Fast Food Choices, lessons for the hospitality industry: An exploratory study in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

This small scale exploratory study investigated the reasons behind fast food purchasing decisions. Respondents were multi-racial, mixed gender, multi-ethic with self-declared different religious affiliations. All respondents were based in Johannesburg, which is South Africa's largest and wealthiest city. In terms of the hospitality industry, the key findings were that taste drives most fast food purchases, followed by convenience and cleanliness. In terms of population health outcomes, however, of concern is that finding that fast food purchases appear to be becoming characteristic, with people purchasing them on a regular basis. Some, however, purchase as 'a treat'. In terms of racial differences in purchasing patterns, it was found that black African men demonstrated a strong affiliation for traditional foodstuffs, whereas white men strongly selected fast food based on perceived store cleanliness. Overall, price and cleanliness mattered more for men, whereas convenience mattered the most for women. Religious affiliation had a strong influence, but surprisingly some non-Muslims seek out halaal meat. Also of interest was that the Banting diet, a diet strongly supported by a medical professor, and media celebratory, Tim Noakes, seems to be influencing decisions around fast food purchases, with some respondents actively shunning carbohydrates. Thus, the hospitality industry should focus on serving inexpensive healthy fast food, in a clean environment, while also taking into account that some people seek out halaal meat and traditional foodstuffs. In addition, adding menu items in line with the Banting diet may boost sales.

Keywords: Fast food, consumer decision making, religion, family orientation, Banting, halaal

Introduction and purpose

Despite facing considerable economic constraints with a weak currency and disposable incomes under pressure, the South African fast food industry showed a 160% increase in revenue between 2006 and 2012, making it one of the top performers worldwide in terms of growth (Euromonitor International, 2015; Mackay et al, 2013).

Consequently, South Africa has seen an influx of multiple global brands such as Pizza Hut, Burger King, Domino's Pizza and more recently, Krispy Kreme donuts. Understanding why South African consumers are purchasing so much fast food is becoming increasingly important (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). It has been argued that food purchasing decisions are influenced by both individual and group (culture) factors (Azar, 2014; Cleveland et al, 2016; Montanari, 2006). Individual or personal factors include food allergies or intolerances, childhood experiences, age, gender, education/knowledge, place attachment, political and world views (to name a few) impact on food choice (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014).

However, culture also influences choice, with Veeck and Veeck (2000:459) describing culture factors as an "invisible hand" that manifests as "traditions", rituals and social norms which

subconsciously influence consumer choice. For example, a food type enjoyed in early childhood may influence adult choice. Chao et al (2012) and Maheswaran & Shavitt (2000) found national culture as a major influence of individual choice. Culture is complex and hard to define, however, this study used the definition that culture is the rituals, religious beliefs, traditions, social norms as well as family influence that impacts on individual decisions (Azar, 2014; Cleveland et al., 2016; Montanari, 2006). Carder (2015), Hofstede (1980) and Tsai & Chentsova-Dutton (2002) argue that the attitudes, behaviors and beliefs that make up culture are usually instilled over time by socialization agents. Hofstede (1980) divided culture into two main categories: (1) individualistic cultures where the focus is on the individual-self and (2) collectivistic cultures where the focus is on the community, group or society. Within this context all African cultures have been deemed collectivist (Venter, 2004). Okoro et al (2015) however, maintain other factors including psychological, economic, religion and demographics (such as gender) impact on food choice in Africa.

Review of the literature

The study relied on a definition of fast food as being inexpensive foods served quickly, with minimal preparation and minimal (if any) table service (Fleischhacker et al, 2011). Fast food is often energy dense as it is high in saturated fat. It is usually also high in sugar and salt and its micronutrient content is low. Thus, consumption thereof is considered a poor and unhealthy food choice (Fraser, Edwards, Cade & Clarke, 2010). Obesity, for example, with its associated cardiovascular disease and diabetes, has been linked to the consumption of fast food (Boyland, & Halford, 2013). In addition, the sugar contained in fast food results in fat storage and increased hunger, making people eat more (Malhotra et al, 2015).

In terms of fast food, competition is fierce and so outlets that meet consumers' preferences and need are the only ones likely to thrive. In terms of individual factors, Ehsan (2012:12) identified five major customer satisfiers: (1) service, (2) fine cuisine, (3) restaurant interior, (4) good company, and (5) other customers in the restaurant. Min & Min (2013) noted that purchases of fast food are influenced by: taste, price, speed of service, cleanliness, location, operating hours and the availability of healthy menu options. Oni and Matiza (2014) found that the factors driving fast food choice were, in order: (1) Good quality food, (2) Convenience/accessibility/location, (3) Healthy food, (4) Affordability/price, (5) Good customer service and (6) Fast service. Schröder & McEachern (2005) however emphasized the convenience factor. Meyers and Wallace (2003) found cleanliness was important, which may be linked to the findings of McIntyre et al (2013) who found that poor worker hygiene, poor food handling practices, worker illnesses and inadequate hygiene training means that consuming fast food may make one ill.

In terms of cultural factors, religious affiliation strongly influences food decisions. Muslims, seek out halaal products while Hindu's generally do not consume beef for example (Asraf Mohd-Any et al, 2014; Bonne et al, 2007). Ethnicity also seems to impact on food type consumption (Laroche et al, 2005). Levels of patriotism also influence fast food choices (Siamagka & Balabanis, 2015). For example, Chinese and Middle Eastern people show strong preferences for local foods (Etgar & Fuchs, 2011; Qing et al, 2012). Studies have found that gender also influences choice. Males purchase fast food based on service, taste, being able to purchase it after hours and price. Whereas females are influenced by the image of the brand image, the location of food store or restaurant, food quality and, lastly packaging style (Ehsan, 2012).

South Africa's fast food industry

The launch of the USA franchise hamburger restaurant, Wimpy, in the 1960s saw the start of the South African franchised fast food industry (Van Zyl et al, 2010). KFC opened its first store in 1971, and there are now over 800 stores nationwide. McDonald's opened in 1995 and currently operates over 200 stores. Top South African fast food brands, in order of popularity are: Nando's Chicken, Steers, Chicken Licken and Debonairs Pizza (Cant et al, 2014). In 2010, the formal fast

food sector consisted of 8,661 outlets, of which 57% are franchises. By 2015 this had increased by 19% to 10, 302 outlets due to the influx of international brands (Euromonitor International, 2015). There are also a huge number of informal food vendors operating off the street (Pereira, 2014). Growth has been attributed to South Africans eating fewer home cooked meals and rising household incomes. Whilst previous sales were driven by other demographics, with a rising black African middle class, this is set to change, making potential growth to be significant (Steyn et al, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to establish the extent to which culture or individual choice influenced fast food purchases. The research questions for this study were: (1) How regularly do people purchase fast food?, (2) What influences an individual's decision to purchase fast food?, and (3) To what extent do family traditions, social norms, rituals and religion impact fast food choice?

Methodology

This is a small scale exploratory empirical study of fast food consumers, conducted in Johannesburg. Accredited and peer reviewed journals were studied by the authors to identify common themes to derive the research questions and develop the survey (see the Appendix). A pilot instrument was tested and subsequently minor changes were made to the survey. Using stratified convenience sampling, customers of fast food outlets and informal food traders located in Johannesburg were approached by one of the authors. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained. All gender, race and religious affiliation was self-reported. The participation rate was 54 percent with 30 of the 56 people approached participating. The interviews lasted 17 minutes on average. The interviews were voice recorded electronically and manually on the interview schedule. In terms of data analysis, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti software.

The sample consisted of 50% black African people, 13% Coloured (mixed race) people, 20% white people and 17% Indian (people descended from immigrants from India) people. Thus, compared to the rest of South Africa, Indian and white (people descended from European immigrants) people were over sampled and black African people under sampled. The ratio of female to male was 47:53, making the sample skewed towards males. In terms of religion, 80% of the South African population identify as Christian, 1.5% as Muslim, 1.2% as Hindi, 0.2% as Jewish and other/undetermined as 17.1%. Thus, in this study, Christianity was under represented while smaller religious groupings over represented. Table 1 represents the basic demographical data of the respondents.

Results

Theme one: Fast food is purchased habitually

It was found that fast food is mostly purchased between one and three times per week with mean at seven times per month; and mode was five times per month (see Figure 1).Thus, the respondents habitually purchase fast food, with Respondent 16 even saying *"I live on fast food."* Most fast food purchases are for dinner time (75%). The trend line indicates that there is a tendency to purchase fast food on a regular basis.

Theme two: Drivers of individual choice of fast foods

The main drivers of fast food purchases in order of importance were: (1) Food quality and taste, (2) Convenience and accessibility, (3) Cleanliness (of the store), (4) Customer service and speed of service, (5) Affordability and (6) Healthy eating options. Other themes that were apparent in the analysis were that gender mattered and there was a mismatch between what respondents reported they ate and what they actually ate.

Subtheme one: Food quality and taste

Taste preferences are driving purchases, with some distinctly popular fast foods. For South Africans, chicken is very popular. The two chicken fast food brands, Nando's and KFC, dominate. But, whilst most respondents like Nando's, respondents either loved or hated KFC. For example Respondent 4 said KFC was *"too oily and after all the [bad] news of what's happening [regarding cleanliness] in the KFC outlets… I doubt I would ever eat it again."* Contrarily, Respondent 14 liked KFC for its taste consistency.

Informal food vendors operating on the street, as well as major retailers and work canteens were also popular because they offer traditional foods such as *"pap and the Mogodu, samp with a nice sauce, cows' head."* which respondents liked [Respondent1]. Mogodu is a traditional black African South African meal which consists of stewed animal intestines. In general, pizza brands, vegetarian foods, seafood or curry, as well as Bimbo's and Burger King, are unpopular.

Subtheme two: Convenience and accessibility

Convenience was the second highest factor. The respondents indicated they were time 'poor' with little time to prepare a meal from scratch. Respondent 19 said *"I don't cook, my wife works full time 12 days (out of) every 14, and the in-laws run their own business so there isn't much time - we tend to do a lot of takeaways. Free home delivery, this is making it almost too easy"* whilst Respondent 27 said fast food allows them the *"luxury of time."* This was especially true for those families where both partners worked. Family time was used to care for children, assist with homework rather than cooking.

Subtheme three: Store cleanliness

Cleanliness of the outlet was the third ranked factor. This included the perceived hygiene and presentation of the staff (neatly dressed, protective workwear), the look and feel of the store (clean floors and counters), the neatness of the seating area (clean tables, trays and bins for disposables) and the external environment of the outlet (parking area and bins).

Subtheme four: Customer service and speed of service

Customer service (staff friendliness and getting the order correct) was the fourth ranked factor. Many respondents ceased patronizing an outlet or the brand if the customer experience was poor. For example, Respondent 22 mentioned *"(you) go (if its) friendlier, personal service"*. But in terms of slow customer service, speed was only a minor consideration Respondent 1 mentioned *"If you have to keep on asking 'where is my food', then it's not worth it - I just rather leave the food"* and Respondent 26 stated that *"when they take long to serve me I don't like it, I get angry"*. Interesting service that is too quick can create a negative impression: Respondent 6 *"I was surprised … Burger King… I didn't even finish punching in my passcode and my burger was waiting."*

Subtheme five: Affordability

Despite prevailing poor economic conditions, affordability was only the fifth ranked factor. This could be attributed to a rise in the spending power of the middle-class. But for some respondents, price affected when and what they purchased: Respondent 4: *"Previously fast food was more a once a week, now it's becoming a once month."*

Subtheme six: Healthy eating and the Banting diet

Only a few respondents were concerned about healthy eating options, although some respondents acknowledged the importance of eating healthy. Such as *"I'm very conscious about my health (I eat) clean, natural stuff (be)cause today you wonder are we eating proper (food)?"* and *"I go for healthy stuff"* [Respondent 3]. Acknowledging the association between fast foods and fatty foods, Respondent 18 stated *"I try to minimize the fatty stuff because obviously there*

are health issues". Lastly, there seems to be some evidence of the influence of the Banting Diet. For example, "*anything that doesn't have much starch, (that is) healthy stuff*" [Respondent 3] and "*I now go for things that have less carbs"* [Respondent 6&7].

Subtheme seven: Gender

Female respondents in general were more likely to value the convenience of fast food and are less concerned about price. Black African females see fast food as a treat and are fond of chicken (although they generally do not like KFC) and are strongly influenced by taste and service. Men, however, value the alignment of the food with traditional tastes and food types, black African males in particular, prefer traditional foods and are more likely to buy from informal food vendors. Cleanliness of the store also matters to men, as does price.

Subtheme eight: Misalignment

It was also found that words and actions were not necessarily in alignment. For example, some respondents said they avoid carbohydrates but ate pizza, muesli and sushi. Others said they don't like seafood but ate fish. Yet others claimed they never purchase fast food, despite being interviewed at a fast food outlet whilst eating fast food. Some said cleanliness mattered but regularly purchased foods from informal vendors operating out of converted caravans or stalls on the street.

Theme three: Family, traditions, social norms, rituals and religion

Culture and tradition influences fast food choice with many respondents acknowledging the influence of family values (50%), upbringing (43%), religious beliefs (30%) and tradition (27%).

Subtheme one: Family

In terms of family values, Respondent 12 mentioned *"fast food is family time",* and Respondent 2 mentioned *"We eat together as a family."* Some bought fast food to satisfy their children with Respondent 7 noted that *"I wouldn't necessarily buy something (for myself, but) the family can feast as much as they want."* Interestingly, Respondent 21 noted "*Now that I have a family it's (fast food) important."*

Subtheme two: Upbringing

Childhood can also be a strong influence on fast food purchases. For example, Respondent 22 stated "*I grew up in a vegetarian household … we stayed away from burgers."* Respondent 13 stated *"parents and elders were always buying from McDonald's, and I believe that's where my liking of McDonald's has come from.*" Also on upbringing, Respondent 8 mentioned "*I think I have a predisposition to not like Bimbos or Chicken Licken because my mother always told me that it's very bad for me. I always thought I had free choice and free will but if I think about it my biasness is based on something that either what my parents or grandparents have said.*"

Respondent 18 said she did not like pizza as "*I've never been brought up eating pizza.*" The dislike of seafood may be cultural, for example, "*I don't eat seafood. When I was growing up I was being told these things that live in water…they eat humans*" [Respondent 2] and Indian people wanting spicy foods (with Nandos is a firm favorite, with Indians in part because of its 'peri-peri' chicken).

Respondent 6 commenting that their upbringing resulted in their food choices revolving around meat *"I'm a meat lover and I think I represent the majority of Zulus."* Whereas Respondent 5 (female) commented "*my granny used to tell me that women (were) not allowed (meat) - meat is for men. Afrikaans speakers (Afrikaans is an indigenous language of South Africa, spoken mostly by Coloured people and descendants of Dutch and German immigrants) were found to be very fond of steak houses and road houses.

Respondent 19, however, actively defied her upbringing *"I'm the black sheep when it comes to (eating) takeaways. We grew up only eating home cooked food. To this day my mother does not enjoy eating takeaways!"* Respondent 11 also defied their upbringing, rejecting KFC because it was what "*my grandfather (bought) every Friday night."*

Subtheme three: Religion

Jewish and Muslim people are strongly influenced by their religion such as the demand for halal foodstuffs such as meat (halal meat is prepared as prescribed by Muslim law). For example, Respondent 13 stated "*my bible says you're not allowed to eat anything with a hoof*" in reference to eating meat. Additionally, Respondent 10 mentioned "*Being Jewish, I wouldn't have a cheese burger, or salami on pizza.*"

Respondent 4 stated that eating vegetarian fast food only occurred during the fasting period "*vegetarian during fasting time, this is more a religious based decision."* Respondent 14 noted "*if it's owned by a Muslim person I will eat whether it's certified (halal) or not. Fish is always halal as long as they don't prepare it with wine or any alcohol. So fish, we always eat at any restaurant. And chickens, basically most chickens on the [South African] market are halal.*"

Respondent 9, however, a non-Muslim, preferred halal due to its taste and "*in my opinion its better (more healthy)".* A number of non-Muslims concurred. Respondent 25, also a non-Muslim stated *"I prefer any product that doesn't have pork so if its halal I'll take it that mostly (because) I like halal stuff and any product that is associated with pork I don't eat pork because I don't like it."* Respondent 9, another non-Muslim respondent mentioned "*I guess if they were halal and that's maybe upbringing because I stayed in an area that had a lot of Muslims. And we just prefer halal meat, it tastes - in my opinion it's better and I don't really eat pork."*

Subtheme four: Traditions and ritualization

In terms of tradition, it seems that fast food is viewed as a 'treat', equated with 'spoiling yourself'. Respondent 6 said *"You know you've worked hard for the month. The parents have worked hard for the month, and (so they) buy KFC (as a) reward, enjoyment, spoiling yourself, treat."* Additionally, Respondent 23 noted "*Spoil myself with my family as well … us black [African] people we always have money once a month then maybe on payday [we buy] for the whole family.*"

Respondent 1 said "*to me it's like spoiling yourself, Luxury! … you want to spoil your family and you know just to make people happy."* Many respondents indicated that eating fast food was now a norm and cooking a meal from scratch far less common than in previous generations.

Discussion

Lessons for the fast food industry in South Africa is that individual factors strongly influence choice, thus, South African trends strongly align international experiences, as outlined by the work of the Euromonitor International Report (2015), Meyers and Wallace (2003), Min and Min (2013), Oni and Matiza (2014), Schröder and McEachern (2005). That said, price is crucial for South Africans, for although Oni and Matiza (2014) found that price mattered only 14% of the time, this study found that 37% of the respondents felt that affordability mattered. This supports Pereira (2014) who found that South African fast food consumers seek value-for-money and are price sensitive. It may also support the work of Asiegbu et al (2016) and Steyn et al (2011) in terms of the popularity of informal food vendors, based on affordability and convenience.

In in line with the work of Gi Park et al (2014), customer service matters so outlets must deal timeously and effectively with complaints, thus front line staff requires high levels of people skills. In terms of health, some 37% erroneously think fast foods are a healthy eating option, similar to what Kaushik et al (2011), McIntyre et al. (2013) and Schröder & McEachern (2005) found. This

is somewhat different to the work of Pereira (2014) who claims people buy fast food knowing it is unhealthy. Despite this, Cant et al. (2014) maintain that demand for healthy, nutritious yet convenient fast food meals is on the rise in South Africa.

In addition, some purchased fast food in defiance of their culture, others said they should not eat beef or pork (depending on their religion) but did anyway. As some said that they actively chose different choices to that of the previous generation, this is an indication of a switch from cultural influences to individual or self-driven purchases. However, the influence of culture was also noted. Many religious respondents reflected a collectivist culture, especially Muslims, with the most important driver of their fast food purchases was if the food was halal or not. Interesting, some non-Muslims also sought out halal food, which is perceived as a healthy, tasty option. According to these respondents halal certification gives them the assurance that the food is clean and healthy. This is an indication of the impact of socialization when growing up in Muslim dominated communities. It must be noted however, that halal meat is not without controversy, as animal rights activists maintain that the killing of animals under halal regulations (no stunning) is not necessarily humane (Farouk et al., 2014; Lerner & Rabello, 2006; Lever & Miele, 2012).

The purchasing of fast food may be an indicator of lifestyle and cultural change, especially for the newly urbanized. Overall, fast food consumption may be becoming ritualized, associated with family time and Friday nights. Much of this can be attributed to households with two working parents, time constraints and urbanization (Bonne et al., 2007; Ysseldyk et al, 2010). These changes have encouraged the purchasing of fast food in volumes unheard of by previous generations. That the factors found in this study are common across many other studies is an indication of how globalization has impacted on South African social norms and cultural practices (Islam, & Ullah, 2010; Rootman, & Galloway, 2013; Slater, 2013; Walls, & Triandis, 2014). More than half of the respondents had a preference to local fast food brands, in line with the findings of Pillay (2014). The preference for local brands over international ones has been noted elsewhere as a type of ethnocentrism (Kashif et al, 2015; Siamagka, & Balabanis, 2015). The popularity of Nando's confirms the studies of Forjoe (2011) and Pereira (2014).

In line with the work of Sapienza et al (2006) and Chao et al. (2012), some respondents acknowledged upbringing influenced their fast food purchases. The strong support of black African male respondents for traditional foods may be an indication of the African collectivistic culture (Triandis, 2001; Venter, 2004). This supports Okoro et al. (2015) who feel that social and cultural factors that contribute to the decision making process related to fast foods. It seems that some consumers are aware that fast food may be linked to obesity and some may be influenced by the Banting Diet. Noakes (2013) advocates a low-carbohydrate, high-fat (LCHF) diet.

Subjects on this LCHF diet reported significant weight loss, and lowered incidents of hypertension, Type 1 and 2 diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome and cholesterol (Malhotra et al., 2015). Bateman (2013) does not think the work of Prof Tim Noakes is medically valid, however. Nevertheless Noakes has a huge following in South Africa, is the author of a very popular cooking book and is relentless in his public promotion of this diet. It may be, therefore, that regardless of its medical validity, Noakes may be influencing the purchasing habits of people. This could have a negative effect on the fast food industry.

Conclusion

The South African fast food industry is thriving and both individual and cultural factors are driving fast food purchases. Interesting too, is the finding of a misalignment with what people reported they ate and what they actually ate, or reported as important versus actual purchasing patterns. In this regard, some may be unaware that the preparation, presentation and display of food in the street by vendors, is in fact unhygienic (Cortese, et al, 2016; Asiegbu et al, 2016). In addition, the switching by urbanites to fast foods over home cooked meals may not be entirely due to time constraints. It may also be linked to lack of knowledge of how to cook, which is thus a possible indicator of cultural change. This research contributes to the body of knowledge in the field of

consumer behavior, in particular the previously unreported finding that non-Muslims seek out halaal meat and there is also the possibility of the Banting diet influencing fast food preferences.

This study was limited in terms of number of participants, geographical location and in that it only used convenience sampling. Thus, the findings are not fully representative. As this study was qualitative and exploratory in orientation, further investigations into the ranking of the factors, as well as uncover additional factors, may be necessary. Importantly, as the consumption of large amounts of fast foods are linked to obesity and illnesses such as Diabetes type 2, it is recommended that a study be undertaken into establishing how much people know about healthy foodstuffs and cooking techniques. Further research should be conducted to establish the extent of the demand for halaal meat, as well as the possibility that the Banting diet is influencing customer purchases.

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INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Gender:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Race:

Geographical location

Nationality

Interview Questions

1. What is/are your favorite fast food/s?
2. Where are you likely to purchase this fast food/s from?
3. Why is this as your favorite fast food/s brand?
4. What is your least favorite fast food brand? Why?
5. Explain the factors that influence your choice of fast food brand?
6. What is most important factor that makes you choose a fast-food brand? Why?
7. In your opinion, has the food buying behavior of your family/elders influenced you in terms of fast food choice? If so, how?
8. What is fast food in your opinion, how does it make you feel?
9. What kind of fast food do you prefer? Does your preference influence where you buy this food?
10. How often do you purchase fast food, and at which times are you most likely to make this purchase? Why?
11. Does proximity to a fast food outlet or food vendor influence your purchase choice? If so, why?
12. Are there any dietary concerns related to your fast food brand choice? Why?
13. In your opinion, does your culture or ethnic background affect your choice of fast food? Why?
14. Which are better - international fast food brands or local fast food brands? Why?
15. Are any of your fast food choices influenced by cultural preferences or beliefs? If so, why?