Introduction

To which extent does fast food advertising affect the general consumer? Most importantly, would it benefit consumers if fast food advertising was further regulated or banned outright?

The ethics of food advertising practices has been hotly debated for multiple years. Famous authors such as Eric Schlosser—known for his novel, *Fast Food Nation*, which sparked my interest in food company morality—call out fast food chains for prioritizing puffing (or glamorizing) their products over the health and safety of the person who purchases them. Indeed, this makes sense in the short term for lining the pockets of the company's head of staff. However, one must consider that the United States—the nation most easily associated with a plethora of fast-food chains—is also home to the world's highest obesity rates and general health problems. This is particularly true in children, who generally don't know any better not to believe what's shown to them on TV. As health problems continue to rise as the years go on and more studies are conducted, the same question rings true; what can we do to prevent this as a nation? I believe the answer lies in the way that fast food is marketed to the people, and that if we really want to stop the trend of people falling ill and even dying due to foodborne illness, we must force restaurants and fast-food chains to approach marketing their products differently.

Literature Review

My research began with an article written by Khalid M. Alkharfy and published by Annals of Saudi Medicine titled *Food Advertisements: To Ban or Not to Ban?* The study's introduction opened with the big claim that "[w]e are obviously being conditioned to look at food as an entertainment" rather than for nourishment, elaborating that "it is widely accepted that exposure to food advertisements promotes over-consumption in younger children." It further

explains that "overweight children are indeed more responsive to food promotion…" and cited a study from the National Institute of Health that theorized "a ban on fast-food advertising to children would cut the US obesity rate by as much as 18%." The picture the article paints is clear—the current way that food is being promoted to kids not just in the United States, but globally (remember that this is a Saudi source), is directly linked to severe health problems for everybody. The article leans on a 2004 report from the World Health Organization, which showed that at the time, non-communicable diseases such as obesity have become an increasingly easier and more common way to die. Alkharfy outlines that food advertisements are rarely about the food we eat anymore, but rather more about the enjoyable experience we get eating the food (this is what he means by the "entertainment" comment). This makes it extremely easy to infer that the nutritional value of the food being presented has also taken a backseat—it's more about how *fun* buying "the magic 'Meal Box'" can be, as the child "unveil[s] what surprise game is hidden" within.

I was then led to a write-up on an experiment conducted by Christoper J. Ferguson, PhD, and many others, titled *Advertising Influences on Young Children's Food Choices and Parental Influence*. The three scientists involved concluded that children gravitate towards wanting to eat whatever is being presented to them on television. The trio tinkered with two factors: promoting both healthy and non-healthy foods, and letting the parents decide whether they wanted to encourage the children to eat the food or not. Shockingly, neither the healthiness of the food promoted nor the parent's approval or lack thereof made a strong impact on whether the children wanted to eat the food. The reality remained simple: whatever the child saw, the child wanted. The authors explain, "[a]lthough advertising impact on children's food choices is moderate in size, it appears resilient to parental efforts to intervene. Food advertisements directed at children

may have a small but meaningful effect on their healthy food choices." The results of this study check out—it is a well-known truth that children are impressionable, and will want to do anything that "looks cool," which is something advertisers specifically have in mind when creating adverts that target children. This gives even more context as to why Alkharfy claimed that food advertisements seemed more like entertainment than nourishment opportunities. This also disproves the claim that children *naturally* like junk food; children in this study that were presented advertisements for healthy food were just as likely to want those types of food as the children that were presented advertisements for junk food. Therefore, a potential shift in the types of food that we allow to be promoted and advertised in the media and online would have considerable and real differences in the dietary choices of the up-and-coming generations.

Finally, I reviewed an article by more than three writers titled *Television Watching, Energy Intake, and Obesity in US Children*. They personally interviewed and medically examined 4,069 children. It made no difference if they sorted the data by age, gender identity, ethnicity, income, or what have you—the trend remained that the group with the highest chance of having obesity and the lowest level of physical activity were the same group that watched the most amount of television. The study showed that "[t]he prevalence of obesity is lowest among children watching 1 or fewer hours of television a day, and highest among those watching 4 or more hours of television a day." It also revealed that among girls specifically, "television watching was positively associated with obesity…even after controlling for age, race/ethnicity, family income, weekly physical activity, and energy intake." While this study focuses more on sedentary lifestyles marked by doing nothing all day but watching television programs, it remains a relevant piece of the puzzle when we consider the advertisements that they will inevitably encounter while watching these shows. If these children are predetermined to have

problems with their health due to watching too much television, then what they actually end up seeing on the screen becomes an important cog in the machine. There is an interesting bigger question to be answered about the amount of harm that living a life marked by nothing but consuming media 24/7 may do in one's life; however, such questions are way out of the scope of this research article.