

Fast-food Is Everywhere: Does Offer Reformulation Influence Young People's Perception of the Relationship Between Psychosensory Value and Health?

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Abstract

Economic and lifestyle changes, increased buyer incomes, and technology have gradually led to the modification of fast-food consumption. This article explores the actual evolution of fast-food offer and how they have been reformulated within the new socio-cultural paradigm to encourage purchases by exploiting customers' sensory and emotional experiences, promoting the idea of healthier options. However, there may be potential divergences between the reformulation of fast-food offer and the perception of the taste-health relationship, as well as between its promotion and consumer behavior. To what extent does the reformulation of fast-food offer shape the behaviors of young consumers and alter the perception of the relationship between psychosensory value and health of food? The answer to this question is the objective of our quantitative exploratory research; the results demonstrate a direct and positive influence of fast-food reformulation on the perception of the link between what is healthy and what is tasty and attractively presented. However, this perception is often mistaken because the reformulation of offer rarely leads to an improvement in the nutritional profile of foods or the enhancement of cultural content. Furthermore, the development of multichannel food marketing has raised new concerns regarding public health and particularly the diet of young people, legitimizing our scientific endeavor as exploring the perceptions and attitudes of young buyers towards new fast-food options provides insight into the impact on sales and profitability in the fast-food industry on one hand, and on the satisfaction and loyalty of a conscious, responsible, and nutritionally educated consumer on the other.

Keywords

reformulation of fast-food offer, relationship between psychosensory value and health, perception of young consumers, psychosensory value and health of food

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Introduction

The current political and socio-economic context (armed conflicts, economic recession, post-COVID era) represents a good opportunity to rethink the entire relationship with food and analyze our eating behavior. This creates the premises for a new approach based on the socio-cultural dimension of nutrition. Food consumption has become a socio-cultural activity that provides identity, self-respect, meaning, acceptance, and social participation (Florea, 2018), which exceeds the food-health relationship.

It is concerning that healthy food is perceived as more expensive than unhealthy food, especially by young people (European Institute of Innovation & Technology, n.d.). Furthermore, the significant growth of the fast-food industry as an alternative to healthy eating has been primarily driven by changing consumer preferences, especially those of young people, regarding the quality-price ratio and convenience (Voinea et al, 2024).

Current research highlights that food marketing affects young consumers' nutrition knowledge, food preferences and consumption patterns, that the foods promoted by food marketing represent a “very undesirable dietary profile, with heavy emphasis on energy dense, high fat, high salt and high sugar foods” (Cairns et al., 2009). According to WHO (2023) “unhealthy diets are a leading global public health risk, contributing to all forms of malnutrition”, and food environments, which include food marketing, are recognized as one of the key influences on diets. Other research (Boyland and McGale, 2022) reinforced these findings, and the advent and growth of multichannel marketing have raised new concerns regarding the relationship between preferences, beliefs, and attitudes.

It is recognized that psychosensory value is the fundamental attribute of fast-food offer that leads to a top culinary experience and consumer satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2019). However, few studies have addressed the combined effects of the attributes conferred by the reformulation of fast-food offer on behavioral intention and the perception of the relationship between psychosensory value and food health.

Since a large part of young people perceive healthy eating as an integral part of mental and physical health (European Institute of Innovation & Technology, n.d.) and consider it difficult to eat healthily, especially outside the home, the fast-food industry has tried to capitalize on these beliefs and has had to undergo significant transformation by reformulating its offer to promote new sensory and affective experiences. Building on the idea that more and more young people seek satisfaction in consumption and exploiting the desire for full enjoyment of fast-food at the intersection of sensory pleasure and situational comfort (Bauman, 2007), the purpose of our work focuses on studying the influence of fast-food reformulation on the eating behavior of young people regarding the relationship between the psychosensory value of food and food health.

Our approach is based on exploratory quantitative research among young people, and the results are beneficial for shaping guidelines and measures for the nutritional education of young people, as well as feasible strategies for improving the nutritional quality of fast-food offer. All these can contribute to healthier choices, both for forming synesthetic experiences and for improving the eating behavior of young people.

1. Review of the scientific literature - the reformulation of fast-food in the context of the new socio-cultural paradigms of consumption

Studying the history of fast-food, we can observe that the first signs of changes in public awareness regarding the nutritional impact and the necessity of reformulating offer bring to the forefront initiatives to reduce ingredients with negative health impacts. Over time, fast-food has cultivated loyalty through sensory attributes and relational benefits (Dandis et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2023), with several notable changes:

- Goal: from simply encouraging consumption, there has been a shift towards promoting a fast-food mentality, with the priority being to attract and satisfy as many customers as possible by finding innovative solutions. Therefore, intensive methods such as visual, auditory, and olfactory stimulation are used to create synesthetic experiences.
- Technology has brought numerous improvements and innovations, from drive-thru service to free Wi-Fi access, tablet use for menu navigation, self-service based on touch screens, QR codes for customer information, mobile access applications, and home delivery services.
- The menu has undergone remarkable transformations: from a limited offering to a vast assortment, including healthier options, which significantly influence consumers' eating habits.
- Portion sizes have increased considerably with customizable quantity options for some products, unlike the period when fast-food portion sizes were moderate, standardized, and available in a single format.
- Prices, although higher compared to the 1980s-1990s, remain equally accessible today for consumers with tighter budgets.

The reformulation of offer in the fast-food industry under the new socio-cultural paradigm does not only refer to the introduction of healthier options but also to the adoption of creative strategies to attract a wider consumer segment and maintain the loyalty of existing ones (Mifli et al., 2015; Chun and Nyam-Ochir, 2020; Giachino et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Ibáñez-Sánchez et al., 2022; Magbanua et al., 2023):

- Innovation in menus - by introducing new and interesting products or unique and uncommon ingredients, expanding the menu to cater to diverse preferences and diets, including vegetarian and vegan options, gluten-free products, or healthy alternatives to traditional fast-food items.

- Customization of options - customers can choose desired ingredients to create their unique product combinations, offering a more interactive and personalized experience.
- Promotions and special offers - that may include discounts on certain products or attractive deals, effective strategies during low sales periods or to promote new or less popular products.
- Collaborations and partnerships with other brands or public figures - may involve launching limited editions or special collections of products in collaboration with popular brands or food influencers.
- Exploitation of national or local specificity - involving adapting food offer and marketing to reflect the culinary preferences and local culture of a particular region or country:
 - Local variants of popular, authentic products adapted to the tastes and dietary preferences of a specific region, ingredients, or traditional local recipes that are familiar and appealing to consumers.
 - Partnerships or collaborations with local producers to obtain fresh and authentic ingredients, supporting the local economy and improving the quality of the products offered.
 - Localized marketing, advertising campaigns, and promotional materials that specifically address the preferences and eating habits of the local population, organizing events or offering promotions during local holidays or festivals.
 - Customization of restaurant designs according to local specificity through themed decorations or architectural elements that reflect the traditions and culture of the respective region.

Customers' attraction to fast-food can be cultivated through an increased psychosensory value, through gustatory, haptic and olfactory indications (Hassan et al., 2023), to which auditory and visual ones are added. Consumers are very sensitive and attentive to the psychosensory value of food given by the visual appearance, color, texture, consistency, smell and taste of the products and use these characteristics as selection criteria. According to Harris and Bargh (2009), sensory cues play a crucial role in shaping consumers' perceptions and behaviors, influencing their food choices. Research conducted by Van Kleef et al. (2008) underscores the importance of hedonic value in alimentary behavior and consumption patterns. Fast-food companies capitalize on this by reformulating their products to enhance the perception of healthiness without necessarily improving nutritional quality (Roberto et al., 2010; Mintel, 2021).

For a better understanding of the term "healthy" the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently proposed to reinterpret the definition of "healthy" food for regulatory purposes. Thus, to be considered healthy, foods must meet strict minimum requirements for fruits, vegetables, dairy products, and whole grains, in addition to having restrictions on added sugar, sodium, and saturated fat (Siu and Drewnowski, 2023).

Recent studies highlight the role of marketing strategies in perpetuating misconceptions about fast-food. Research by Wansink and Chandon (2006) suggests that subtle environmental cues, such as the packaging and labeling of food products, can influence consumers' perceptions of portion sizes and healthfulness. By strategically positioning certain menu items as "healthy" or "light," companies can manipulate consumers' perceptions without significantly altering the nutritional content of their offer. Other research (Lopes et al., 2023; Ragavoodoo, 2023) suggests that deceptive marketing tactics, such as greenwashing and health halo effects, can lead consumers to overestimate the healthfulness of certain fast-food items. Companies strategically position menu items as "natural" or "organic," exploiting consumers' desire for healthier options while often neglecting significant nutritional improvements.

2. Research methodology and Model

The review of specialized literature revealed that the reformulation strategies of fast-food have a significant impact on the attractiveness of the offer and consumer satisfaction, therefore we studied how young consumers' perception of the psychosensory value-health relationship of food is influenced in this context.

The relevance of reformulating fast-food offer, based on diversification strategies that can influence food choices, must start with identifying young consumers' perception of its usefulness. Thus, we begin with the idea that this perception can help capitalize on acquisition opportunities and select more attractive and healthier foods for more interesting consumption experiences.

In this context, our research aims primarily to identify the perception of the relationship between psychosensory value and food health within reformulated fast-food offer.

Data Collection Procedure

The statistical survey method was used to collect data in this exploratory quantitative research. A questionnaire was used for data collection, which was disseminated online between October and December 2023. We received answers to 112 questionnaires, and after removing the incomplete questionnaires, 104 valid questionnaires resulted. The results of the collected questionnaires were processed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and the CORREL function to determine the correlation coefficients to verify the established hypotheses. The questionnaire was structured in two sections: the first section included questions about how the reformulation of the fast-food offer influences consumers' perception of the psychosensory value-health relationship, and the second section included socio-demographic questions (gender, age, education and income). Items identifying reformulation strategies that motivate young people to consume fast-food were rated using a Likert measurement scale (from 5 to 1, where 5 = very important and 1 = not at all important).

Research Model

In order to fulfill the objective of this paper, our research investigates how the reformulation of the fast-food offer through five creative strategies - innovation in menus, customization of options, promotions and special offers, collaborations and partnerships, exploitation of national or local specificity – influences customers' perception of the psychosensory value-healthiness relationship of foods. The conceptual research model is suggested in figure 1.

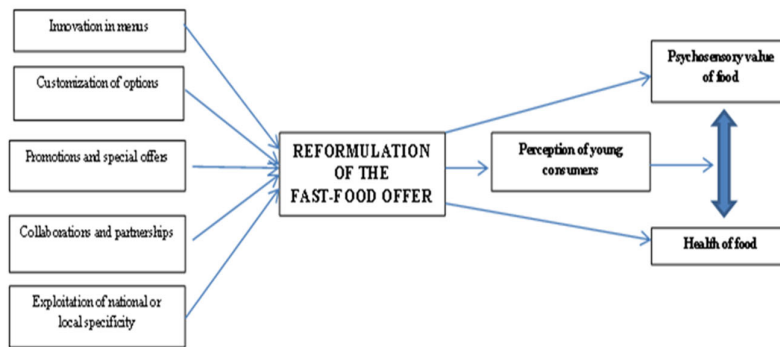


Figure no. 1. Research Model

Source: our research

Starting from the influence of items identified as reformulation strategy on fast-food, it was possible to investigate the connection with consumers' perception of the psychosensory value and health of food; thus, three research hypotheses were outlined:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). The reformulation of the fast-food offer has a direct and positive effect on psychosensory value.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The reformulation of the fast-food offer has a direct and positive effect on the healthiness of food.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). Young consumers perceive fast food offer reformulation as having a beneficial influence on the relationship between psychosensory value and food health.

3. Results and discussion

Socio-demographic differences are an important predictor of fast-food consumption. Lower socio-economic status (in terms of education level and income) is the most significant risk factor for consuming unhealthy foods (d'Angelo et al., 2020), along with other important factors such as age, gender, and frequency of fast-food consumption (Table no. 1).

Table no. 1. Participants' Demographic Data and Frequency of fast-food consumption

Variables	Number (%)	Variables	Number (%)
Gender		Income	
female	76 (73.07)	under 2000 lei	14 (13.46)
male	28 (26.92)	between 2001-3500	56 (53.84)

Age		between 3501-5000	22 (21.15)
18-23	82 (78.84)	over 5000	12 (11.53)
24-30	22 (21.15)	Frequency of fast-food consumption	
Education		Never	2 (1.92)
high- school education	20 (19.23)	Rarely	12 (11.53)
university studies	66 (63.46)	Sometimes	38 (36.53)
post- university studies	18 (17.30)	Often	52 (50)

Source: our research

Following the delineation of the socio-demographic profile of consumers (women, aged 18-25, with university education, earning between 2001-3500 lei monthly, and who frequently consume fast-food) was identified the importance given to the five strategies for diversifying the fast-food offer to consumers, the results indicating that the majority consider them fairly important, ranking first innovation in menus (48.1%), promotions and special offers (45.3%) and customization of options (42.6%), followed by collaborations and partnerships (38.3%) and exploitation of national or local specificity (35.1%) (Figure no.2).

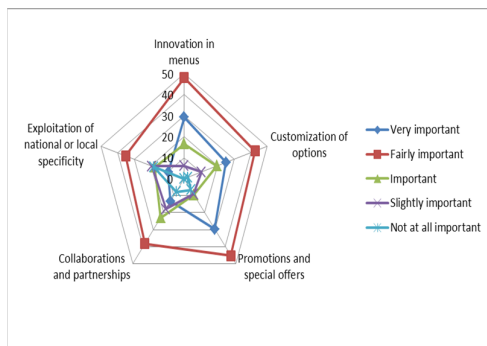


Figure no. 2. The importance of fast food offer reformulation strategies

Source: our research

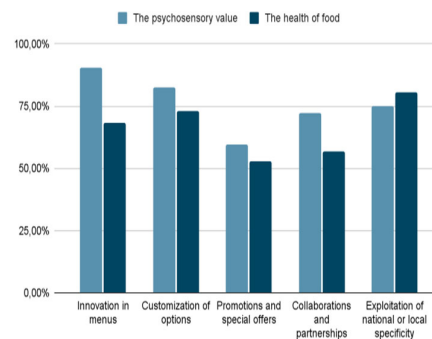


Figure no. 3. The perception of fast food offer reformulation on the psychosensory value and health

Source: our research

The data processing indicated that young people perceive the reformulation of fast-food offer as an improvement in predicting increased demand, as it significantly influences the psychosensory value and health of these foods. This explains that interventions in restructuring offer, accompanied by effective promotion and strong food marketing, are efficient as they involve making active, heuristic decisions (d'Angelo et al., 2020), based more on emotions and less on reason.

A large portion of the respondents (86%) showed a tendency to change their eating habits after being heavily exposed to fast-food advertisements, which they found very appealing, boosting the consumption of these foods and further encouraging repeat purchases.

Regardless of the strategies for reformulating the fast food offer referred to, they are perceived as having a direct connection, both with increasing the psychosensory value of the food and their health status, simultaneously (Figure no. 3), so the reformulated offer is perceived by young people as both tasty and healthy.

Research on the importance of the psychosensory value of fast-food products involved assessing organoleptic characteristics, and the results indicated that the sensory experience focuses on taste, smell, visual appearance, and texture/consistency, in that order of importance. The perception of increased psychosensory value of reformulated products compared to classic ones is positive, as is the perception of the healthiness of reformulated foods defined by nutritional quality, safety, and ingredient quality. The correlation is used to verify the validity of the first two hypotheses:

- $r_1=0.87$ represents the correlation coefficient between the reformulation of fast-food offer and the psychosensory value of the products, with the result indicating a very strong positive correlation; according to the results presented above, hypothesis H1 is validated.

- $r^2=0.58$ represents the correlation coefficient between the reformulation of fast-food offer and the healthiness of the foods, with the result indicating a moderate positive correlation, which validates hypothesis H2.

By concatenating and processing the data obtained, it can be observed that young consumers have a good perception and perspective on the relationship between the psychosensory value and the health of food determined by the reformulation of the fast-food offer, which validates hypothesis H3, regardless of the strategy chosen by the company.

However, we believe that this perception is not always accurate, as the reformulation of fast-food offer rarely leads to the provision of healthier and more sustainable alternatives. The promotion of reformulated fast-food offer, from the producer's perspective, highlights, through advantageous visual cues, the characteristics of "new/authentic/natural/popular/local/national," which younger generations perceive as "progress." Indeed, the ideological influence it implies is yet another reason to expect further acceleration in demand, as the relationship with consumption defines the relationship with the society we live in (Ritzer and Miles, 2019). Furthermore, the marketing strategies used by fast-food chains perpetuate and exaggerate the perception of the relationship between psychosensory value and food health towards a distorted conception.

The consumption of fast-food plays a major role in the obesity epidemic, being a popular activity among young people due to the advantages offered by low prices and convenience. The reformulation-centric approach to fast-food fails to address the root causes of poor dietary habits and health outcomes. As highlighted by Nestle (2010), the emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility obscures the broader socioeconomic factors that contribute to unhealthy eating behaviors, such as food deserts, marketing to vulnerable populations, and socio-economic disparities in access to healthy foods. Recent work by Bagnato et al. (2023) emphasizes the need for comprehensive policies targeting the food environment, including regulations on marketing practices and increased access to affordable healthy foods, to combat the pervasive influence of fast-food on public health.

The reformulation of fast-food offer focuses on menu innovation but is supported by other factors such as pricing strategies and new restaurant formats, the development of digital technology, and the expansion of food delivery platforms. One key aspect of this phenomenon is the manipulation of sensory attributes to create the illusion of healthfulness.

Conclusions

This paper was designed to gain a better understanding of the perception of the psychosensory value-health relationship on reformulated fast-food offer through various means. Thus, to fulfill the main objective of the paper, five creative strategies were identified - innovation in menus, customization of options, promotions and special offers, collaborations and partnerships, exploitation of national or local specificity- which shape the context of reformulating offer and have been integrated into the research model.

Fast-food has become an integral part of modern society, with its ubiquitous presence shaping not only the diets of young people, but also their perceptions of health and psychosensory value. The research results demonstrate that reformulating fast-food offer through the creative strategies outlined can create the illusion of healthier choices among young people, ultimately perpetuating a mistaken perception of the relationship between health and psychosensory value. To produce significant changes in eating behaviors and improve health outcomes, stakeholders need to adopt a multifaceted approach that addresses both individual choice determinants and public health determinants.

Reformulating fast-food offer, along with marketing efforts, could promote healthier eating habits if interventions by health organizations and governments focus on increasing consumer awareness of health issues, as well as the perception and effectiveness of nutrition standards. The reformulation of fast-food offer should integrate the transfer of scientific and technological knowledge as sources of nutritional enrichment; to further exploit local raw materials and ingredients, traditional dishes adapted to modern requirements; to rediscover the cultural value of food, considering the social, health, and economic consequences of the current food system for young consumers.

This study has certain limitations due to the short duration of the data collection process, resulting in a small sample size, with the research relying on 104 questionnaires. Additionally, the results could have been enhanced by a comparative sensory analysis between classic and reformulated products, which would have required substantial human, financial, and material resources.

The intensive promotion of fast-food seeks to shape consumer perceptions and behaviors—an objective that is both enticing and ubiquitous; much of the previous research starts from the idea that marketing is based on emotional and cognitive associations and approaches fast-food marketing on the premise that media discourses reflect and contribute to culture (Otto, Johnston, and Baumann, 2022), recognizing that fast-food incorporates aesthetic, social, cultural, and economic dimensions (Warde, Paddock, and Whillans, 2020). The results of our study can guide future research because little is known about the effects of promoting reformulated fast-food offer on emotions and behavioral intentions (Diaz-Beltran, 2023), especially among consumers concerned about their well-being and health.

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