

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 Christopher 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.

Argument and Reasoning

On paper, the answer to these problems seems entirely simple. All of the problems underlined and mentioned in the research that I conducted all seemed to be tied to the things that are painted in a positive light in media. Perhaps television is more of a dated medium to focus on in the current age, but food advertisements are still common digitally—restaurants continue to shove glamorized versions of their products to the youth via online shops and interspersed throughout YouTube videos (which Pew Research revealed was watched by 90% of teens in 2023)—and the point-of-view generally remains on “the good times,” rather than the nutritional value of the products being provided. The articles I found seemed to line up with what I had already believed about this topic, especially being informed on the events that inspired *Fast Food Nation* and et cetera.

The tricky part is coming up with a solution that would appease everybody. Obviously, some will argue that the way things are today benefit the companies making the products. And, sure, that may be true in the short-term. However, when the reality is that people are falling ill and dying due to being conditioned into making poor food choices, and families worldwide are left with a poor taste in their mouth (pun intended), there might still be long term impact on the company's image and the people that will want to purchase from them again.

Regulation or arguably censorship of the advertisements may also be tricky, as it is never uncontroversial to apply regulation to an industry that has (a) never had much and (b) historically responded negatively to the few regulations made concerning it. The people that are vocally against the government stepping in and affecting the private sector also aren't necessarily working for the company either—it generally remains an unpopular idea. However, the question must be asked whether or not the reservations should be dropped when people are falling ill from one common factor under a government whose duty it is to protect those people.

Suggestions for Future Research

To summarize, the way that fast food is marketed to the average consumer has been proven time and time again to have negative impacts on everybody's lives, including children, which in some cases has even proven fatal. I'm all for government regulation to put an end to these harmful trends. The solution seems obvious, but how to get there remains unclear. Until changes are made at the legislative level, I implore the reader to exercise a lot of caution with blindly following the attitudes and items that they see in advertisements, especially those that paint the item presented in a positive light. It's also not a bad idea to deliberately lower the time spent online/in front of a television set. Not only will you see less of these obtrusive advertisements, but you will also generally live a life that feels more fulfilling to you. *Fast Food Nation* is a great book that dives incredibly deep into the weird whims of the fast food industry and just how much harm it can do from the inside-out; I definitely recommend reading this book and anything related to it.