

Misleading health halos around fast-food consumption in India

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Abstract

The fast-food industry is one of the most widespread industries in India. The study aimed to find out the positive perceptions that consumers have around fast food and their contents and to what extent these influence their purchase decisions. This paper provides insights into the fast-food industry, their consumption rates and the health risks they pose. Frequent fast-food consumers were subjected to descriptive questionnaires and in-depth telephonic interviews. The responses were then transcribed and analysed to identify the most common perceptions the respondents possess about their food. This study found that there exists a considerable number of misconceptions about the food they consume, the way of preparation, the ingredients they possess and the calorific values of the contents. However, it was observed that taste plays a major role in determining the consumption pattern of any food item. It was also evident that awareness amongst consumers is increasing, and the percentage is likely to increase in times to come. These findings have significant implications for the fast-food industry as the change in consumer demand will impact them and they need to curate such strategies to retain the consumer base.

1. Introduction

Fast foods refer to highly processed and highly palatable foods that take less time to get cooked and can be consumed easily. The food industry is growing at 10% CAGR and contributes a considerable amount to the GDP of the country. The growth is backed by an increase in quick-service restaurants, dine-out culture and frequent changes in consumer preferences. According to WHO, 39% of adults above 18 years were overweight and 13% were obese in 2016. A clear correlation can be drawn between the growth of fast-food chains and the increase in obesity. Advertisements and PR strategies also play a significant role in increasing the popularity of fast-food chains. They help in framing perceptions around any item and play a key role in the decision-making process of a consumer. It can be inferred that most of the impressive sales figures of the popular restaurants are a result of innovative promotional strategies. There can be many factors behind the increased consumption of fast or processed foods, one of which could be biasing health halos. Health halos refer to the positive perception that a consumer develops towards an object, in this case, a food item, irrespective of its actual nutritive value. US researchers have studied that consumers highly confuse “low fat” or “healthy” with

“low calorie” without even checking for specifics of the product. Even certain healthy-sounding desserts with words like “lite” are also perceived to be healthy. Well, there are many such words or paraphrases that confuse and provoke consumers to choose any product over other healthier options. Halos are not only limited to overconsumption of calories and fat, but also certain food items are high in sodium content and are completely ignored over sugar and salt.

With the increase in the footprint of fast-food chains, there has been an uprising in competition among the players. Hence consumer retention has emerged to be a greater problem. A study concluded that repurchase intention can be influenced by certain factors such as good staff and soothing ambience. But should also include something that makes it stand out from its competitors. The survey suggested that consumer-specific requirements would help retain regular customers and maintain the footprint (Kumar Reddy *et al.*, 2018). High-end fast-food restaurants are likely to include healthier options in their menu as they expect the boom in this section. On the other hand, middle-end restaurants are unlikely to do so as healthier food mostly includes fresh raw materials, which comes with the limitation of lower shelf life and higher perishability rate

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and would require extra investment in storage (Glanz *et al.*, 2007). Most of the adolescents and young adults who prefer eating out or ordering from fast food restaurants are unlikely to estimate the correct nutritional content of a food item just by their appearance. However, if given a choice the restaurants are in denial of including the entire calorie information as it would require extra expertise and investment on their side. The study also revealed that some percentage of the audience is likely to change their orders if they are revealed about the original nutritional content of their ordered food (Yamamoto *et al.*, 2005). If we consider the international market, New York in 2008 became the first jurisdiction in the US to put a mandate on restaurant chains to include nutritional information in their menus. A study undertaken in the New York Post announcement concluded that the number of consumers looking for nutritional content on websites and menu cards has increased as compared to the preannouncement scenario. Across all types of food restaurants, the fast-food chain has the maximum engagement of consumers seeking nutritional information (Dumanovsky *et al.*, 2010). However, to ensure the success of a fast-food restaurant human resource management practices are very crucial as quick-service restaurants need to have a well-laid-out organizational structure. Retention of employees in the fast food industry requires attractive rewards and benefits to help decrease the intention to leave (Shriedeh, 2019).

Fast food is becoming a major part of the diets of young adults and children has led to the onset of health hazards like overweight and obesity. Technology at an arm's distance has made things supremely accessible and hence reduced physical activity, which has resulted in energy imbalance. However, the purchase of fast food majorly depends on the income level of the buyer. Lower-income households usually go for the cheapest available source of food without considering the nutritional content. There have been various programmes designed to address such health issues, but they lack implementation (Popkin *et al.*, 2012). Rapid urbanisation is the major cause of nutritional shift among children and young adults in developing nations that has led to an increase in obesity and overweight. This cannot however be completely blamed on the consumption of fast food, as there is involvement of other factors like prolonged hours of binge-watching/computer games and lack of physical exercise (Mistry and Puthussery, 2015). The obesity rate in India is scattered among its culture and socio-economic status. Urban populations are found to be more obese as compared to rural ones due to easier availability (Ahirwar and Mondal, 2019). Fast foods like burgers and french fries come under the category of 'Hyper palatable foods and result in fast food addiction. However, this addiction is totally different from that

caused by drug abuse and the procedure of developing the addiction is also different. Fast food addiction is caused due to frequent consumption and exposure at a very early stage. This might be the reason for higher obesity among children and young adults (Gearhardt *et al.*, 2011). Food addiction can be best measured by the Yale Food Addiction Scale for children which has been identified as a reliable tool to yield accurate results. This method takes into account addictive eating and the substance responsible for it. Hence it is a reliable measure to identify repetitive consumption of similar items (Gearhardt *et al.*, 2013). Addiction to high-sugar and high-fat savoury food items has been reported to be the highest among all the fast foods. The intensity (ps) of withdrawal symptoms on those foods is also higher than the low-sugar ones ($p < 0.05$) (Gordon, 2018). A study concluded that ultra-processed fast food is mainly consumed by people living away from home or are single dwellers, people having moderate weight and level of education do not have a considerable impact on the calorie intake (Bielemann *et al.*, 2015). Obesity is not the only monster that follows fast food consumption that haunts human health. A study conducted on the effect of fried edible oils with an emphasis on sunflower oil on human health revealed that it significantly alters sperm parameters, damages tissues and affects blood lipid profile. High-fat content foods are found to increase oxidative stress and ROS levels and decrease sperm count. It can be inferred from the findings that high-energy and high-calorie foods have negative effects on the male reproductive system as they decrease their fertility levels. Though there is a lack of study on this phenomenon, there is a possibility of using probiotics as a cure for obesity and sperm dysfunctionality. However, this requires extensive research and human trials to draw any definite conclusion (Sayiner *et al.*, 2019). Diseases resulting from the consumption of fast foods come under the category of non-communicable diseases and indicate urban school-going children under the high-risk radar (Singh *et al.*, 2006). Access to fast food outlets has also been considered an important aspect impacting human health. A study in New Zealand clears the air around this fact and concludes that the location of fast-food outlets does not necessarily influence the diet of the consumers. However, poorer access to multinational fast-food outlets rules out the tendency to be overweight (Pearce *et al.*, 2009). The chief consumer segment of fast food includes young adults in the age bracket of 15-35 years. It can be inferred from the thorough survey that the motive behind visiting a food joint in 93% of cases is especially on recommendation or during any kind of celebration. The choice of any food joint depends on ambience, location and service. The study also indicates that correct nutritional information about the food item would be an

added bonus for almost 68% of the consumers under study. The study however has a limitation of considering only a particular region in India (Goyal and Singh, 2007). The impact of food on our lives is so strong that even the sight of it can trigger some sensations throughout the body. A study was conducted to record and analyse the reaction of children to food commercials as compared to neutral commercials. The children were provided with a Visual Analog Scale (VAS) to mark the level of hunger before and after the experiment to obtain visible results. It was found that food intake by boys during a food commercial is more than during a non-food commercial as compared to the girls exposed to a similar phenomenon. There were however multiple conclusions to this behaviour, one of which points towards greater vulnerability and lower self-control of boys. Another explanation stated that girls are more concerned about socioeconomic pressure, body image and distraction during the activity which might have impacted their natural response. This study needs to be conducted under more controlled surroundings, but it could be clearly inferred that different genders have different reactions towards food commercials and hence the health impact could also be somehow correlated with this (Anschutz *et al.*, 2009). There have been various plaintiffs against fast food restaurants stating that there have been false health claims that could mislead consumers. Although several plaintiffs were able to get through the 'Pelman's Plaintiff' against McDonald's was one of a kind. It accused McDonald's of causing psychological and physical food addiction without warning the consumers to make an informed choice. Although there has been no substantial evidence against McDonald's and hence it is not liable to warn its consumers against consumption in its food outlets. Nevertheless, this must have raised an alarm of caution in the minds of the consumers about the consumption and side effects of fast foods. The increased upper hand of big players on lawsuits against them in the industry have always kept them away from controversies due to lack of proper evidence. However, the increase in health hazards among individuals exposed to fast foods is not unnoticed by national and international organizations (Grills *et al.*, 2016).

Consumers consider advertisements of food products to make purchase decisions and marketers play with that well. A study evaluated the views of consumers on disclosure-type ads which reveal nutrient information about the fast product and non-disclosure ads which reveal a certain amount of nutrient information through their ads. The result leaned towards the common fact that the majority of the consumers failed to decode the information revealed to them. However, the consumers who viewed the 'disclosure ads' could only evaluate the

product on the basis of revealed information and did not consider the other underlying facts. It can also be inferred that the background nutritional knowledge of consumers also affects their perception towards the product. High-knowledge consumers comprehended the revealed knowledge better than low-knowledge consumers. However, the study was limited to primary food shoppers of a particular geography and only referred to print media for ads. Television advertisements might have different reactions from consumers (Andrews *et al.*, 1998). Online advertisements tend to have a major impact on children consuming them. A study conducted in USA among the children and their parents stated that children are influenced by the visuals shown in the ads, especially through Facebook ad popups. They also get influenced by recommendations through social media in the peer group. Parents have admitted there have been changes in the consumption patterns of their children and a shift from healthy to unhealthy snacking (Thaichon and Quach, 2016). The brand name also influences the purchase decision of the consumer. The brand name acts as a quick evaluator of the quality of the products and can be regarded as a heuristic cue. When respondents were given two sets of products one under a known brand and the other anonymous, they were inclined towards the brand as they believed a good brand comes with good quality products (Maheswaran *et al.*, 1992). The human psyche can play a substantial role in the decision-making process of an individual. For consumer behaviour and the formation of perceptions, self-control is one of the important attributes of the human psyche. This might end up altering one's choices based on external factors like weaknesses, price and clarity on goals. Food-related impulsivity, however, results in the consumption of large portion sizes due to higher reward values associated with that item and the absence of an inhibition factor. Food-related impulsivity in obese children may result in binge eating disorder (BED) and loss-of-control-eating (LOC) which is a lower-level version of binge eating. Results of this phenomenon are different in adults and children as certain factors like mood or stress are not generally visible in children (Schag *et al.*, 2013). Perception of a product might lead to misconceptions in the mind of the consumer. Misconceptions, often referred to as 'Halos' in terms of psychology state that there are presumptions about an entity based on information available on certain attributes and those presumptions are also influenced by external factors like global evaluations of that particular entity. It was also studied that the information available may or may not be from a reliable source (Yavari *et al.*, 1993). However, it should be noted that literature has evidence of fast-food consumption and its health impact, but when it comes to the factors that affect its

consumption and the mindset of a consumer based on the informal information available that influences the purchase decision, there has been a gap. Hence this paper aims to study the thoughts that a consumer develops when exposed to a fast-food item and with limited information on it.

This research aimed to find out what are the possible health halos that are perceived by the consumers who are associated with frequent consumption of fast or processed foods in India. Although several studies have been conducted on the fast-food industry and its health impact across age groups in India and abroad, less attention has been paid to understanding the factors that influence the consumption pattern of consumers. This study aimed to discover the possible positive misconceptions that the consumer might develop around a particular fast-food item that would influence purchase behaviour, which could be considered as one of the factors. This paper aimed to decipher two main objectives keeping in frame the Indian consumers for analysis - to apprehend whether a consumer forms a positive perception about a fast-food item based on their face value with limited available information. There has been various evidence in the literature that forming perceptions around an item is a common phenomenon. A pilot study was conducted between the consumers of two very popular fast-food joints to understand the perception of the consumers regarding the calorie intake of their meals. It was found that the consumers estimated different calorie content for similar meals from two different joints. They were inclined towards a particular joint due to its marketing strategy and unique positioning (Chandon and Wansink, 2007). However, there has been a research gap in terms of the nature of the perception formed. Perceptions have the power to both uplift and downgrade a brand's image. This paper particularly analyses the responses of the consumers to find out if exposed to limited information, whether they form positive perceptions about a fast-food item. The second objective was to analyse the extent to which this perception affects the purchase behaviour of the selected population. Positive perception tends to uplift the brand image of the food item and might have a subsequent effect on the revenue. This paper attempts to capture the effect such perception has on the food choices of consumers. Literature has evidence stating that all kinds of perceptions have an impact on purchase decisions, the effect on the consumption pattern might differ when compared to other goods.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Data collection

This paper attempts to achieve its objective by

examining a sample of 83 respondents; 39 females and 44 males. The participants were able to read and write English and for those who were not so fluent it was ensured that they were comfortable to communicate verbally in Hindi or Bengali. Participants were selected randomly from platforms like Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Goodreads and word of mouth. The sample size was not very large but was large enough to ensure that the data did not become repetitive.

2.2 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part attempts to capture the demographics of the respondents to help us categorize them accordingly as mentioned in the sampling method like name, age, gender and marital status. This provided us with the essential background of the respondent which helped with the further analysis. The second part consists of a total of 11 descriptive questions out of which 2 questions were dichotomous followed by plausible explanation. The questions were designed keeping in mind the psychology of the consumers. It was very important to understand the underlying psychology of the respondents while considering a particular fast-food item. The questions started from obtaining a general perspective such as, "Do you consume fast foods?" followed by the frequency of the consumption, then the questions tried to dig deeper into the subject matter such as "choice between a branded food joint like dominos and local food joint" and choice between several food items like veg sub wrap and aloo patty burger. Questions like these would help us understand the preferences of the respondents precisely. The answers to these would help us move closer to achieving the aim of the paper.

2.3 Data analysis

The data was translated and transcribed in MS Word format. The transcribed text was then fed into NVivo 12 application for further analysis. A thematic analysis procedure was followed to analyse the data and draw conclusions. The colour-coded themes and nodes helped to understand the common perspective of the sample population briefly. This also helped to achieve the objective of the study to seek the most common positive perspectives on fast food and their implications on their purchase decision. The entire data set was coded into nine parent nodes based on the transcript and the questions asked in the questionnaire. Each transcript under the nodes was carefully examined. The word cloud was used to distinguish the most frequently used words by the respondents while filling out the questionnaire, which gave an idea about the thought curve of the respondents. This helped to conclude the point of commonality among the responses.

The respondents when asked about the side effects of fast-food consumption mostly stuck to obesity, heart diseases, cholesterol, and digestive issues, which are the most common types of side effects. There are however more complicated side effects that can permanently damage vital organs like the liver and kidney. The information which the respondents provided is all over social media and the internet which is not a reliable source. When asked if they were aware at what levels of consumption the side effects kick in, they were either unaware or were unsure about their answers. There had been no active involvement in knowing serious issues related to food consumption. Figure 2 represents the cluster analysis for perception around fast food and its effect on purchase decisions. Finally, the factors responsible for the purchase from known brands were hygiene, brand value, quality of service, certified preparation process, availability of certified ratings, quality certifications, a fixed proportion of ingredients used, less oil, free from contamination and regular inspection by authorities. For non-band purchases, the factors were ease of availability, value for price, support for local vendors, enhanced taste, fresh ingredients, and

minimal usage of preservatives. The result of the whole study suggests that consumers who frequently consume fast food do form certain positive perceptions about the food based on the appearances and information available to them from common sources or word of mouth. Due to these perceptions, it was found that there exists a positive correlation with the consumption pattern or purchase behaviour. A study on food advertisements in the USA found that advertisements for nutritionally poor and unhealthy food items deliberately include a health-related message to change the perception of the food (Castonguay *et al.*, 2013). It was also quite evident that the primary reason to consume any fast-food item was simply the taste and requirement of change from their monotonous routine. The other factors however were secondary to taste. Participants were not seen to show active interest in knowing their food well, they mostly went for easily available information and when it came to food, they went for food items that were branded for their perception of being healthy. Similarly, a study on Chinese consumers revealed that the average knowledge score of food safety and nutrition was less as compared to other scores (Luo *et al.*, 2021). They believed in



Figure 2. Cluster analysis for perception around fast food and its effect on purchase decisions.

brands due to the brand value that they presented in the market. The participants were more attracted towards items that consisted of veggies, were comparatively less fried and had a hygienic preparation background. These results were in line with the study conducted in Germany where customers simply believed that cereals advertised with 'fruit sugar' were healthier as compared to cereals just advertised with 'sugar' (Sütterlin and Siegrist, 2015). Similar to this study, a study performed as a comparison between the health quotient of items in McDonald's and Subway concluded that consumers rated Subway higher in health quotient as compared to McDonald's due to their range of salads and healthy bread, but when the actual calorie of a similarly priced meal from both the outlets was tested, it was found to be same (Chandon and Wansink, 2007). It can therefore be partially concluded that the choice of fast-food items and perception towards them are subjective, yet on close observation, it follows a pattern. However, with an increase in awareness, there might be a demand surge to know the food better when the fast-food industry might tweak its current state of existence.

4. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to determine whether there are any positive perceptions towards fast food based on its face value. Indian outlets and food joints obviously do not provide proper nutritional information on the items on their menu, apart from certain branded ones. There were several arguments put forward by the participants to choose their go-to food stop, although the decision-making was purely based on open information which has zero guarantee of authentication. However, improved awareness among people and their willingness to know what's on their plate might push the fast-food industry to bring about certain changes to retain their customers. Not only retention but educating the customers about what's on their plate is gaining immense popularity worldwide. Even when the respondents were exposed to such a situation, they reacted positively. This factor might not only change the revenue structure of the fast food industry but also aid in levelling it up from the current scenario. When the look into the other studies that were conducted in a similar genre but in different countries exposed various other aspects of the study. One of the striking differences was the willingness of the consumers to acquire knowledge about the items they consume. The food outlets that displayed more transparency in terms of their food items, gained more popularity and their percentage of customer retention.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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