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“How do Italian people face fast-food consumption? A customer behaviour study”

Prof. Rumen Ivaylov Pozharliev

Relatore

Valerio Lozzi - 262851

Candidato



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Introduction

Everyone faces, as intelligent living being, the crossroads of where to eat. In order to satisfy such an ancestral need, many mental processes activate. They depend on very subjective conditions, such as the time available, the means to use, the diet regimen observed, the proximity of possible options, the company around us, the effort puttable on that action and so on. In front of the combination of all these elements to evaluate, making a choice could be tougher than expected. Often happens that, when a situation requires too much decision-making phases, the solution chosen satisfies temporal and economical needs, denying the priority to what is the best overall. This reflection comes from the following sharable postulate: every day, new problems are coming, so the default ones must be processed almost automatically, in order to not lose your mind. Sounds good, it may work. Automatic management of the eating need. The best solution is by far cooking at home in advance, having a to-go lunch for the day, while preparing dinner can be managed with less pressure once came back home. Healthy and temporally sustainable, but it requires discipline and consistency. Once that habit takes off, the effort declines. In this scenario, diet regimen is respected and the problem is automatically solved. But, as the postulate says, new ones arrive. Colleagues, fiends or fiancé may feel neglected in this routine. They invite you eating out every day, obtaining a bunch of excuses and several refusals. Here is a social problem: what should be prioritized? They want to eat something fast and unexpensive, uncaring of any diet. Sometimes company must be indulged, so personal priorities end to be ignored. Fast-food restaurants were thought and realized to satisfy exactly what that group was looking for: desire of eating something that requires a small amount of time and money. Its positioning is simple, but easily solves many of the variables mentioned before. One in particular is satisfied, in a dangerous way: the effort element. Good things are never easy. What seems good in these restaurants, called quick service restaurants (QSR), is taste and convenience, fundamentally. So, as output, is served a product that generally ignores the diet element and, as consequence, healthiness. I said generally because some of these fast-food providers also satisfy the nutritional needs of consumers, but the biggest multinational companies still focus their offer on high-processed foods, rich in salt, fat and sugar. Another factor that needs to be mentioned is addiction, because that kind of food, so tasteful and relatively cheap, may trigger an uncontrolled consumption. That’s bad, but not causal. In the postulate is explicated that people look for automatically processed problems, and that’s what addiction does, in a unhealthy and irrational way.

The thesis aims to understand how do Italian people behave towards fast-food, what is their consideration of it and how they manage the scenarios mentioned before. Before the original explanatory study, in Chapter 3 and 4, I provided to display a wide overview of the topic, starting from the definition of QSR, explaining their concept and success. It was my care also to cite the Covid-19 pandemic effects on food habits, being it probably the most disruptive event of the new century on both private and social life, globally. The literature review section also deserves attention. It helps to enrich the content of the study, deepening many aspects

that reveal absolutely useful for the next chapters. Many are the topics on which those researches focus on. The convenience theme, being the most shared reason why American consumers choose fast-food instead of any other eating solution. Addiction is also developed, studying which are the internal and external drivers that move people to come up with that inclination. The role of commercials on kids’ and families’ consumption, the correlation between impulsivity and fast-food consumption, and the relevance of people’s proximity to fast-food outlets and restaurants, had all been subject of study from previous researchers.

The study conducted on Italian consumers links itself to the existent researches on consumer behaviour, enriching the existing literature of my modest footprint. The results came up from the qualitative study will be matter of analysis for future researchers who are deepening the still conflicted relationship between Italian people and fast-food, because the topic still hasn’t been examined *in toto*. Big and small companies may find this paper useful whenever they operate or are willing to operate in the Italian food sector, understanding the preferences of young and adult consumers, their requirements from a food-service and their Achilles’ heels.

I wish everyone an enjoyable reading.

Chapter 1 - “The fast-food market”

1.1 QSR: a first approach

QSR is a food service model that lived such an unrivalled growth in the industry since the second half of the previous century. The best way to start the paper is by giving a first definition. QSR (Quick Services Restaurant) is a model of restaurant that serves meals prepared with a special focus on two key words: efficiency and uniformity. These two are fundamental features in this type of service in order to guarantee success. Returning to the definition, the meals offered are usually inexpensive, characterized by an easy cooking chain and packaged so they can be eaten in every way the customer pleases: *in loco*, on the go, take-away and either delivered at home¹. What kind of food can be purchased QSRs? Most commonly burgers, wraps, sandwiches, ice creams, pizzas, but also salads or bowls. The only limits are imagination and suitability to the two previous fundamentals. Fast-food is the product sold by quick service restaurants, being it the direct consequence of this kind of restaurants’ *modus operandi*. The market size is constantly growing. Looking at the Table 1.1 below, it’s possible to see the situation in U.S. by instance.

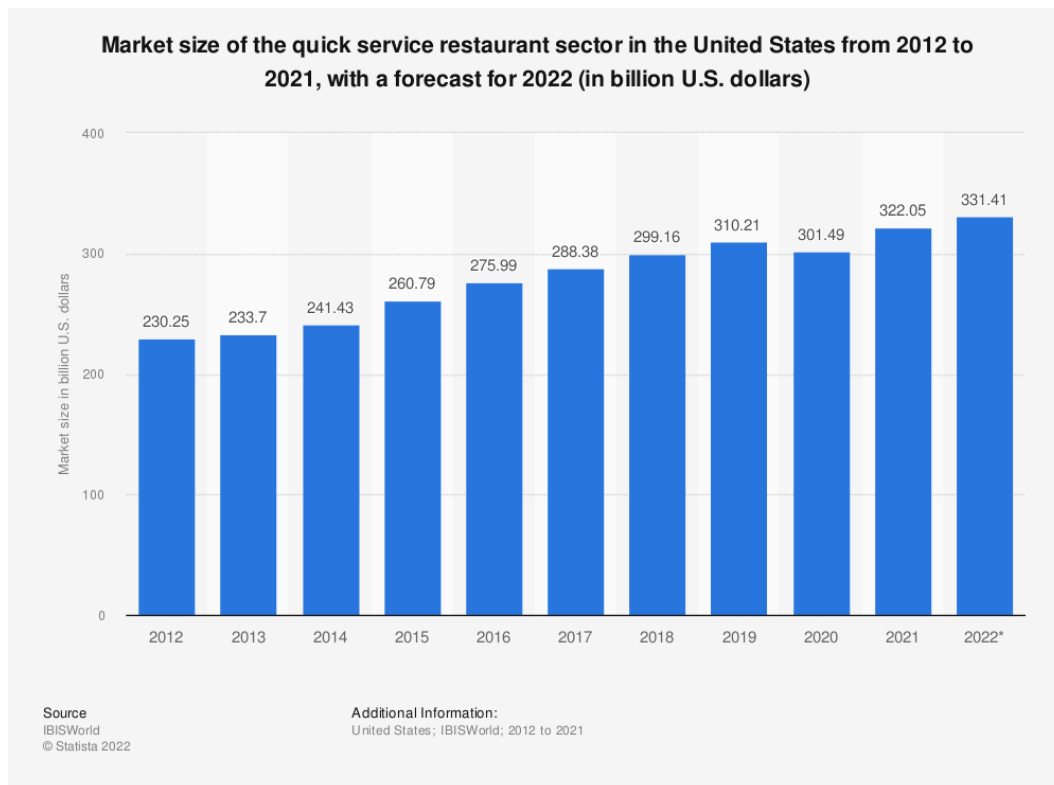


Table 1.1 Data reported by Statista Research Department, November 14, 2022 ².

¹ [QSR meaning: what is a quick service restaurant? | Flipdish](#)

² [Fast food restaurant sector market size US 2022 | Statista](#)

The graph is telling by itself. The SARS COV-19 pandemic had a significant and, unfortunately, a negative impact on the growing numbers. In 2020, the restaurant industry in the U.S. was often restricted to take-out orders or delivery only, as indoor dining was not possible due to social distancing orders enacted to control the spread of the virus. While the decline in U.S. restaurant traffic due to COVID-19 was felt most strongly by the full service restaurant (FSR) industry, the fast food industry experienced a nearly 20 percent decline in restaurant traffic that year³.

The job market was affected by the strong environmental events too. According to the precious Statista researches, the number of employees in the QSR franchise industry suffered of a consistent decrease (8.7 percent) in 2020 compared to the previous year (from 3.88 million to 3.54). In 2022 the employment in the sector is estimated at 3.8 million³.

The size of the industry is important, as it’s important the job demand generated by it.

1.2 QSR targeting

In the QSR market there is a wide branch specialized in selling meals also commonly known as junk food. This category of food is characterized by a significant presence of salt, sugar, edible colourings and thickeners, refined fats and carbohydrates; everything mixed together with low quality raw materials. People love these flavours, that smells, that service: it’s suitable to the digital fast life concept of nowadays. “Fast food is popular because it's convenient, it's cheap, and it tastes good. The real cost of eating fast food is never written on the menu.” said the American journalist, Eric Schlosser. He has a point.

Quick service restaurants seek, by their nature, the largest consumer base possible. It’s a category of food service oriented to every kind of target, even more than a FSR (full-service restaurant). So, targeting has no limits. From the youngest to the eldest, focusing on every segment with a specific and effective communication system. Maybe the most fit-focused will avoid this kind of food, but, even in this segment, the idea of diet indulgence is becoming established. Children who watch commercials on TV, scholars who want to take a break for a snack, university students who struggle in cooking but still have a limited budget, workers who need a fast meal in a restricted lunch break. Fast-food is what quick service restaurant sell.

³ [Franchise industry: QSR establishments US 2022 | Statista](#)

1.3 QSR pricing strategy

As previously said, standardization of the menus is the key to reach a rapid service. In this way, quick restaurant X can maximize the quantity of sold meals, minimizing the food related variable costs and, so, can focus on a very competitive pricing strategy. Indeed, this type of business relies on the frequency of footfall.

Price communicates positioning. QSR’s positioning is to be affordable, reliable and consistent. In order to make the medium bill value rise, a typical technique is to use bundle pricing strategy. Price bundling (product bundling or product-bundle pricing) combines two or more products to sell them at a lower price than if the same products were sold individually. This method generates positive results when the service provider offers complementary products and the consumer chooses to purchase two or more of them together. Two goods are complementary when one adds value to the other (the demand elasticity is cross negative). Aware of that, it’s almost intuitive the utility of this pricing strategy. The customer visits a store to buy a single product or service and he finds himself to have purchased way more than one because the bundling looked convenient. While the client experiences the benefits generated by this apparent saving, the company can benefit of economies of scale, low inventory risks and brand loyalty (related to the counterpart).

One of the most iconic examples is the way of charging a menu compared to the way of charging the single elements. Opening the McDonald’s website (today it’s August 26, 2023), and, have accepted all the cookies, it’s obvious the application of this marketing strategy. The main page show exactly what I was expecting, even if I haven’t visited this site in the last year.

“Menu” and “Quanto è grande la tua fame?” (“How large is your hunger?”)⁴. A few words, but very meaningful. The message communicated cannot be clearer: we serve meals composed by two or three products to satisfy your hunger (because you ARE hungry!). A small package of French fries, a bigger one, a Big Mac, a large Coke, a smaller one and a chicken salad (from left to right). The main page continues showing off all the twenty available menus (excluding size differentiation). The single burgers, sides or beverage are obviously available, clicking on that small writing on the left “I nostri prodotti” (“our products”). But the time a hungry consumer notices that greyish button, he has already added a large burger menu with fries and Coke to his cart. It’s marketing; and it works so well.

⁴ [Benvenuto su McDonald’s Italia | McDonald’s Italia \(mcdonalds.it\)](https://www.mcdonalds.it)

1.4 QSR common features

Summing up what was said previously, it’s possible to identify six common features among the majority of QSR. Here they are in a slimmer way:

1. Menus are simple. That means a high level of standardization in the cooking chain with a marginal possibility for personal customization. It’s all aimed to efficiency and uniformity. Customization can be found during the phase of composition of the menu chosen, without turning the original set upside-down.
2. The price point is low. The value offered by this type of companies is strongly focused on money, keeping production costs down and maximizing the number of customers served
3. Table service is usually absent. The large part of the staff works behind the cashier’s desk and in the kitchen. Consumers are generally supposed to wait a small amount of time before retiring their order at the counter. This is another factor for the low costs and prices as a consequence.
4. Limited in site dining. A well prepared QSR has different serving channels, such as drive-thru and delivery, added to the more classic take away. That’s the reason why dining rooms are often not so large and finely decorated.
5. Quality consistency. QSR aim to offer the same experience whatever store the customer chooses to walk into. That’s a significant feature in terms of brand image and brand loyalty. If a customer enjoys the experience in the restaurant X several times, the brand association to that perceived quality will be always stronger and easier. All these factors are crucial in the decision-making process.
6. Opening time. Being the target very heterogeneous, it’s important to be as reachable as possible (in terms of time and space). QSR are known for being open till late, guaranteeing their presence to all the potential customers in time slots when the competition is far weaker¹.

1.5 Covid-19 pandemic as a powerful ally for junk food consumption

Environment may be the most critical factor while talking about markets and businesses. Crisis, booms or simple trends happen as a function of the environmental conditions. Technology, socio-culture, geo-politics, global economics evolution, global wealth and so on: these factors have an indirect, but still consistent, effect on whatever organization’s welfare and performances. QSR’s sector does not make any exception, but it’s important to study the bigger picture to deeply understand whether the last pandemic wave have had a disruptive effect or maybe a more contained one. The sample used is the U.S. situation.

The first step is taking under analysis the numbers: they never lie. As previously reported, Table 1.1 shows a clear fall (around 9 billion of dollars compared to the previous year) in terms of market size, but that is nearly obvious. This negative walk is simultaneous to the decrease of QSR establishments. 196.764 were estimated in 2019, but only 183.543 (93,28%) resisted to the first pandemic wave, before this number started to rise again reaching in 2023 the pre-pandemic levels³.

People are anxious to go out, for any reason. In these singular circumstances, services’ companies must reach their customers in their houses, in order to maintain their level of demand stable and, on the other hand, to reinforce brand loyalty and reputation. In-loco consumption, in 2020, was minimized, in according to people anxiety and government dispositions. This socio-law mix was fatal for a particular sector: food-services. Digital menus and delivery started to be essential to make the customer feel safer from contamination. QSRs, from this point of view are in advantage if compared to traditional FSRs. As seen in the previous paragraph, the processes of FF (fast-food) restaurants are more versatile and this specific type of food services does not rely so much on located consumption. Having a higher number of POS (Points of Sale) than a classic restaurant, their business was already oriented to reaching clients in other ways, such as delivery or drive-thru. Due to the more flexible approach, visits in QSRs declined of 17% between 2020 Q1 and Q2, while visits in FSRs harshly fell of 47% in the same period⁵.

The impactful lifestyle changing can also be noticed from the people’s diet point of view. Fast-food kept his strength despite the global health warning, competition’s pressure reduced and distribution was further innovated. The true triggers that led people to compromise the quality of their diet were then circumstances, but most of all stress and anxiety. These emotions twisted eating habits during the pandemic. For instance, acute stress can cause loss of appetite which might lead to undereating, while chronic stress might cause an increase of preference for palatable foods, which are high in sugar and fat⁶. Recent research, published in January 2022 on “Nutrients”, analysed the rise of unhealthy food consumption among U.S. people. The early phase was disruptive: half of the participants reported higher quantity of fatty or sugared snacks and desserts eaten, while a third reported to have rose the number of sugar-sweetened beverages. Young adults and lower-income adults had been the most sensible categories⁷. It’s not casual that these are two consistent segments of fast-food targeting (as reported low price point among the main QSRs’ feature). These dietary changes could impact health in different points. Obesity is concerning (still a central issue in U.S. and not only), but also diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and metabolic syndromes are concrete menaces. Other

⁵ [COVID-19: decline in restaurant traffic US 2020 | Statista](#)

⁶ Gakidou, E.; Afshin, A.; Abajobir, A.A.; Abate, K.H.; Abbafati, C.; Abbas, K.M.; Abd-Allah, F.; Abdulle, A.M.; Abera, S.F.; Aboyans, V.; et al. (2017) “Global, regional, and national comparative risk assessment of 84 behavioural, environmental and occupational, and metabolic risks or clusters of risks, 1990-2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016”. *The Lancet*, 390(10100), p.1345-1422.

⁷ Partridge, S.R.; Gibson, A.A.; Roy, R.; Malloy, J.A.; Raeside, R.; Jia, S.S.; Singleton, A.C.; Mandoh, M.; Todd, A.R.; Wang, T.; et al. (2020). “Junk Food on Demand: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of the Nutritional Quality of Popular Online Food Delivery Outlets in Australia and New Zealand”. *Nutrients*, 12(3107), p.1-16.

consequences may be depression, anxiety and productivity loss, due to the insufficient amount of nutrients deriving from an unbalanced diet regimen.

Chapter 2 - “Literature review about consumption drivers”

This second chapter is going to display a wide and multisided literature overview about the main drivers of fast-food consumption in different countries. This section aims to define the results of the past researches about the topic, in order to have a complete database of key terms of comparison, affinity and divergence with the study conducted on an Italian sample in the next chapter. This part is crucial to unmask the destination where fast-food commercials, pricing strategies and hedonistic sensations lead: addiction. This condition will play a key role in the interpretation of the following paragraphs and it will also be deepened in the personally conducted research. Contents of the literature fundamentals are reported below.

The starting paragraph of the chapter, “Convenience food: time or money saving”, has the specific intent to display the ambiguous meaning of convenience. With the use of a wide time spread literature, it’s possible to centre the objective, also exploring the evolution of consumers during the last decades.

“Fast-food consumption and anti-consumption behaviour” (Paragraph 2.2) is a key content in this chapter. It concentrates the major part of the known fast-food eating drivers, summing them up in five hypotheses based on the most shared literature about customer behaviour. Hypotheses verified in quantitative research conducted on a generation Y sample in Pakistan.

The paper reported in Paragraph 2.3, was published in 2011 and finds, successfully, a positive correlation between children’s exposure to specific FF advertisement and number of the families’ visits to the restaurant. Another object of focus is toy collecting, a child-directed marketing idea that seems to have a mediating effect on the visit frequency. This study inspects the effectivity of FF brands’ commercial communication. This element is part of the second stage, the information research one, of the customer journey model⁸.

“Impulsivity and fast-food consumption: a cross sectional study among working adults” (Paragraph 2.4) contains an interesting question: is junk food related to impulsive behaviour? The decision-making process remains a mystery under certain aspects, so the literature section about impulsivity and eating habits is supported by quantitative research conducted on U.S.

⁸ Kotler, P., Keller, K. L., Chernev, A., Ancarani, F., Costabile, M., (2022): Marketing Management, 16th edition, p.83.

adults. The method used to translate such a dark behaviour in statistical data is in accordance with the “delay discounting” approach, which gives to the research an additional appeal.

The chapter ends with a study about a possible correlation between the presence/density of fast-food outlets and supermarket stores with people decisions about where and what to eat. As displayed in the introductory section, literature is divided about the thesis. The research reported shows some types of influence, but the heterogeneity of the samples made things difficult to be clearly defined.

2.1 Convenience food: time or money saving?

According to a survey conducted in 2014 on 400 U.S. adults, 67% of the participants declared “convenience” as the main reason for choosing FF restaurant⁹. It’s important to deeply understand what people mean with this term and which side of convenience is weighted more during the decision-making process. A recent paper, published on *Appetite* in 2016, had tried to sum up the etymological and socio-cultural meaning of “convenience food”. This article was part of a greater project on Food, Convenience and Sustainability (FOCAS), aiming to understand how this food category is defined by consumers and how its use relates to consumer understandings of healthy eating and environmental sustainability.

2.1.1 Is convenience food only related to its lower healthiness?

Convenience seems to include a wide variety of processed and semi-processed food, frequently contrasted with fresh foods using raw ingredients¹⁰. This definition focuses on food composition and treatment, generating meals usually regarded as among the least healthy and most unsustainable of dietary options in terms of their low nutritional value, extravagant packaging and heavily relying on imported ingredients. Even though, a ready-to-eat salad may be considered as convenience food, still being generally composed by raw vegetables. So, convenience relates more to the quality of being ready and easy to consume. The discussion continues in the next paragraph.

2.1.2 Laziness, social anxiety or simply lack of effort?

Grunert acknowledges that convenience is not a defined concept, expanding its meaning to the concept of effortlessness. For him, this characteristic usually involves making something easier, saving time or mental effort at various phases of meal preparation including planning, preparation, eating and cleaning up afterwards¹¹. This interpretation follows the ancient meaning of the word, associated to laziness, immorality and unhealthfulness. So, convenience

⁹ [Reasons for eating fast food U.S. 2014 | Statista](#)

¹⁰ Freidberg, S. (2009). “Fresh. A perishable history”. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

¹¹ Grunert, K. G. *Conveniencemad [convenience food]*, (2003). In L. Holm, & S. T. Kristensen, (2012). “Mad, Mennesker og Måltider”. Copenhagen: Munksgaard. 2nd edition.

looks like a modern tendency of preferring what is easier rather than what is more valuable (a similar contraposition emerges also in Paragraph 2.4 about impulsive choices).

Marketing is seen as a responsible about increasing the need for convenience facing the concept of time-scarcity, suggesting people to prioritize work or social situations instead of having a well-made meal. The continuous use of words like “now”, “fast”, “ready”, etc has a considerable impact on the consumers perception. People are almost brought to use automatized and routinary decision processes, avoiding to consider all the possible implication of a “convenient diet regimen”. Warde, Shove, and Southerton, in their paper presented to the European Science Foundation summer school on sustainable consumption, also suggest that the advertising of convenience may make people more conscious of the passing of time, its practical irreversibility, its value to those who see life in terms of self-development and the kind of individualism that sees mortality as the end of meaning¹².

2.2 Fast-food consumption and anti-consumption behaviours

This important paragraph reports a wide literature overview about the main drivers that lead consumers to develop a true addiction for fast-food. Several are the consequences and one of them is coming up with an anti-consumption tendency, but it’s important to proceed with order to clearly understand the various content of this section. The paragraph ends with a study on a Pakistani sample which confirms the theoretical fundamentals exposed.

2.2.1 Introduction

The growing trend of fast-food consumption has emerged among the youth. Health practitioners indicate that the recent rise in obesity is caused by modern eating and drinking habits and, particularly, by this unhealthy diet. The advent of the modern, fast-paced lifestyle stimulates binge eating of convenient food options, which generates a dependence on and addiction to these. Additionally, fast-food overconsumption has caused an increase of heart disease cases, which has triggered global attention. Indeed, a recent WHO report indicates that obesity is a major risk factor for chronic diseases, which can be reduced significantly through changes in consumption and dietary patterns¹³.

Moreover, food addiction is being catalysed by the abundance of food adverts that motivate unhealthy consumption habits, resulting in the development of various eating disorders and harmful food consumption behaviours¹⁴. Pursuing the intent to increase consumption and promote sales, advertisers have often led consumers to addictive behaviour. What is meant with “addictive behaviour”? Addiction can be defined as the excessive physical or

¹²Warde, A., Shove, E., & Southerton, D. (1998). Convenience, schedules and sustainability. Paper presented to the European Science Foundation Conference, Lancaster University.

¹³ [Obesity causes cancer and is major determinant of disability and death, warns new WHO report](#)

¹⁴Contini, C., Boncinelli, F., Gerini, F., Scozzafava, G., & Casini, L. (2018). “Investigating the role of personal and context-related factors in convenience foods consumption”. *Appetite*, 126, p.26–35.

psychological dependence on a substance, brand or activity¹⁵. Something dangerous, the most might think, but companies, specifically those operating in fast-food sector, seem to manipulate this sick tendency to obtain the maximum level of appeal on customers.

2.2.2 Five Hypothesis model about addiction and anti-consumption drivers

Hypothesis 1: “Consumers’ opinion regarding fast-food is positively related to their addictive consumption behaviour”.

Addiction is largely linked to individual impulse and personal influencing characteristics especially among young consumers¹⁶. Indeed, food addiction could be considered a pathological and compulsive disorder in which consumer experience and strong hedonistic needs and itches play a major role.

Hypothesis 2: “Socio-cultural factors regarding fast-food are positively associated with addictive consumption behaviour”.

Research reveals that consumers who share similar sociocultural backgrounds and values also generate collective behaviours¹⁷. These values shape personal perceptions and convictions, inducing addictive inclinations towards the specific product or brand, which will gain a sort of artificial consumer’s loyalty and advocacy.

Hypothesis 3 “Advertising practices in relation to fast-food are positively associated with addictive consumption behaviour.”

Generally, advertising is utilized by companies to encourage purchases and build brand loyalty¹⁸. This is aimed to increase consumer familiarity with the relative brand, which consequently incites addictive consumption and tendencies¹⁹. Fast-food companies also greatly employ advertising channels to induce consumption and build sustainable relationships with consumers. Studies indicate that exposure to advertising is one of the main

¹⁵ Mrad, M., & Cui, C. (2017). “Brand addiction: Conceptualization and scale development”. *European Journal of Marketing*, 51, p.21.

¹⁶ Khalid, H., Nawaz, R. L., & Zahid, M. (2019). “Exploring inside the box: A cross-cultural examination of stimuli affecting fast food addiction”. *British Food Journal*, 121(1), p. 6–21.

¹⁷ Shahzad, F., Khattak, J. K., Khattak, M. J., & Shahzad, F. (2015). “Impact of consumer socialization on soft drink consumption and the mediating role of consumer generational behaviour”. *British Food Journal*, 117(3), p.1205-1222.

¹⁸ Eshghi, A., Sarkar, J. G., & Sarkar, A. (2017). “Impact of online advertising on adolescent’s brand attitudes”. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 35(6), p.706–723.

¹⁹ Shahzad, F., Bilal, M., Xiao, J., & Yousaf, T. (2019). “Impact of smartphone brand experience on brand equity: With the mediation effect of hedonic emotions, utilitarian emotions, and brand personality”. *Journal of Islamic Marketing*, 10(2), p.440-464.

influencers regarding fast-food consumption, especially in the case of young consumers, as deepened in the specific paragraph.

Hypothesis 4 “Fast-food addiction has a positive effect on anti-consumption behaviour.”

Against logic, anti-consumption behaviours can also be developed from eating unhealthy foods. Research reveals that excessive consumption of fast-food impacts on generating negative emotions, such as anxiety and guilt. These negative emotions disrupt consumer attitudes and create feelings of disenchantment and disengagement with the given brand or product²⁰. This in turn leads the consumer to “leave the shameful behaviour behind” and disengage from these actions, displaying a sense of control and power²¹. Anti-consumption can be defined as a form of “resistance that is both a consumer activity and an attitude”²². Anti-consumption can occur due to: personal motives and addictive tendencies, negative experiences with the brand or product, social and environmental concerns and socio-political activism.

Hypothesis 5 “CSR moderates the relationship between fast-food addiction and anti-consumption behaviour.”

CSR refers to an individual's conscious choice to make consumption decisions based on individual moral beliefs. It can be also explained as the “application of instrumental, relational, and moral logic by an individual, group, and corporate and institutional agents seeking to influence a broad range of consumer-oriented responsibilities”²³. CSR not only focuses on avoiding to harm society, but also on acting proactively for the collective social benefit in all stages and aspects of consumption^{24,25}.

2.2.3 Quantitative research on Pakistan’s generation Y

This study applies a quantitative approach in order to esteem if fast-food addiction drives anti-consumption and how. The study's target population is Generation Y individuals, composed by those born between the years 1977 and 1994, characterized by an increased use of and

²⁰Tore, M. S., & Heinonen, K. (2013). “Diagnosing service brand strength: Customer-dominant brand relationship mapping”. *Journal of Service Management*, 24(5), p.502–519.

²¹Suarez, M. C. (2014). “Meanings of consumption and abandonment: Understanding smoking cessation symbolism”. *BAR-Brazilian Administration Review*, 11(2), p.210–227.

²²Cherrier, H. (2009). “Anti-consumption discourses and consumer-resistant identities. *Journal of Business Research*”, 62(2), p.181-190.

²³Eteokleous, P. P., Leonidou, L. C., & Katsikeas, C. S. (2016). “Corporate social responsibility in international marketing: Review, assessment, and future research”. *International Marketing Review*, 33(4), p.580–624.

²⁴Baron, P. (2013). “The root and responsibility model: A framework for ethical consumption”. *Kybernetes*, 42(9,10), p.1325–1337.

²⁵Nicola Sneddon, J., Soutar, G., & Ann Lee, J. (2014). “Exploring wool apparel consumers’ ethical concerns and preferences”. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 18(2), p.169–186..

familiarity with modern technology and media channels when compared to older generations. Indeed, they are considered as well educated and brand conscious, consumption oriented, highly involved in purchases and concerned with the overall impact of their purchase decisions on both their individual well-being and social welfare²⁶. Accordingly, a total of 800 questionnaires were distributed across university students within the five most urbanized cities of Pakistan.²⁷

Results highlight the fact that both personal and sociocultural factors affect consumer fast-food addiction (both are significantly linked to fast-food addiction), confirming Hypothesis 1 and 2.

Moreover, the study highlights the positive impact advertising has on fast-food consumption and addiction (significance link). In fact, exposure to advertisements and promotions emerges as influencing on consumer perception of fast-food, whereby frequent exposure to the same enhances consumer inclination to purchase fast-food. Hypothesis 3 is confirmed too.

Again, fast-food addiction showed a significant positive influence on anti-consumption behaviour, thus confirming Hypothesis 4.

The values of the moderated indirect and direct effects of CSR in influencing anti-consumption emerge too. Low and medium levels of CSR have a significant positive indirect effect. The conditional indirect effect is positive, but declines as the CSR increases. Hypothesis of a mediating role of CSR can also be considered as confirmed.

2.3 The role of commercial television exposure on families

2.3.1 Introduction to the topic and objectives

Third hypothesis of Paragraph 2.2 comes back under observation, this time specifically about results on the youngest consumers. The kids' meal is a fast-food combination meal tailored to children. Most kids' meals come in colourful bags or cardboard boxes with images of activities or games on the bag or box and a toy inside. Some fast-food corporations considered crucial the children customers' target, owing to the success of the kids' meals²⁸. Their effectiveness has been appointed to the fact that the patronage of youngsters often implies the patronage of a family and to the toys' allure, which often are in collectible series²⁹. In 2006,

²⁶ Lazarevic, V. (2012). “Encouraging brand loyalty in fickle generation Y consumers”. *Young Consumers*, 13(1), p.45–61.

²⁷ Farah MF, Shahzad MF. (2020). “Fast-food addiction and anti-consumption behaviour: The moderating role of consumer social responsibility”. *Int J Consum Stud.*, 44, p.379–392.

²⁸ Bishop, Pete (20 March 1990). "Fast food meals for kids come under fire", *The Telegraph*, p.29

²⁹ Rector R, Sheffield R. (2011). “Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox: what is Poverty in the United States today”, *The Heritage Foundation*.

fast-food corporations spent \$360 million for toys in kids' meals, which numbered over 1.2 billion³⁰.

The objective is to assess the associations between children's exposure to television (TV) networks that aired child-directed advertisements for children's fast-food meals with the collection of fast-food meal toy premiums and frequency of family visits to those restaurants³⁰.

Cartoon Network, Disney, Nickelodeon and Nicktoons are cable-supported TV networks directed to preschoolers and young children. Those 4 network channels are part of paid cable or satellite TV subscriptions in the US, and, during 2009-2010, 79% of all child-directed fast-food ads were aired on those 4 networks.

2.3.2 Research sample and questions

Of the 217 eligible parents (identified from medical records at a rural New England hospital), the final sample counted 100 children and one of their parents or guardians. Children viewed TV advertisements for fast-food meals and were interviewed, while parents completed a questionnaire. All the study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Dartmouth College.

- Parents reported how often their child watched TV over those 4 networks on a Likert scale (never, <1 time per month, 1-3 times a month, 1-6 times a week, every day).
- Study measures were specific to the 2 fast-food restaurants that were the primary participants in child-directed TV advertising at the time the study was completed. In separate questions, parents reported how often in a typical month they ate at a McDonald's or Burger King restaurant (never, <1 time a month, 1-3 times a month, 1-6 times a week, every day).
- Parents were also asked to report whether their child collected toys or not.
- Parents reported also on child race/ethnicity, parental education, household income, and health insurance status (in order to create covariances).

2.3.4 Conclusions

What comes to light from this research confirms the successful reaching of the objective. The more children viewed commercial TV that presented child-directed meal advertising, the greater was the likelihood of the relative family for visiting fast-food restaurants. There is a coefficient of 2.84 related to the family likelihood every time 1 point is added to child's exposure to commercials on TV.

The other objective was to find the correlation between advertisings and the toy purchasing. Even in this case, positive results emerge. The mean commercial TV scores were greater

³⁰ Jennifer A. Emond, Amy M. Bernhardt, Diane Gilbert-Diamond, Zhigang Li, James D. Sargent. (2016). “Commercial Television Exposure, Fast Food Toy Collecting, and Family Visits to Fast Food Restaurants among Families Living in Rural Communities”, *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 168, p.158-163.

among those who collected toys compared with those who did not indeed. The associations are likely reciprocal. More frequent visits to the given fast-food restaurants led to more toys received by the child, which consequently increases a child's desire for coming back to the select fast-food restaurants. A sort of circular addictive path which has brand loyalty as natural, but maybe unwanted, consequence. The role of toy collection resulted as “mediating” in relation to the number of visits. This means a weaker relevance in the studied correlation, if compared to the influence of child-directed meal advertising.

2.3.5 Toys premium in decline

In the last decade, the youngsters’ inclination to this kind of meal has declined mainly for two reasons. The first one is the rising of sensibilization about health-related topics, still being central the problem of obesity; between 1975 and 2016, the prevalence of obesity and overweight amongst children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 19 worldwide increased from 4 to 18%^{31,32}, alongside the intake of ultra-processed foods, elevating short- and long-term risks to health, including excess body mass and obesity, mortality, and the development of noncommunicable diseases^{33,34}.

The second reason is strictly related to youngsters’ way to play and entertain themselves. In the article “Kids’ meal orders decline as restaurants offer more healthful choices” by Joyce Smith, the exponential spread of videogames and media contents influenced the young target segment, becoming less interested in physical toys³⁵.

2.4 Impulsivity and fast-food consumption

2.4.1 Research subjects, impulsivity and “delay discounting”

As seen in Paragraph 2.2, fast-food consumption is drove by both personal and environmental elements. The focus of this research is set on how much people’s inclination to impulsivity has a correlation with fast-food consumption. The secondary objective is to find the motives which drive adults to choose fast-food for dining.

³¹ [Obesity and overweight \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int)

³² Marino M, Puppo F, Del Bo’ C, Vinelli V, Riso P, Porrini M, et al. (2021). “A systematic review of worldwide consumption of ultra-processed foods: Findings and criticisms”. *Nutrients*, 13 (2778).

³³ Polsky J, Moubarac J-C, Garriguet D. (2020). “Consumption of ultra-processed foods in Canada”. *Statistics Canada – Health reports*, 31(11).

³⁴ Chang K, Khandpur N, Neri D, Touvier M, Huybrechts I, Millett C, et al. (2021). “Association between childhood consumption of ultra-processed food and adiposity trajectories in the Avon Longitudinal Study of parents and children birth cohort”. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 175(9).

³⁵ Joyce Smith, (June, 27, 2012). “Kids’ meal order decline as restaurants offer more healthful choices”, *The Kansas City Star*.

What does impulsivity mean? It’s the action that reflects short-sightedness, prioritizing the immediate advantage and ignoring the mid-long-term consequences. Individuals who have this type of inclination, tend to prefer highly palatable and readily available food rather than cooking their own meal³⁶. For instance, the immediate reward in this case is the pleasurable taste and the minimum effort made to eat, but this behaviour leads people on an inconvenient path in the long-term perspective, helping diseases like obesity or diabetes to appear. Impulsivity has been examined in regard to several negative health behaviours and has been found to be greater in smokers, alcohol abusers, and illicit drug users compared with controls. The discipline of behavioural economics offers a way to characterize an individual’s degree of impulsivity by using the “delay discounting” concept. Delay discounting is the theory according to which individuals devalue (discount) the future to varying factors, depending on how far into the future people receive rewards, incorporating the concepts of both time and value³⁷. Being the literature not so consistent about the correlation between impulsivity and unhealthy food consumption, this research was made on middle-age employed adults who live in areas characterized by high rates of obesity and diabetes. Have made this brief foreword, in the following paragraph are displayed the methods used in order to translate impulse behaviours in statistical data.

2.4.2 Sample, questions and methods: how to measure impulsivity

The analysis sample is composed by 478 employees (of a university in the southern eastern United States) who completed a cross-sectional online survey (the only criterion was age > 19 years old). Auburn University’s Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided informed consent electronically. Questions are directly reported in “”.³⁸

First questions are aimed to divide the sample in fast-food consumers or not consumers. “During the past 7 days, how many meals did you get that were prepared away from home in locations such as restaurants, fast-food places, grocery stores, cafeterias, or from vending machines?” Then, “How many of those meals did you get from a fast-food or pizza place?” was asked in order to measure frequency of fast-food consumption. Reasons for eating fast-food were organized using questions such as: “Do you buy food from fast-food or pizza places because it is more convenient than cooking at home?” Similar questions were asked related to cost, nutrition, taste, and social aspect of buying food from fast-food or pizza restaurants.

It’s crucial now to understand how was possible to translate a psychological trait in a measurable language. Understood the idea of “delay discounting”, explained in the previous

³⁶ Appelhans BM, Waring ME, Schneider KL, et al. (2012). “Delay discounting and intake of ready-to-eat and away-from-home foods in overweight and obese women”. *Appetite*, 59(2), p.576-584.

³⁷ Doyle, J. (2013). “Survey of time preference, delay discounting models”. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 8(2), p.116-135.

³⁸ Kimberly B. Garza, Meng Ding, Justin K. Owensby, Claire A. Zizza, (2016). “Impulsivity and Fast-Food Consumption: A Cross-Sectional Study among Working Adults”, *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 116(1), p.61-68.

paragraph, the subjects had to choose between two options about money at varying values and delays³⁹⁴⁰:

“Would you prefer \$500 now, or \$1,000 (X days/ weeks/months/years) from now?” Seven delays were used, which included 1 day, 1 week, 1 month, 6 months, 1 year, 5 years, and 25 years. If a participant chose \$1,000 one day from now over \$500 now, the subsequent question would be: “Would you prefer \$750 now or \$1,000 one day from now?” Alternatively, if the participant’s choice in the first question was \$500 now, the sequent question would be: “Would you prefer \$250 now or \$1,000 one day from now?”

This adjusting algorithm was functional to find the subjects’ point of indifference between getting the X amount of money now rather than \$1000 later. Indifference points for each delay were then used to calculate the area under the delay discounting curve (AUC). Normalized AUC values are indirectly related to impulsivity. It means that with lower AUC values represent greater impulsivity, while higher AUC values represent weaker impulsivity.

Under a demographic point of view, participants were asked to select their sex, age, marital status, education level, and total annual household income were assessed. Body mass index was catalogized in four self-reported categories: underweight, healthy weight, overweight and obese.

2.4.3 Conclusion and considerations

It’s possible to see some correlations between demographic variables and FF consumption. Males reported a greater inclination to fast-food consumption compared with females. Fast-food consumption was greater in participants with low education level and lower in those with a graduate or professional degree. People who were at a healthy weight reported less fast-food consumption compared with those who were obese. Marital status, household income, and age did not seem to be linked with fast-food consumption.

The most shared rational reason for choosing to eat in a QSR instead of cooking at home was “conveniency”, strictly meant under a financial and timing point of view. Another driver confirmed was the socialization aspect, due to the informal nature of the place. Food tastiness also was mentioned several times, underlining the addictive nature of those high-fat, high-carbohydrates and ultra processed ingredients. If a FFR’s food offer isn’t satisfying, customers generally struggle to give it a second chance. A bad meal offered means a not coming back consumer. Not only. Most of the clients, being central the social feature of this kind of places, use to eat together. In these circumstances, WOM (word of mouth) may play a tricky role. If someone’s experience is told to the friends’ or to the colleagues’ group, the equation wouldn’t be “single insufficient service, single client lost” anymore, but “single insufficient service, multiple potential clients lost”. That’s a point that success-seekers companies must pay

³⁹Chapman GB, Elstein AS. (1995). “Valuing the future: temporal discounting of health and money”. *Med Decis Making*, 15(4), p.373-386.

⁴⁰ Lagorio, C. H., & Madden, G. J. (2005). “Delay discounting of real and hypothetical rewards III: Steady-state assessments, forced-choice trials, and all real rewards”. *Behavioural Processes*, 69(2), p.173-187.

attention to. Another factor that adds value to the previous statement is the fact that competition in this particular sector is suffocating. The constantly growing demand, also deserved for the FFRs’ smart positioning and location strategy, has been inevitably followed by market offer. In U.S., the number of QSR franchise established fluctuated around 150.000 units between 2007 (150.291) and 2012 (151.156). Then, growth was more significant, reaching 196.794 units in 2019 and the forecast for 2023 goes around 196.00 units after a notable drop in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic⁴¹.

Analysing relationship between demographics and impulsivity, the measurement was done using area under the delay discounting curve (AUC). Remembering that a lower AUC score means higher impulsivity, while a higher score means lower impulsivity, it’s possible to notice some associations. Firstly, employees who had reported eating at a fast-food or pizza place in the past 7 days had a lower AUC than those who did not. AUC was significantly negatively correlated with BMI. Analysing age, total household income and education level, fast-food consumption was negatively related to AUC. These evidences prove that some demographics (BMI, age, education level and household income) do have a correlation with impulsivity in terms of fast-food consumption.

Where is the border between impulsivity and addiction? What are the elements that might have a good influence on our decision-making process, reducing this unhealthy habit?

2.5 Proximity to fast-food outlets and Supermarkets as predictors of FF dining

2.5.1 Introduction and literature review

The continuous rising of obesity rates made researchers think about a concrete hypothesis about the influence of food environment, such as fast-food outlets and supermarkets, on consumers’ choices. Evidence on the relationship between fast-food dining and fast-food access has so far been equivocal, being literature slightly divided about this possible correlation. For instance, He and colleagues found that closer proximity to the nearest fast-food outlet increased the likelihood of purchases at these establishments and that a higher density of fast-food outlets was associated with increased fast-food dining⁴². Moreover, Burgoine found that people who have a more comfortable access to fast-food or “take-away” restaurants close to home, work, and along their commute itinerary are more likely to consume

⁴¹ [Franchise industry: QSR establishments US 2022 | Statista](#)

⁴² He M, Tucker P, Gilliland J, Irwin JD, Larsen K, Hess P. (2012). “The influence of local food environments on adolescents’ food purchasing behaviours”. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 9(4), p.1458-1471.

fast-food for meals⁴³. On the other hand, some researchers have found that fast-food restaurant density was not predictive for fast-food purchasing.

On balance, supermarket availability appears to be associated with lower body mass index (BMI), due in part to increased intake of healthier food items such as fresh produce, whole grains, dairy, and unprocessed meats⁴⁴. Must be considered that supermarket access allows residents to more easily purchase ingredients for food preparation and may, therefore, prompt a shift away from fast-food dining toward home-prepared meals. As analysed in Paragraph 2.1.2, supermarket access is not sufficient if effort doesn’t come together with it.

2.5.2 Research methods

Given the uncertain influence of fast-food access on fast-food dining and little evidence on supermarkets’ direct or indirect influence on fast-food dining frequency, Jessica K. Athens, MS; Dustin T. Duncan and Brian Elbel wanted to elaborate pertinent research⁴⁵. Three hypotheses were tested:

1. Proximity to fast-food outlets increases fast-food dining frequency;
2. Proximity to full-service supermarkets decreases the frequency of mealtime dining at fast-food outlets;
3. Presence of a supermarket reduces the association between fast-food outlet access and fast-food mealtime dining frequency.

Data were collected via point-of-purchase surveys at fast-food restaurants in Baltimore and Philadelphia and via a second, random-digit-dial telephone survey of Baltimore and Philadelphia residents was also completed to estimate population-based fast-food consumption patterns.

In all, 3,240 observations had values for weekly fast-food dining frequency and all predictor variables and were used in the analysis. Of these, 49.3% were telephone survey respondents and 50.7% were point-of-purchase respondents. Data on fast-food outlets and supermarkets in 2011 were purchased from InfoUSA, a geo-localization software which helped the survey to have more detailed data about participants’ house locations. Fast-food chains registered on the system were: McDonald’s, Subway, Burger King, Wendy’s, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC, Arby’s, Chick-Fil-A, Domino’s Pizza, Papa John’s Pizza, Quizno’s, Hardee’s, and Popeye’s Louisiana Kitchen.

⁴³ Burgoine T, Feroz NG, Griffin SJ, Wareham NJ, Monsivais P. (2014). “Associations between exposure to takeaway food outlets, takeaway food consumption, and body weight in Cambridgeshire, UK: Population based, cross-sectional study”. *BMJ*, 348(1464).

⁴⁴ Morland K, Wing S, Diez Roux AV. (2002). “The contextual effect of the local food environment on residents’ diets: The Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities Study”. *Am J Public Health*, 92(11), p.1761-1767.

⁴⁵ Jessica K. Athens, Dustin T. Duncan, Brian Elbel, (2016). “Proximity to Fast-Food Outlets and Supermarkets as Predictors of Fast-Food Dining Frequency”. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 116(8), 2016, p.1266-1275.

- As dependent variable was chosen the weekly fast-food dining frequency, omitting snack purchasing from the calculation in order to keep the focus on dining as a replacement for meal preparing at home.
- Independent variables used are three: outlet density, presence of outlet and street network distance to nearest outlet.
- The following covariates were included in research models: time period, sex, race (African American or other), age (years, centred on age 18 years), education (high school diploma or less or more than high school), all of which resulted to be associated with fast-food dining frequency.

2.5.3 Results

There was a marked, but predictable, difference in fast-food dining frequency between telephone survey and point-of-purchase survey respondents. Point-of-purchase survey respondents consumed an average of 5.3 fast-food meals a week, compared with 1.4 fast-food meals among the telephone survey participants. It is unsurprising that respondents in the point-of-purchase survey had higher frequency of fast-food dining because they were identified exiting a fast-food restaurant; frequent visitors to fast-food chains were therefore likely to be overrepresented in that sample. The telephone survey was designed to provide a population-level estimate of fast-food dining behaviours. Respondents with a high school diploma or less ate 1.6 fast-food meals per week more than respondents with some education after high school. African-American respondents ate 1.4 more meals per week at fast-food outlets compared to other respondents.

For telephone survey respondents, only count of supermarkets resulted to be a significant predictor of fast-food dining frequency. The number of supermarkets within a specified distance reduced the frequency of weekly fast-food meals among this sample respondents, but the effect decreased as the distance increased. Each additional supermarket within a quarter-mile buffer reduced fast-food dining by 18%, on average. Each mile increase in distance to a supermarket was associated with a 29.9% increase in fast-food meals per week, on average.

For point-of-purchase respondents, neither the number of fast-food outlets nor the number of supermarkets was significant. However, having at least one chain fast-food restaurant within 1 mile was associated with a 21.2% increase in frequency of fast-food meals. The presence of a supermarket was associated with an 18.2% decrease in fast-food dining frequency, on average.

2.5.4 Conclusion

These findings suggest how heterogeneous could the population of the same city be, seeing the different effects the presence of supermarkets has on the two consumers' groups. Telephone survey respondents, considered a population-based sample, are less likely to dine on fast-food and that likelihood is reduced only by proximity to supermarkets, and not

affected by fast-food outlets. Among the point-of-purchase respondents, fast-food dining frequency was responsive only to presence of a fast-food outlet.

Chapter 3 - Focus Group: “Why do Italian people choose fast-food?”

It is no longer a mystery that fast-food consumption is driven by addictive tendencies. In the previous chapter, other elements have come to light from the existing international literature. Pricing strategies, geographical and temporal convenience, commercial campaigns, impulsive attitudes, personal and collective dynamics. All these factors are often subconsciously processed by every single fast-food consumer. The decision-making process of a general individual have reached such a level of saturation that it has been, and still is, complicated to define in crystal clear theories.

What is possible for researchers to do is observing consumers behaviour, their personal associations, processes and evaluations. In order to reach a satisfying result, qualitative researches are the best deal. This approach is focused on the deep understanding of preferences, cognitive processes, frustrations and satisfactions of few people, instead of giving priority to the size of sample and statistical results. Professor Sarah J. Tracy recently wrote an eight-pointed guide of useful criteria for realizing the perfect qualitative research. These eight “Big Tent” are: (1) a worthy topic, (2) rich rigor about theoretical fundamentals and analysis process, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethical and (8) meaningful coherence.⁴⁶

The chosen method of research for this study is the focus group. It can be defined as a collective interview of a small sample of people, around 8-10, organized to debate about new products, experiences and problems. For this specific approach, transparency and frankness communication is crucial, but not granted. Indeed, participants might reply with answers that reflect what other people say or what they know that is right to think about that topic. This behaviour could be influenced by the fear of being blamed by the others, or could be driven by the intention to protect his/her private or public image. It is going to be a duty for me, as official moderator, to make the participants feel comfortable and to motivate them to be serious, original and honest. My job is to coordinate the flow of the debate, without giving too much time to an individual penalizing someone else who have talked less. It will my care to introduce the objective and the functioning of the interview to all the participants as exhaustively as possible, answering to any clarifying question and reminding them some rules, about which I’m going to explain in the following paragraphs. The interview will follow a defined schedule of themes in order to focus on every aspect desired.

Ice-breaking jokes, interactive games, engagement and professionalism are going to be the ingredients of my research-mix, in order to obtain the most reliable and genuine output from my dear sample.

⁴⁶Sarah J. Tracy, (2010). “Qualitative Quality: Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research”. *Qualitative Inquiry*, p.837-851.

3.1 What? – Objectives

The research objective is to understand how Italian consumers manage their fast-food consumption, how much they are aware of their decision-making drivers and if they have had anti-consumption tendencies in their personal experience.

There are four key questions that this paper has the intent to solve.

- What is Italian people’s perception of those product?
- What factors are people affected by? Why?
- Does fast-food consumption generate greater satisfaction or guilt?
- Have they ever tried to limit/delete this habit from their diet? Why?

In order to define an effective schedule, it’s important to set the key themes that will be touched among the interview and will guide the conversation.

- Fast-food perception
- Main drivers in costumer journey
- Addiction between rational and subconscious behaviours
- Anti-consumption attitudes

The hypothesis I support is that adults are the most usual consumers of fast-food, due to their working routine and means’ availability.

In order to pursue the research’s objectives the sample composition is a step to care:

- ✓ Two young adults (around 20 years old), a female and a male;
- ✓ Three teenagers (around 16 years old), all males;
- ✓ Three working adults (around 50), two males and a female;

for a total of eight participants. The heterogeneity of the sample is due to the intent to see how much age has influence on consuming behaviours. All of them has been contacted face-to-face and then added to a group chat to give them more detailed information.

3.2 Where and When?

The focus group was set for Tuesday 12th at 18:30 in my house. Participants were told to arrive at 18:00 just to familiarize with the environment and to break the ice. Some beverages and some snacks are going to welcome them and are going to be available during the whole interview. It will be my care to present the project informal but still serious, trying to communicate the right mood wanted for the good result of the research.

3.3 How? – Schedule

People arrived between 17:50 and 18:20. For the occasion, I decided to organize an aperitive with soft drinks (Coca-cola, iced tea, Crodino) and some snacks (nuts and small pizzas). The intent was to make participants feel comfortable and to give them a first occasion to chat and break the ice. The following schedule is just a guideline, I do not expect to touch every single point in depth or maybe the discussion autonomously focuses on unexpected topics.

Participants sit down around the table at 18.30: the interview can start.

- Welcoming and thanking them for their presence
- What is a focus group?
- Explanation of privacy’s respect.
- Focus Group rules: respect, sincerity and originality.
- Participants are asked to introduce themselves by telling their name and favourite movie
- Participants are asked to complete the first two questions of the paper (age and sex)
- An alien lands on earth and asks you what fast-food is. How would you answer?
- Draw your favourite fast-food and explain why!
- Participants are asked to complete the frequency question on the paper
- Tell the first thing that comes in your mind thinking about fast-food
- What is your favourite fast-food restaurant? Why? (Laddering)
- When and why do you prefer fast-food instead of slow food?
- What is the main feature evaluated in your decision-making process?
- Pricing strategies: do they work?
- Time’s importance
- Taste’s relevance
- Commercials’ effects
- Group dynamics in decision making process

Pause of ten minutes after around one hour (if needed or requested)

- What is a number of meals per week you think it’s healthily manageable?
- How do you feel after a hearty fast-food meal?
- Did something ever made you decide to avoid eating fast-food?

Closing and thanking the participants for having come.

In the next page is reported the paper given to the participants to support the interactivity of the interview.

FOCUS GROUP

Why do you choose fast-food?

Age _____

Sex

M

F

O

I define myself a:

- Highly casual consumer (1 or less per month)
- Moderately casual consumer (2-4 per month)
- Balanced consumer (1-2 per week)
- Usual consumer (3-4 per week)
- Addicted consumer (more than 4 per week)



Did you find interesting the interview?

Have you learned something from it?

Most of all, did you have fun?

Thank you for having come! 😊

Chapter 4 - Focus Group Results

In this final chapter are displayed the results of the focus group described in the previous section. As support, I have registered the whole audio of the interview with a microphone placed in the centre of the table, connected to the computer. I was the moderator and guided the debate, while an appointed assistant took down some notes. Every participant is reported anonymously and direct speeches are written inside inverted commas (“”).

4.1 First definition of fast-food

Participants, put in front of a fantastical scenario, are asked to explain an alien what fast-food is.

“A place you can find rapidly prepared and low-priced food, but quality is mediocre”

“A place where the product is highly standardized (...) Standardization as guarantee”

“A 24 hours per day open restaurant”

“Fast-food taste is phenomenal! (...) Not knowing what it is, satisfaction reaches its best”

A member wanted to share his critical opinion about this kind of place, having answered:

“Fast-food is a place where you should go only if you are hurry. If not, you should avoid it”

It is important to highlight that all the participants linked the word “fast-food” to a place, and not to a food basket. The idea of rapidity and standardization was generally shared.

4.2 Visit frequency to fast-food restaurants

Participants reported on the paper the number of visits to this type of restaurants.

- Six of them defined themselves as moderately casual consumers (2-4 times per month)
- Two of them defined themselves as highly casual consumers (1 or less per month)

From these results it’s possible to assume that Italian consumers are, nowadays, careful about fast-food consumption. It’s interesting that teenagers agreed to a moderate consumption too. Of the two who declared the lowest number of visits (1 or less per month), one is a young adult and the other is an adult. Age does not seem so relevant in this case. Later are displayed the reasons behind these answers.

4.3 Draw what fast-food is for you

Under the multiple-choice question, on the paper, there is a square flanked by a painter icon. The objective was to find out what is the participants’ very first image visualized thinking about the word “fast-food”. Results are slightly polarized.

- Four people drew just a hamburger, with no sides.
- Three people drew a hamburger menu, with fries and a soft drink as sides.
- Only one person drew fries and a soft drink, without the burger.

It’s possible to affirm that the unanimity of the sample associates fast-food to junk-food. That is something to consider, especially because in this phase participants explained their awareness of other types of fast-food such as *pizza al taglio* (take-away pizza, very popular in Italy especially in Rome) or poke restaurants. They exist in their mind, but the visualization of junk-food totally prevailed.

Another element that must be highlighted is that, among the people who draw the hamburger menu, all of them wrote the McDonald’s logo on the fries’ box. Remembering what was said in Paragraph 1.3 about the American company’s price bundling and its main page on internet, I do not consider this result as a coincidence. None of the others had the same behaviour.

4.4 Fast-food is not only junk food

A participant made a truly interesting consideration. He stated that, in these last years, some fast-food companies oriented their offer to those specific segments which were avoiding junk food due to its unbalanced nutritional values or just because the diet regimen prohibits it (vegan diet or intolerances). For these reasons, concepts like poke, salads, baked potatoes and others are quite disruptive and other members agreed describing only positive experiences related to this category of fast-food restaurants.

“Vegetarians and fit-diet consumers are two targets now reached by fast-food too. (...) Earlier, they were ignored by the (fast-food) industry”

“Plant based products have reached these needs too”

“It’s still fast and transgressive, but you can take more care of your diet”

“The biggest companies invest too less on innovative products”

4.5 How many fast-food meals per week are sustainable for you?

This question is linked to the frequency one. The objective was to compare their real consumption with their theoretical one and, secondly, to analyse the strength of their

discipline. If real consumption results higher than theoretical one, it’s possible to deduce a low level of diet strictness. On the other hand, if theoretical one was higher, the strictness test would be passed. Let’s see the outcomes.

- Two people answered “every day” as sustainable frequency, arguing with the abundance of options findable nowadays; some products perfectly observe a fit diet regimen.
“Evaluating the variety of fast-food concepts nowadays, it is a valuable alternative”
“I would balance macro-nutrients anyway”
- One person answered “three times” as sustainable frequency
- Three people answered “twice” as sustainable frequency
- Two people answered “once” as sustainable frequency, arguing with their personal avoidance towards fast-food and considering that single time as a mere exception
“Considering the genre of fast-food restaurants that I visit, (they are unhealthy) and my age (she is 56), one per week is enough”
“Once you get married, it’s rare to share an unhealthy meal”

It’s important to underline that every participant passed the strictness test, meaning that the addictive element does not seem relevant in Italians’ consumption behaviour.

4.6 Kid’s meal

Continuing the conversation, a topic was autonomously introduced and discussed: kid’s meal. Being the sample so heterogeneous, what came out from this phase is very interesting.

A participant of 16 years old, reporting his experience, affirmed that he started eating fast-food moved by the desire of collecting the toys included in kid’s meal. Once the interest of collecting toys faded, the habit of visiting these places had solidified and he have continued to regularly eat in that specific FF restaurant. From his point of view, kid’s meal is a strategy aimed to build familiarity with the brand since the very first years of life. All the participants, adults excluded, totally agreed with him.

“I don’t like the toast anymore. Now, I order a burger”

Young adults and teenagers also unanimously agreed about the association between American fast-food chains and birthday parties. This link is crucially effective on people judgement, because it creates a strong and subconscious idea of fun and carefreeness in relation to this type of restaurants.

“I associate McDonald’s with birthday parties”

“We were all happy of wearing our own crown”

Adult members did not fit in this experience. When they were so young, the habit of fast-food did not make part of their childhood, preventing that strong fidelity grown in younger people.

“My generation experienced the boom of American fast-food when we were already grown”

On the other hand, an adult participant said that kid’s meal was an occasion to please her children. The other adults moderately agreed with that statement. The weakness of the agreement was due the fact that parents want to be a healthy model with their family, ignoring the pleasing effect of this habit if compared with a proper education.

4.7 What is the main feature you look for in food?

Participants were asked to select the principal attribute evaluated when they choose what to eat.

- Quality was the most shared, chosen by four people (two adults, one young adult and one teenager)
 - “Quality also mean natural taste”
 - “Trading off waiting time and quality, I choose quality”
 - “I want to see well-treated and valorised ingredients”
- Taste was selected by two people (both teenagers)
 - “I prefer taste without quality than quality without taste”
- Nutritional values were put at the first place by two people (an adult and a young adult)
 - “Light food is my first choice”
 - “I have to respect the daily macro-nutrients assumption”

4.8 Why do you want seek a fast-food product?

This simple question was directed to every participant. In this phase the objective was to identify the prioritized drivers in decision-making processes.

Some participants reported to be driven mostly from desire, appetite and habit. While talking, it seemed like they were under a sort of spell. They didn’t mention any contrast to their decisional process: that familiar taste is what they want. They purchase fast-food because these recipes, smells and experiences can’t be replicated anywhere else.

“I go there because I have used to since I was a kid. (...) I still remember the smell”

“It’s rapidly served. (...) I can’t cook fried chicken at home!”

“People of my age (20) are attracted by the informality too”

“It’s a usual practice for me since I was young; I love that flavour”

“It’s so fun going with my nephews! (...) I make them happy, but, secretly, I like it too!”

Other ones were more diligent in their analysis of drivers. They focused on quality and they made comparisons with alternatives. Taste is not secondary, but it’s the consequence of good ingredients used, not of the only salt and sugar abundancy. Service rapidity and restaurant proximity were considered too.

“I order from there because it’s near house and it combines taste, good quality of the ingredients and rapid service.”

“If I need to eat (fast-food), I look for quality ingredients and less processed food, like a good *pizza al taglio*”

“It’s close and very good compared to other solutions. (...) Price is secondary”

None reported price as a main driver of decision. Do Italian consumers have a more rational idea of food consumption, evaluating other features (ingredients, taste, healthiness, time) instead of a mere matter of cost? The interview continues.

4.9 Is price relevant?

As analysed in past researches, low income was a characteristic directly related with fast-food consumption. Being the sample composed also by young adults and teenagers, it might be the right occasion to study how do Italian consumers behave towards fast-food price.

The discussion starts from the rising trend of price during last years. Less informed participants were shocked by acknowledging that their idea of ultra-accessible meals had faded several years ago.

“Products are not so low-charged as before. (...) The cost of a fast-food meal reaches the restaurant one” (referring to medium pasta or pizza prices)

“Price is not a sufficient characteristic to define fast-food anymore”

“You can’t afford a satisfying menu with 9 Euros”

The focus of the debate moved on a consequential question: “Is fast-food worthy?”. Participants were divided in two macro-factions. The first one, composed by adults, was very sceptical about the perceived value of that products, highlighting, generalising into “junk food”, the bad features of it. It is important to specify that the association with junk food was absolutely spontaneous, confirming the theory that Italian people, especially adults, still do not distinguish fast-food and junk food properly.

“I absolutely condemn junk food! It’s unpleasing, unhealthy and I now discover that it’s neither cheap” (laughing)

The other faction supported the idea that fast-food may be charged higher than some years before, but it’s not a daily expense, so the effect on consumers is less impactful than expected.

The role of satisfaction also revealed important. Even if it’s 3-4 euros more expensive than before, the sensation still remains almost unmissable for younger consumers.

“I allow myself a cheeseburger neither once a week. (...) When I want it, few euros (compared to prices of then) don’t make the difference”

4.10 When is fast-food time?

Everything has its moment, but fast-food seems to escape to timing rules. Serving snacks in alternative to complete meals, this type of restaurant can be evaluated by hungry consumers every hour in a day.

“Fast-food time is when you are hungry” - stated a participant

“So, potentially, it’s always fast-food time” - replied another one

“It’s always time for it (fast-food), as a snack in the afternoon or late night”

“After disco is perfect!”

A common occasion came to light from the discussion. An adult participant explained that, despite his low fast-food consumption frequency, he has used to permit himself fast-food as a reward for having finished something particularly stressful. An example he made was an important appointment with clients gone well.

“I visualized the most gorgeous burger menu as a recompense for my commitment. (...) It was motivational before and gratifying then”

A young adult reported a similar experience. Going to military school, he needed a day in which he could eat something unhealthily transgressive and fast-food was a usual solution.

“For me fast-food means transgression”

“I couldn’t handle six days of canteen, I needed it (fast-food meal)!”

Teenagers totally shared this concept, saying that it’s common for them to visit a FF restaurant after the last school day of the week.

“We used to go eating a hamburger on Fridays after school”

“Once school on Saturday ends, my daughter (16 years old) uses to go eating fast-food”

4.11 Fast-food abroad

Another situation was travelling abroad. Far from home, consumers may struggle eating local specialities every meal, every day. For this reason, they see in fast-food restaurants the

opportunity to taste some familiar flavours. People also debated about choosing a multinational chain or a local one, talking about trying out new tastes.

“Eating fast-food abroad brings me in a sort of comfort-zone”

“(Fast-food) Service and product offered are a certainty also abroad”

“I’m likely to test local chains, where service is quick but product is more original”

Or just because fast-food, being a quick service, allows to not lose too much time eating at lunch and gives the opportunity to fully visit a foreign city, by instance. This scenario was agreed by both young and adult participants. It was identified as a “family dynamic”, often driven by children and permitted by parents that see the opportunity to eat something rapid and consistent.

“When I’m abroad with my family, lunch is often quick so fast-food is a concrete option”

“You know you are going to spend a small time for eating”

4.12 Post fast-food sensations: satisfaction or sense of guilt?

In Paragraph 2.2 is defined the concept of anti-consumption as a tendency to avoid unhealthy food, driven by physical and mental health concerning or by other socio-cultural-environmental factors. Participants are asked to describe the elements that move them to choose other alternatives instead of fast-food.

First of all, the discipline of respecting a healthy diet regimen plays an important trigger of guilt.

“I feel guilty because, lately, my alimentation has improved a lot”

“After having made an exception, I feel like I have to redeem myself (...) avoiding it (fast-food) for a while”

Another element highlighted particularly by female participants is the digestion process. Sense of guilt in this case comes from the physical discomfort produced by some kind of food, while other types of alimentations cause fewer digestive problems.

“Digestion is way too tough”

Not everyone agreed with unease after eating fast-food, especially teenagers.

“Fast-food fully satisfies me. (...) Without any afterthought”

“It tastes amazing and, at my age, I can eat whatever I want”

Conclusion and future studies

Despite its suitable features with modern lifestyle, fast-food still hasn't convinced Italian consumers. A first noteworthy result is the unanimous association between fast-food and junk food, as highlighted by the drawing exercise. This outcome gives a first hint of the twisted idea Italian consumers have about that typology of food, making necessary an ensuing clarification by the undesigned. During food evaluation, purchasing and consuming, the most shared priority element resulted to be quality, followed by taste and nutritional composition. Young adults, segment that involves me too, seemed too much caring about their alimentation. Maybe it's just a phase, but the impression I had is that they were slightly slaved by discipline, feeling the pressure of growth and being anxious for any consequence of their actions and behaviours. Surprising was the great care of teenagers toward this fine-tasting food category. All of them reported an average consumption of one meal per week or less, arguing their choices, preferences and evaluations with an uncommon sharpness. Even less predictable was the grown adults' position, less devoted to American fast-food due to the lack of the nostalgia factor. Still unexpected was their strong diffidence toward the entire fast-food category, blaming even the most marginal ingredients for diseases, maybe not so correlated. The hypothesis that adults were the most usual consumers of fast-food was not confirmed by results, and diffidence plays a crucial role, not being a so strong sentiment in younger consumers.

A few aspects must be clarified in order to give credibility to the work done. Literature reported attitudes and consumption drivers observed in foreign countries: United States above all, but also Pakistan's consumers were analysed under the addiction and anti-consumption point of view. Results of these researches, consequently, must be contextualized into the environment selected. American consumers are generally more likely to be seduced from fast-food products, being that culinary culture more rooted in daily routine. In opposition, the cook-at-home habit still struggles to spread among families, so convenience food becomes a valid and consistent alternative evaluated every dining time. Pakistan's situation is slightly different, locating itself next to India. Local food tradition is solid and well-rooted in families, but the recent investments of multinational companies also globalized the food offer in the most urbanised cities. On the other hand, as central subject of study, Italy. It's no mystery that, looking for a country which new food habits may struggle with, it definitely is the right place. Not just talking about the viscerally entrenched culinary culture, but also the carefulness dedicated to prime matters and local products does play a crucial role while talking about food preferences.

A weakness point of the qualitative research conducted is the limited sample and the impossibility to expand results to the whole Italian population. Focus groups' general objective is to reach the purest sentiments and behaviour of the participants, making the outcome as subjective as possible. For this reason, might occur more researches, especially quantitative ones, in order to complete the bigger picture of fast-food consumption in Italy, without leaving out any demographic sector. Youngsters, teenagers, young adults, grown adults and elder people are all important resources to engage in future studies, having seen

the enormous role played by nostalgia and happy past memories in results. Another interesting matter of study is how the word “fast-food” have spread in Italy. The complete understanding of the phenomenon might light up an answer to the common association between fast and junk food.

The topic’s complete study is not over yet, this is just a brick for the building’s construction.

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