

FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS: THE NEW SOCIAL ARENA OF URBAN YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract

Fast food restaurants are very popular alternatives for nowadays Romanian young urban population, addressing the needs of a busy, information society but, in the same time, changing the traditional lifestyle. Fast food expansion is due to several important factors, such as the modern commerce development- with its explosion of hypermarkets and malls providing fast food alternatives to their customers, the aggressive marketing policies, lower prices and fast serving times. As such, the current paper analyzes the behavior of young Romanian urban population in respect to their fast food eating habits, with special emphasis on both online and face-to face socialization issues. The results indicate the fact that, the very specific of fast food restaurants enhances the online and face-to-face socialization. It reveals that the fast pace of living determines students and urban young working people to move an important part of their social and business life inside fast food restaurants, not taking into consideration the poor nutritional value of fast food products.

Keywords: Fast food, consumer behavior, social media, nutritional value

JEL Classification: I10, I12, L82, M21, Q18

Introduction

Fast food eating was a phenomenon practically unknown in Romania until the beginning of 1990 years. It gradually spread along the last decades, modifying the consuming habits of Romanian people.

The eating “fashion” is always influenced by the very essence of the people, as well as by the complex social-economical-technological context they live. Importing fast food from the Western countries is linked to visible diet changes, to dramatic modifications in the people regular working, travelling and living paces (Voinea, 2011).

The information society requires that its members are always connected to the latest news and know-how; it permanently keeps them busy and preoccupied for staying informed. Large pieces of time are dedicated to activities that previously were not required by society: mobile communication, fast learning and acquiring of information, as well as rapid

rendering needed information to others; extensive networks of friends, acquaintances that transmit information through social media, messenger and email applications. Processing this huge amount of data that surrounds people, requires time. Therefore, time is taken away from other activities, like eating, face-to face socializing, visiting friends etc. These transformations in the overall lifestyle of urban population are very visible now, as for hundreds of years, the working, eating and socializing patterns have remained quite unchanged (Pamfilie, Bobe, Cristescu, Toma, 2016). Daily eating was a matter of home cooking or, in restaurants, of a-la carte serving for the higher class; socializing meant by no means reading information in newspapers; working didn't involve staying always connected to the live information that is provided nowadays by internet and mobile networks.

Fast food restaurants are the reflection of the frantic society we live in. They address the need of people with lower incomes to eat cheaper food outside their homes, in restaurants. They also address the need of crowded with tasks urban working people for the least time-consuming eating breaks. They replace home cooking for people too busy or too tired to spend time shopping for ingredients and preparing meals throughout the day. Nevertheless, numerous studies and debates taking place in media – especially in online media, state that on the long run, the regular consume of fast food is susceptible to inducing health damages due to a lack of needed nutrients and to an increased input of non-benefic additives (Powel,2009).

As such, the current paper aims to analyze the behavior of young urban people in what concerns fast food eating, taking into consideration that they the category most connected to online information (Lenhart et al, 2010), and also that they are the most active and dynamic segment of population in terms of working and studying.

1. The particularities of fast food phenomenon in Romania

Our research through the fast food offers available for Romanian consumers has shown that these are products found also in Western fast food restaurants such as burgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, pizza, fish & chips, French fries. However, there in the Romanian market there are also Asian fast food products such as noodles and soups, as well as the Oriental ones like shawarma, kebab, falafel etc. Soft drinks are most of the times part of fast food menus and the desserts such as pancakes, muffins, doughnuts and ice-cream complete the image of Romanian fast food assortment variety.

According to research, the main ingredients used for preparing fast food (sugar, salt, saturated fats, flavor and taste enhancers, preservatives, synthetic colorants etc.), when excessively consumed, lead to serious health problems like arterial hypertension, cardiovascular and digestive problems, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity as well as an alteration of the cerebral activity (Kenny, 2013). These highly processed aliments also have a low content of the fibers required for a proper digestion and low vitamins content. Specialists in public health policies debated about introducing additional taxes on fast food, hoping that an increase of prices will diminish the consume among population(Holt, 2010). Nevertheless, taxes alone are not sufficient (Cotti and Tefft, 2013), as these have to be supported by massive campaigns for informing the population about the risks of long term fast food eating.

Due to the numerous campaigns and messages for a healthier lifestyle distributed throughout media, consumers become more aware about their nutritional needs. As such, many of the fast food restaurants include “healthy” dishes, such as salads, fruit smoothies,

tea, boiled vegetables etc. Also, the main international fast food chains adapt to the cultural particularities of the market, by introducing from time to time limited edition dishes consisting of national traditional food, such as “mici”, “sarmale” etc. By promoting this safe and tested for generation Romanian food within their restaurants, they try to improve their image in what concerns the negative nutritional issues of fast food eating. Also, some of the fast food restaurants introduce on their websites applications for calculating the nutritional values of their products (McDonald’s, 2017), trying to meet the expectations of a more and more informed consumer.

2. The social profile of the Fast food consumer

Despite the mentioned risks of regularly consuming fast food, restaurants offering such products are still popular, as the Romanian fast food market has been growing along the years. Employers often have their lunches or breakfasts in fast foods, while young adults and teenagers are found to visit fast food restaurants at all times of the day; families with children usually eat in fast food restaurants mostly during evenings and weekends (Euromonitor, 2016)

Many young people who work in the urban areas are very busy and, due to over-crowded working schedules, do not have enough time for eating in slow-food restaurants. Therefore, fast food is an appropriate choice, as these products can be consumed while travelling by bus, car, underground, or even at the workplace, while performing job tasks (DailyBusiness, 2015). Also, young employed people, students and teenagers generally have lower incomes than more mature and experienced population (Institutul National de Statistica, 2016), because they are at the beginning of their career or they are still financially supported by their family. Therefore the cheaper prices of fast foods - as compared to those of classic slow-food restaurants or to eco-food eating, may be another reason for attracting the category of low budget population (Meghisan and Meghisan, 2012). The non-formal manner of serving fast food (eating without fork and knife, but with fingers or biting directly from the product) offers a casual relaxed atmosphere.

Taking into consideration the fact that adolescence is a transitory stage of life when adult individual character starts being built, it is natural that teenagers manifest a strong sense of independence in all of their living: values, beliefs, schedules and tasks, socializing, travelling, clothing, eating preferences etc. Having their own experiences and trials are very important, therefore, left to their own choices, teenagers are more likely to willingly disregard the risks of habitually eating fast food. Research indicates the fact that adolescents living with only one parent or having parents with very busy working programs are more prone to excessively eating fast food because they are left alone, unsupervised, for longer periods of time. Also, the parents try to replace their absence by behaving more indulgently with their children, granting them money and liberty for buying IT&C gadgets and clothes or for eating fast food at their own choice (Voinea, 2011). As research suggests that students spend more time for online socialization, than for face to face socialization (Maiorescu et al, 2015), the advertisements created for fast food restaurants target this segment of young adults or teenagers having fun – most of the time in connection with social media, mobile phones, tablets or computers and internet.

3. Research methodology and analysis of results

The research, deployed in November 2016 was focused on finding information about the following issues:

- The frequency of young people going into fast food restaurants
- The behavior of young people when in a fast food restaurants in relation with their eating, socializing and working activities
- The motivation of young people for choosing fast food
- The influence of internet and social media upon young people fast food nutrition beliefs and behavior

Taking into consideration that young people are the most active segment in using internet and social media (Lenhart et al, 2010), the most appropriate way of distributing the questionnaires of research was considered to be online. Hence, 300 young people of both genders living, working and studying in urban area were asked to fill in the survey online and 273 valid answered questionnaires were retrieved. The distribution of genders consists in 59,3% feminine and 40,6% masculine respondents with ages between 18 – 35 years old. Data was gathered and analyzed with statistical software Minitab and Microsoft Excel. Taking into consideration the sample size of 273 respondents, for a confidence level of 95%, the resulting margin of error is approximately 6%.

In respect to our first objective – finding out the frequency of fast food eating, it can be remarked that more than one third of respondents (38.5%) state that they eat fast food products once every few days (see figure no.1).

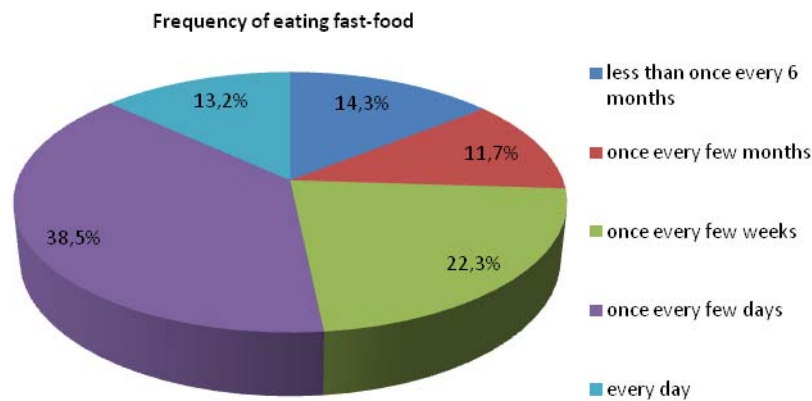


Figure no. 1: The frequency of eating fast food among young people

Adding the segment of respondents that daily eat fast food (13.2%), we can see that about half of the young respondents eat fast food very often.

Because eating with regularity fast food leads to health problems on the long term, we wanted to find out if respondents have information about the nutritional values of the products they consume.

For finding out the level of information respondents have about the nutritional values of the fast food products, respondents were asked whether they know or get informed beforehand about the nutritional values of the food they are to buy. About two thirds of the respondents (70%) stated that they never check the nutritional information when going into a fast food, and 24% that they check it occasionally. Only 6% of the questioned young people stated that they always check the nutritional information of fast food products before eating them.

Pearson Chi-Square results have indicated no association between “Gender” and “Checking for nutritional information about fast food”.

The lack of interest about the nutritional values of fast food is also visible in figure no.2, where the most frequent reason for visiting fast food is eating when hungry fast food products. Eating healthy products inside fast food is rarely a choice for more than half of the respondents.

Also, it can be seen in figure no.2 that visiting fast foods is a matter of socializing: 79% of respondents indicate “socializing with friends” as reason that convince them to go in such a restaurant every time or, at least most of the times. This indicates a social habit of having meals together with friends inside fast foods, since 68% of respondents say that they eat with friends in slow food - a-la carte restaurants occasionally (once every few months or even more seldom).

Almost half of the respondents stated that from time to time they choose fast food as the place for solving work or school project related tasks with colleagues.

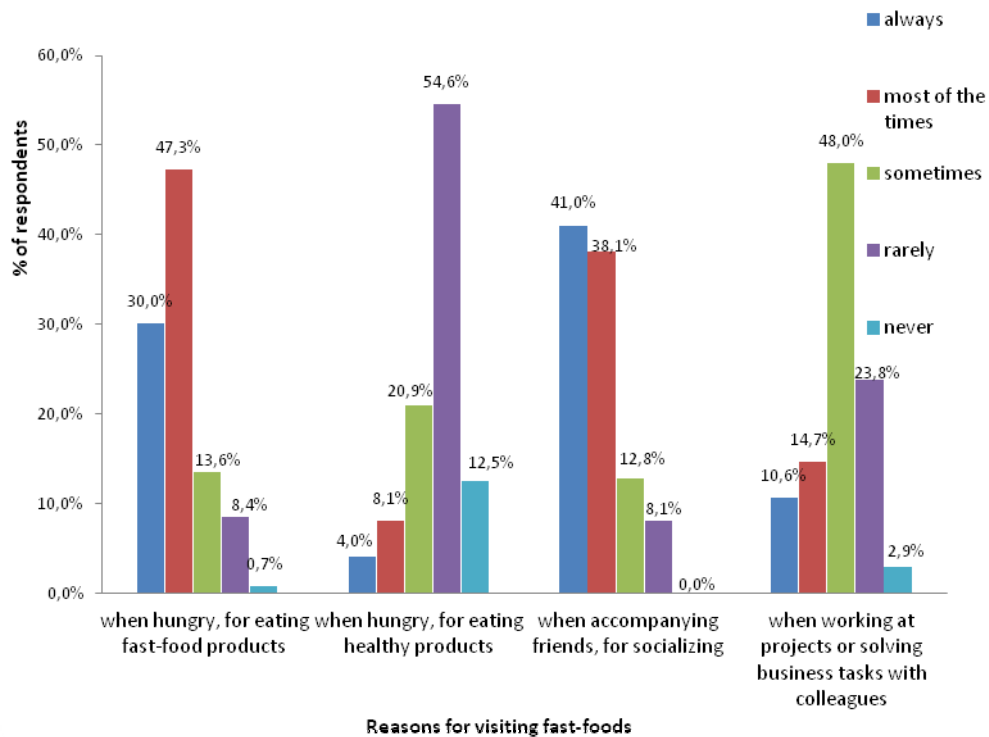


Figure no. 2: Respondents’ reasons for visiting fast food restaurants

The social behavior of nowadays young generation is linked with mobile technologies and applications; therefore we wanted to know if eating in fast food – which, according to the results, is largely the result of socialization needs, rules out online socialization or the use mobile smart devices. In respect to this issue, when asked about their using Smart devices such as mobile phones, tablets, Smart watches, laptops etc. in fast foods, about two thirds

(63%) of respondents stated that they usually use them and 21 % that they use them from time to time.

Social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram (82%), social messaging applications such as Whatsapp, Viber, SMS (74%) and office/school related applications such as email or documents viewer/editors (61%) are the most accessed by respondents when they are in fast foods. About a third of the respondents (32%) state that they play games when they are in a fast food.

The Pearson Chi Square test calculated between “Gender” and “Use of Smart devices in Fast food” indicated no association between these variables.

Although we would have expected to see a connection between “Games” and “Gender”, as the masculine segment of population is more prone to digital gaming, the results do not confirm this hypothesis. For 1 degree of freedom, the calculated Pearson Chi-Square is 0,083 with a p-value of 0.774, the cutting off being at 0.05.

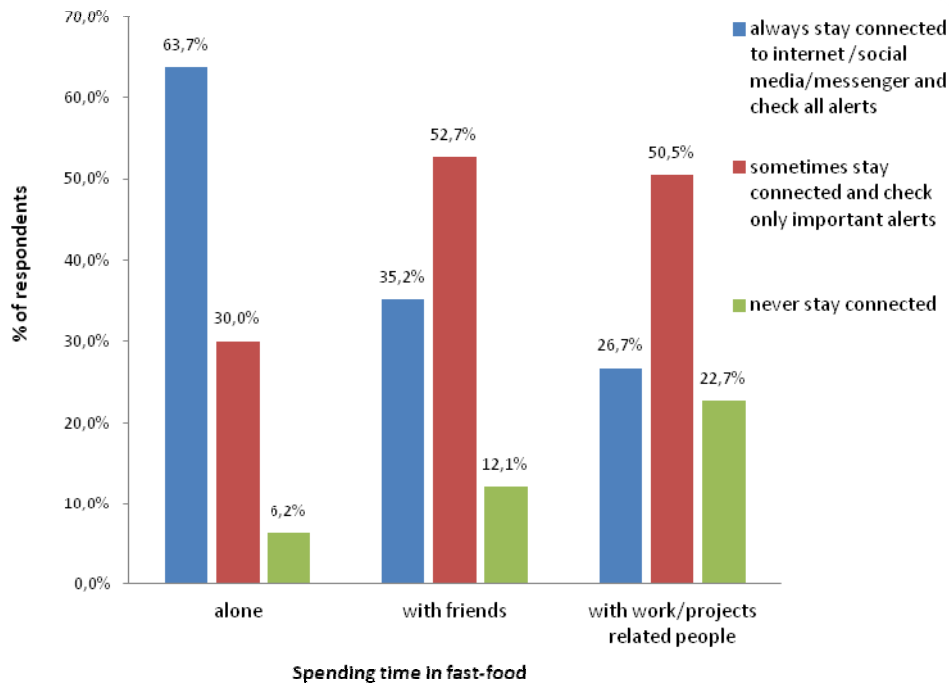


Figure no. 3: Respondents’ behavior about using internet/social media/ SMS-messenger while visiting fast food, depending on the company they have there

The use of mobile Smart technologies for socialization or for information while in fast food is at its highest while eating alone (see figure no.3). It can be noticed that, even while being with friends one third of the respondents state that they are always connected and check all alerts coming from social media/ messenger/ internet linked applications.

The highest percentage of respondents saying that they don’t stay connected in fast food is for situations when they are discussing work or school projects issues with others. Still, this percentage is low (only 22.7%), meaning that even in the more “formal” context like discussing business or school problems.

Conclusions

Romanian young urban people, despite the fact that they are informed and connected to Internet and social media applications still go in fast food restaurants and frequently consume the over processed food lacking in nutrients food, with potential associated long term health issues.

Fast food restaurants provide menus at low prices, fast standard serving and a casual atmosphere. Therefore, their motivation in choosing fast foods strongly revolves around the need for socializing with friends; however, going in fast foods is driven almost in the same degree by the need to eat.

Our research has shown that, regardless of their company inside fast food restaurants (alone, with friends or with business/study partners) young urban people are most of the time connected to internet, social media and messaging applications, ready to instantly check all updates and news they receive on their Smart mobile devices.

It turns out that, unlike traditional slow-food restaurants, fast foods attract in a higher extent young urban people for face to face socialization. While present in fast foods alone or in the company of others, online socialization and information seldom cease.

The young urban individual regards fast foods as being more than mere places to eat. Fast food is a social arena, where various needs such as seeing friends, discussing professional issues and staying updated with the latest news from the social media can be met simultaneously.

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