



Short communication

Fast food perceptions: A pilot study of college students in Spain and the United States

Rachel Bryant^a, Lauren Dundes^{b,*}^a Department of Psychology, McDaniel College, 2 College Hill Westminster, MD 21157, United States^b Department of Sociology, McDaniel College, 2 College Hill, Westminster, MD 21157, United States

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ABSTRACT

Comparing survey data of college students from Spain and the United States provides insight into how perceptions about fast food are culture and gender-specific. More American college males (61%) considered value (amount of food for the money) to be a priority than did other respondents (35%) and relatively few American college males (29%) cited nutritional status as important (versus 60% of other college respondents). Convenience of fast food is more important to Americans (69%) than Spaniards (48%) while more Spanish college students (49%) than Americans (18%) objected to the proliferation of fast food establishments in their own countries.

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The increasing consumption of convenience foods is an international trend influenced by changing lifestyles (Belasco & Scranton, 2002). In the United States, much of the demand for convenience is rooted in the societal changes that occurred during a period of prosperity following World War II. Economic affluence sparked drastic changes in the living and eating patterns of many Americans. As recently as the mid-1970s, Americans spent an average of 2 h each night preparing dinner; today, that number has plummeted to just 15 min partly as a result of traditional work weeks increasing to 50 h or more (Gambescia, 2004). Consequently, the intake of meals purchased outside of the home, including take-out and fast food, has risen to higher rates than ever before, as many people have resorted to fast food as a “quick fix” (Guthrie, Biing-Hwan, & Frazao, 2002; Jabs & Devine, 2006; Schurer, 2004). Calories consumed from fast food in the United States have increased from 3% of the total caloric intake to 12% over the past 20 years (Henderson & Kelly, 2005; Nielsen & Popkin, 2003) likely due in part to reliance on energy-dense food (Rolls, Roe, & Meengs, 2006) and increasing portion sizes which are difficult to gauge (Bryant & Dundes, 2005).

In 1970, while there were 70,000 fast food establishments in the United States, by 2001 that number increased nearly threefold to 186,000 (Spurlock, 2005). The entrenched presence of fast food in

United States, the “fast food nation” (Schlosser, 2001), is in part due to Americans’ longstanding familiarity with fast food, reinforced by abundant and successful marketing of such cultural icons as the Ronald McDonald happy clown. The association of fast food with the United States may change, however, given that fast food has gone global, with McDonald’s alone serving 46 million people worldwide each day (Spurlock, 2005). Of the five new McDonald’s opened each day, four of those restaurants open abroad (Schlosser, 2001).

One consequence of the increase in consumption of large quantities of fat-laden foods has been a dramatic upsurge in obesity both in America and abroad. Since 1959, obesity rates have surged. In the United States alone, from about 1960 to 1999, obesity rates rose from 13% to 30% (Rashad & Grossman, 2004). The worldwide obesity epidemic, which has accompanied the proliferation of fast food restaurants, is expected to worsen both rates of morbidity and mortality around the globe (Colapinto, Fitzgerald, Taper, & Veugelers, 2007; French, Harnack, & Jeffery, 2000; Lee & Speer, 2002; Young & Nestle, 2007). Over one billion adults worldwide are overweight, 300 million are obese and almost 18 million children under the age of five are overweight, a trend linked to fast food consumption (Jeffery, Baxter, McGuire, & Linde, 2006).

As fast food restaurants proliferate, obesity appears to rise in response (Jeffery et al., 2006). For instance, as the number of fast food restaurants in Australia tripled, the obesity rate increased proportionately. As fast food locations in Britain doubled between

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ldundes@mcDaniel.edu (L. Dundes).

the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, obesity rates doubled as well. In China, the number of overweight teenagers has tripled over the past 10 years as fast food restaurants have established a greater presence. In Japan, in the 1980s, sales of fast food are believed to have more than doubled the rate of obesity among citizens, including children (Schlosser, 2003).

In Spain, a country known for its Mediterranean diet rich in health-promoting comestibles like fresh fruits and vegetables, complex carbohydrates, legumes, olive oil, and wine (Holgado, de Irala-Estevez, & Martinez-Gonzalez, 2000), the expanding presence of fast food restaurants has been deemed a threat to health (Schröder, Elosua, & Vila, 2007). Yet since this time, the rate of obesity in Spain has risen among adults (Aranceta, Pérez-Rodrigo, & Serra-Majem, 2003) and children and adolescents (Serra-Majem, García-Closas, & Ribas, 2001) as well as among both women and men (Schröder et al., 2007), a trend noted by a number of scholars (Gutiérrez-Fisac, Banegas Banegas, Artalejo, & Regidor, 2000; Gutiérrez-Fisac, Lopez Garcia, Rodriguez-Artalejo, et al., 2002; Larrañaga, Amiano, & Arizabalaga, 2007), and suspected to be linked to greater consumption of fast food (Ribas-Barba, Serra-Majem, & Salvador, 2007). Alarm generated by the increase in obesity has resulted in concerted efforts to reverse the trend in Spain by the Spanish Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs (Aranceta, Pérez-Rodrigo, & Serra-Majem, 2007; González-Zapata, Ortiz-Moncada, & Alvarez-Dardet, 2007; Neira & de Onis, 2006).

While prevention efforts are best targeted to children, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System revealed that persons between 18 and 29 years old showed the most significant increases in the proportion who were overweight and obese (CDC, 2007). Within that age group are those in college who are at risk of inappropriate weight gain (Racette, Deusinger, & Strube, 2005), and thus an appropriate group for the study of fast food perceptions (Cavadini, Siega-Riz, & Popkin, 2000).

Methods

Convenience samples of college students in both the United States and Spain were asked in person to fill out a brief, one-paged, Institutional Review Board-approved survey in the winter of 2005. Spanish participants were enrolled at the University of Granada, where the first author was enrolled at the time. Data collection occurred at the end of a 4-month stay at which time the first author had become a part of the community and felt comfortable requesting the participation of her peers who were recruited in between classes at the Center of Modern Languages, a division of

the University of Granada, or while they ate at a student center where food was served at the main campus of the University of Granada.

Students in the American sample were recruited from either McDaniel College, a small, liberal-arts school in central Maryland, or a nearby college, Carroll Community College, accessible to the second author. The second author recruited the sample of American students who completed the survey in classes where colleagues from a variety of disciplines agreed to distribute the survey. Students in the classes selected were in introductory level classes that included a wide variety of majors.

For both samples, the survey took between 5 and 10 min to complete. The sample ($n = 196$) consisted of 89 students from Spain (41 males and 48 females) who had identified their ethnicity as Spanish (100% response rate) and 107 students from the United States (39 males and 68 females) (100% response rate). The questions included a closed-ended rank ordering of priorities in consuming fast food and an open-ended question: "How do you feel about the increasing number of fast food restaurants in America [or Spain for Spanish respondents]?" Spanish respondents were also asked an open-ended question that asked them to comment on the differences between American fast food and European fast food. At the end of the survey, all respondents were invited to add any additional comments.

Respondents were asked to rank in importance factors that induce them to buy fast food: the ability to socialize, the food's taste/flavor, nutritional value, and value (amount of food for the money) as well as convenience (including whether the meal is pre-cooked and/or pre-packaged and can be eaten quickly). Finally, Spanish respondents were also asked an open-ended question about how they felt about the increasing number of fast food restaurants in their country. Data were analyzed using SPSS 13.0.

Results

While taste/flavor was widely cited as key (by 76% of Spaniards and 84% of Americans) and only 14% of both groups considered time to socialize over the meal to be a priority, there were differences by gender and culture. American males were much more likely to deem important the amount of food for the money (that is, the food's value) than American females or Spaniards. Sixty-one percent of American males compared to 34–35% of American females or Spaniards of both sexes deemed value to be a priority ($p = .002$). American males (29%) were also much less apt to consider nutritional value an essential factor in meals compared

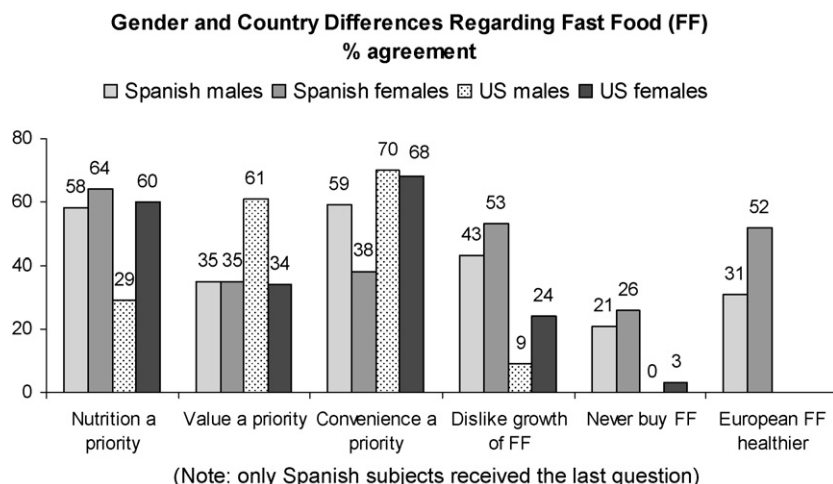


Fig. 1. Gender and country differences regarding fast food (FF).

to American females (60%), Spanish males (58%) and Spanish females (64%) ($p = .001$). When asked why they buy American fast food, the majority of American college students listed convenience (defined as proximity, many locations, lack of time, in a hurry, speed of service) as the main reason (70% of American males and 68% of American females). Among Spaniards, only Spanish males were nearly as likely to value convenience as a reason for eating American fast food (59%). Spanish females were the least likely to buy fast food: 21% of Spanish males and 26% of Spanish females said they never bought fast food compared to 0% of American males and 3% of American females ($p < .001$). In response to the open-ended question about the differences between Spanish and American fast food, only one answer appeared in more than two or three responses: that European fast food was healthier than American fast food. Spanish females were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to deem European fast food healthier (31% of males and 52% of females: $p < .05$) (see Fig. 1).

Significantly fewer American males objected to the increased presence of fast food restaurants: 9% compared to 24% of American females, 43% of Spanish males and 53% of Spanish females ($p = .05$). Among Spanish respondents, the most commonly expressed complaint about the increase in fast food establishments was their erosion of the traditional healthy Mediterranean diet and their negative impact on health.

Discussion

While taste is known to influence eating choices (Glanz, Basil, & Mailbach, 1998; Stewart & Tinsley, 1995), the emphasis on convenience has grown dramatically in accordance with changes in lifestyle (Glanz et al., 1998) to the point that Americans devote nearly 50% of all their money spent on food to meals prepared and purchased outside of the home (Rappoport, 2003). In addition to convenience, the American college students prioritized value more than the Spanish students.

Nearly one-quarter of the Spanish respondents indicated that they never eat or buy fast food in contrast to only 3% of the American respondents. Research that links nutrition-orientation with decreased consumption of fast food in the United States (Binkley, 2006) supports our finding that Spaniards place greater emphasis on nutritional value and are less likely to buy fast food. Their traditionally healthy Mediterranean diet and the ubiquitous presence of fresh food that many families purchase on a daily basis at local markets may also contribute to their awareness of what is healthy. Furthermore, to many Europeans, fast food restaurants are a tacky and menacing form of Americanization (Pells, 1998). Eating does not just encompass the food, but also the underlying concept (Rappoport, 2003). To buy American products is to encourage American industries and therefore back Americanization and all the ideals associated with it. In order to avoid showing such support, people from other countries can simply choose not to assist American companies by spending their money at local establishments instead.

Yet another reason Spaniards may frequent fast food establishments less often than Americans is because most Spaniards still reside in or near city centers (Pells, 1998). Living in such a location gives them access to cafés and other local eateries where traditional Spanish cuisine is served, decreasing the appeal of the convenience of fast food restaurants. In addition, Spain does not share Americans' car culture encouraging the use of drive-thru windows.

Preferences clearly drive market forces since more than 20% of the Spanish sample do not frequent fast food establishments and almost half (49%) are unhappy with the growth of fast food restaurants in their country. The deep pride in and love for native

cuisine that was expressed by Spanish respondents could also explain less frequent patronage of fast food establishments. Many of the Spanish respondents' written comments at the end of the survey (where respondents were invited to add any reactions to the topic) extolled their diet, including, "It's healthy;" "Spanish food is the best;" "We should maintain our customs;" "The Mediterranean diet is the best;" "Spaniards like quality food." Clearly, they are very proud of their culture and the foods that represent it. This positive view of the native Spanish cuisine has enabled Spain to withstand at least some of the influence of fast food because, like France, local and regional cuisines have not been overwhelmed by globalization and McDonaldization (Belasco & Scranton, 2002).

Limitations

A major limitation of this research is its small, non-random sample of a younger, wealthier, and better educated population enrolled in college. While the goal of the study was to examine fast food-related perceptions and practices in Spain compared to the United States, the size of the sample and the way in which subjects were recruited resulted in a substantial bias. Extreme caution in generalizing these results to any population beyond the study samples is warranted. Future research employing different sampling techniques and a larger sample size might yield results that are significantly distinct from those reported in this pilot study. In addition, because the survey was clearly about fast food rather than about food in general, the survey's construction might have sensitized respondents to the topic.

Conclusion

Over the last few decades, the United States and other countries around the world have undergone a period of "McDonaldization" in which efficiency, convenience, and immediate gratification trump other social values (Rappoport, 2003). The finding that the proliferation of fast food establishments was acceptable to most American college students, especially males, while it was objectionable to about half of Spanish college students provides some understanding of how the spread of this element of American society varies by culture, although these results are not generalizable outside the limited study populations sampled. In addition, cross-cultural comparisons between the United States and Spain in this pilot study give insight into how Americans are socialized. In particular, American college males' prioritization of value over nutrition compared to American females or Spaniards suggest we pay heed to American college-aged males' seeming propensity to sacrifice nutritional benefits to the reigning American values embodied in fast food. While these data require replication to ensure their validity, this study highlights possible gender and cultural differences in patterns of consumption.

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