-makers to make changes so that low-income families have access to healthier options. Understanding a situation is the first step towards improving it.
Works Cited


