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Factors influencing fast food consumption: a case study of University of Venda Students, Limpopo, South Africa

S. Rabotata¹, T.L. Malatji²

Univeristy of South Africa¹, University of Limpopo²

enoch.rabotata@ul.ac.za¹, thabiso.malatji@ul.ac.za²

Abstract. Eating fast foods more than twice per week is associated with more weight gain and insulin resistance in otherwise healthy young adults. However many consumers see fast foods as symbols of wealth, progress and well-ordered openness of western society. Studies reveal that fast food consumption is the dominant dietary pattern among children and young adults today. However there is little data on the factors influencing fast food consumption in South Africa. Therefore this research paper focuses on factors influencing fast food consumption in South Africa. This is an empirical data which was obtained using exploratory and descriptive research design. Data was collected through unstructured interview of focus groups. The interview involved a direct interaction between the researcher and a group. Participants reported to use fast foods due to the perceived lack of time to prepare one's own meal. Fast food consumption was found to be more frequent among participants especially during lunch times. The following findings were recorded as factors influencing fast food: Lack of time, change in living conditions, lack of cooking skills & cooking utensils, fun & cravings, socializing and convenience.

Keywords. Fast food, Cooking skills, Consumption, Craving, Cooking utensils, Convenience

Introduction

Fast foods are one of the world's fastest growing food types. Fast foods are quick, reasonably priced, while convenient and economically high in calories, fat, sugar, and salt (Bender and Bender, 1995). South Africans spend close to R2 billion a month on fast food, which represents more than 10% of total discretionary spend. Some households buy take-aways up to three times a week, while others might treat themselves once a month. It all depends on income level and proximity to a fast food outlet. There are around 50 fast-food chain brands in South Africa, operating out of 5,800 brand outlets. 90% of South African residents live within 5 km of at least one fast food outlet, and almost half of them have a fast food restaurant within 1 km of their homes (www.businessstech.co.za). Non-the less, the food habits of youngsters are influenced by many factors such as environment at home, educational environment, availability and accessibility to fast food providers, and social environment in their surroundings. In addition, emergence of traits of independence in their eating habits, nutritional educational, divergence of food preferences at home and at fast food outlets and ambience of place for socializing affects their visits and linking of fast food outlets (Goyal and Singh, 2007).

Three beliefs towards convenience foods were identified as potential determinants for convenience food purchase, the perceived value for money aspect of convenience food (Lindvall, 1989), perceived time saving element of convenience food (Promar, 1997) and the perceived health value of convenience food (Jago, 2000). With regards to the perceived value for money of convenience foods, consumer assess price in relation to the perceived value for money a product gives. Consumers may not only view price as a financial sacrifice but also as an indicator of quality (Van Trijp and Meuleenberg, 1996).

Many consumers see fast food as symbols of the wealth, progress and well ordered openness of western society and therefore become trendy attractions in many cities around the world, particularly among younger people with more varied tastes (Harvey, 2003). Some of the largest food chains are beginning to incorporate healthier alternatives in their menu, for example white meat, snack wraps, salads and fresh fruit.

McDonald's announced that in March of 2006 the chain would include nutritional information on the packaging of all of its products (Gaulin, 2007). However, some people see these moves as a tokenistic and commercial measure rather than an appropriate reaction to ethical concerns about the world ecology and people's health.

The concept of fast food

The concept of fast food is not new. Early in the 19th century, at the start of industrial age when people had to work twelve to fourteen hours a day, there was scarcely any time for long breaks for eating. The first snack bars and kiosks arose in front of factories. Today, quick meals outside the home have become an essential part of many life styles. There's often not enough time or opportunity to shop carefully for groceries, or to cook and eat with one's family. Especially on weekdays, fast food outside the home is the only solution (The Swiss Association for Nutrition, 2003).

The term "fast food "means just that, thus it is self-explanatory. Fast foods have been defined by Bender and Bender (1995) as a "general term used for a limited menu of foods that lend themselves to production-line techniques; supplies tend to specialize in products such as hamburgers, pizzas, chicken, or sand witches". Smith *et al.* (2001) clearly demonstrated the production-line approach with the specific reference to sandwich production. The Fast Food industry has grown considerably during the last decade and Fast Food outlets provide a diverse range of food products (Target Group Index, 2005).

However, the boundary between fast food and traditional dishes is fluid. In particular it's difficult to provide a qualitative distinction because fast food can also include salads and fruit in addition to classic offerings such as hamburgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, french-fries, fish and chips to mention a few. The best way to distinguish fast foods is to make use of formal characteristics. The characteristics of fast foods; therefore, are that they require little time, offer a limited selection, are finger foods, and the silverware and plates are disposable. These characteristics readily illustrate the difference from the traditional dining culture (Jago, 2000).

Literature review

Factors influencing fast food consumption

Media

Television and magazines probably have a greater influence on adolescents and young adults' eating habits than any other form of mass media. It is estimated that by the time average children reach the teenage years, they have viewed 100,000 food commercials, most of them

for products with high concentration of fat and simple carbohydrates. More than 65% of food advertisements promote fast foods and sweets (Brown and Witherspoon, 1998). Fast food consumption was positively influenced by exposure to broadcast media among metropolitan children, and by exposure to online and social media among suburban children (Lwin, Malik, Ridwan, and Au, 2017).

Modern life style

Due to a busier consumer lifestyles and dual working families with children, emphases are increasingly being placed on quick meal solutions (Atkins and Bowler, 2001). Consumers can combine meal - time with time engaged in other activities such as shopping, work, or traveling (Jekanowski *et al.*, 1997). There is an increase in eating moments per day which may be seen as part of the modern lifestyle which fits to the increasing consumption of fast food. Moreover a new and faster pace of life in big cities has also led people to find quicker meal solutions for their shortened lunch hours (Hanson, 2002). The results of a study, Consumer characteristics influencing fast food consumption in Turkey, age, income, education, household size, presence of children and other factors, such as consumer attitude towards the price of fast food, health concerns and child preference, significantly influenced the frequency of fast food consumption (Akbay, Tiryaki, and Gul, 2007).

Independency

It is estimated that the nation's approximately 23 million college aged people who stays away from home spend nearly 100 billion dollars annually. About 15 billion dollars is spent annually for fast food and other food and snacks. Teenagers are also frequent visitors of fast food restaurants, with the highest number of visits occurring immediately after school and the next highest number occurring during weekday dinnertimes (Laxer and Janssen, 2014). A study; Fast Food Consumption Patterns of College Students in Busan, came to a conclusion that 83.3% of college students were using fast food in Busan area (Shin and Roh, 2000).

In a survey; Cost and Calorie Analysis of Fast Food Consumption in College Students, all surveyed students reported fast food consumption in the past month (Kimberly, Sarah, Ginger, Khalid, Brenda, and Kevin, 2012).

Changes in living conditions

Today, quick meals outside the home have become an essential part of our lifestyle. The increase on fast food consumption arose from the changes in our living conditions. There are increased numbers of single parent households, many women or both parents are now working, long distances to school and work are common, and usually, lunch times are short (The Swiss Association for Nutrition, 2003). The shift of young people from school to university has many health implications. These were the results of a cross sectional study of relationships between food consumption and living arrangements among university students in four European countries: Students' food consumption patterns differed across the countries. Frequent consumption of unhealthy items was common. Bulgarian students reported most often frequent consumption of sweets and cakes and snacks (e.g. chips and fast food). Polish students reported the least frequent consumption of vegetables and a low consumption of fruits. Students living at parental home consumed more fruit, vegetables, and meat than those who resided outside of their family home in all studied countries (Ansari, Stock, and Mikolajczyk, 2012). Although students' food consumption patterns differed amongst the countries, consumption of fast food was common in all countries. The role living environment in fast food consumption is

further observed by the difference in students staying at home (have low consumption of fast food) and those staying outside their homes (high consumption of fast food)

Lack of cooking skills

What is clear is that the landscape of cooking is changing, as technology becomes more common in the home, this in turn changes the nature of the food we buy and prepare and the relationship of the individual with food preparation. Poor cooking skills could be a barrier to widening food choice and thus reduce chance of eating healthily (Murcott, 1995). Indeed, a recent study from the National Consumer Council (2003), reported respondents on low incomes identified the barriers to a healthy diet as being too tired to cook and not being able to cook, despite believing pre prepared foods to be more expensive and less healthy. In a study by Van der Horst, Brunner, and Siegrist, (2011), cooking skills were identified as a strong predictor of ready-meal consumption. Moreover, another study had similar result concluding that cooking skills correlated positively with weekly vegetable consumption, but negatively with weekly convenience food consumption frequency, even while holding the effect of health consciousness related to eating constant. Cooking skills may help people to meet nutrition guidelines in their daily nutrition supply. They allow people to make healthier food choices (Hartmann, Dohle, and Siegrist, 2013).

Environment at home

In an investigation of children's views of cooking, there was a definite tendency for pizza and burgers to be favored as something the children themselves liked or something they would like to serve their visitors. This may be the influence of eating out in restaurants and or of the growth of eating pizza in the home. The ever-present confirmed preferences for chips and other fast foods in children's meals indicates that at an early age children are developing preferences for processed foods high in fat (Attar, 1990). In a study conducted by Boutelle, Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and French, (2007), adolescents in homes with fewer than 3 fast-food family meals per week were significantly more likely than adolescents in homes with more fast-food family meals to report having vegetables and milk served with meals at home. Fast-food purchases for family meals were positively associated with the intake of fast foods and salty snack foods for both parents and adolescents.

Research shows that a child's home environment can also promote healthy dietary patterns. For example, availability and accessibility of fruits and vegetables in the home are positively correlated with the level of consumption. Conversely, access to unhealthy foods, such as sweetened beverages and unhealthy snacks, is correlated with increased energy intake in children (Østbye, Malhotra, Stroe, Lovelady, Brouwer, Zucker, and Fuemmeler, 2013).

Other factors

Studies reveals that age, income, education, house hold size, presence of children and other factors, such as consumer attitude towards the price of fast food, health concerns and child preference, significantly influence the frequency of fast food consumption. Eating out gives consumers to satisfy their hunger, and need for convenience, pleasure, entertainment, time saving, social interaction and the mood transformation (Park, 2004). Moreover consumer derive benefits from food and restaurants, so people experience excitement, pleasure and a sense of personal well – being (Finkelstein, 1989 and Park, 2004).

The study done in Turkey revealed other several factors that can explain the changes in consumer's fast food consumption which are the increase in participation of women labor force, longer workdays, growing number of households living on at least two - income sources,

decreasing household sizes, urbanization, growth in tourism, longer life expectation, increasing educational level of consumers, increasing per capita income, and the increasing number of fast food restaurants (US Department of Agriculture, 2002).

Methodology

Study design

The study was descriptive and exploratory. The researcher aimed at exploring perceptions of fast food among UNIVEN students and thereafter describes it. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006), a descriptive research aims at describing existing conditions without analysing relationships among variables. The researcher who conducts a descriptive investigation observes, describes, and perhaps classifies. On the other hand exploratory research is an extension of descriptive research that focuses more directly on discovery of relationships. Furthermore, exploratory research also focuses on a phenomenon of interest, but pursues the question: what factors influence, affect, cause, or relate to this phenomenon? (Polit and Beck, 2004).

In this study, data was captured from the subjects residing at block F4 of the University of Venda. The data was used to describe the perception of fast food among UNIVEN students. The study type is both qualitative & quantitative, because the information was collected by qualitative measures, e.g. focus group discussion and thereafter narrative and quantitative data analysis conducted. Results were quantified at the end.

Population and study area

Creswell and Miller (2000) define a population as a set of entities in which all the measurements of interest to the researcher are represented. Similarly, Creswell (1998) also defines a population as the total set from which the individuals or units of the study are chosen. The targeted population included male and female students of UNIVEN. The accessible population was male and female students of Univen aged 18 to 27. UNIVEN had a total population of 9700 registered students for academic year 2007. From its early years, Univen students were drawn from various back grounds in South Africa. To date students are increasingly coming from other neighboring African countries and overseas. The presence of students from diverse backgrounds on campus creates a unique atmosphere and fertile environment for new ideas and capacity for change.

University of Venda is situated in Thohoyandou in the scenic Vhembe district, Thulamela municipality of Limpopo Province of South Africa. It is approximately one kilometer away from Thohoyandou town.

Thohoyandou town is one of the developing towns in Limpopo with large range of fast food outlets being established. It has more than ten fast food outlets.

Sampling

Sampling design

Two groups of students from F4 block were chosen using stratified random sampling, namely male and female respondents. A list of students residing at block F4 was obtained from the house father. Thereafter, the list was divided into two homogeneous groups of males and females. Then, within each stratum, simple random sampling procedure was performed.

Sampling procedure and sampling size

All students residing at block F4 had a chance to be participants in the study. The sampling procedure followed in the study was that within each stratum of males and females, 15 names were selected randomly from the list of males and the same applied for females. That is names on the list were assigned numbers and picked one at a time until a total of 15 are reached from each stratum. This brought the total number of participants to 30. From these two stratum participants stratum participants were then divided into six groups of five respondents.

Data handling and data collection

The data was collected during the period October 2007. On the first visit to Block F4 resident, the permission and cooperation of the housing representative council (HRC) and students was requested; on the second visit to Block F4 resident, sampling was done, and the researcher explained the significance of the study to the students. All those students that were stratified simple randomly selected from the resident list were given consent forms to sign if they agree to take part in the study (see Appendix A). On the third visit to block F4 resident, the researcher and assistant presented themselves to the HRC. The housing representative councilor allocated her room for the purpose of space for discussion with respondents. The room was arranged in such a way that respondents, the researcher and the assistance were sited in a circular fashion. All the information was captured by a tape recorder. The researcher and the assistant were also taking notes.

The researcher served as an instrument for data collection. Data was collected through unstructured interview of focus groups. The interview involved a direct interaction between the researcher and a group. Although the researcher was having some initial guiding questions or core concepts (see Appendix B) to ask about, there was no formal structured instrument or protocol. The interviewer was free to move conversation in any direction of interest that came up. During data collection, the researcher introduced issues to be discussed, made sure no one dominates the discussion, and kept people focused on the topic. The researcher made sure that everyone in the group had a chance to each question in order to get more representative data. As the tape recorder was used, during the focus group session, participants were asked to identify themselves by letters such as A, B, etc. at the beginning of the session, having them to do so helped the researcher to identify different speakers when transcribing the session later on.

Validity and reliability

Validity is the accuracy, meaningfulness, and credibility of the research project as a whole. Validity was ensured by doing triangulation. Triangulation has been defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2005) as the multiple sources of data which are collected with the hope that they will all converge to support a particular hypothesis or theory. It goes further clarifying that the approach is especially common in qualitative research; for instance, a researcher might engage in many informal observations in the field and conduct in depth interviews, then look for common themes that appear in the data gleaned from both methods. Three instruments were used to collect the same information, namely; the researcher, and the assistant taking notes, and tape recorder.

The information was then compared during data analysis to make sure that no information is missed out. The researcher then made a broad narrative of the data, so that the situation was described in sufficiently rich, “thick” detail that readers can draw their own conclusions from the data presented.

Reliability is the consistency with which a measuring instrument yields a certain result when the entity being measured has not changed. The tape recorder yields original results and therefore it is reliable.

Data analysis

Content analysis and descriptive statistics in the form of percentage were used to analyze the results. Thematic or content analysis was used, whereby information gathered was grouped into themes or according to similarities and thereafter analyze. A series of steps was followed in analyzing the data. The first one was familiarization. After the completion of data collection the researcher had immerse in the raw data by listening to the tape and reading the collected notes, in order to list key ideas and recurrent themes. It was then followed by identifying a thematic frame work, which involved identifying all the key issues, concepts, and themes by which the data can be examined and referenced. This was done by drawing on prior issues and questions derived from aims and objectives of the study as well as issues raised by the respondents themselves and views or experiences that recur in the data. At the end, a detailed index of the data, which labels the data in to manageable chunks for subsequent retrieval and exploration, was achieved.

The third one was the indexing, which is the applying of the thematic frame work or index systematically to all the data in textual form by annotating the transcripts with numerical codes from the index usually supported by short text descriptors to elaborate the index heading. Single passages of the text often encompassed a large number of different themes, each of which had to be recorded, usually in the margin of the transcript.

The fourth one was charting. It involved the rearranging of the data according to the appropriate part of the thematic frame work to which they relate, and forming charts. The charting process involved a considerable amount of obstruction and synthesis.

Lastly, mapping and interpretation. Using the charts to define concepts, the range and the nature of phenomena was mapped, classifications were created and association between themes were found with a view to providing explanation for the findings. The process of the mapping and interpretation was influenced by the original research objectives as well as by the themes that have emerged from the data themselves.

In descriptive statistics the general nature of the data obtained was summarized in to percentages, for instance, how certain measured characteristics appeared to be on average, how much variability existed among different pieces of data. After grouping the information according to similarity and themes, the results were then quantified in the form of percentage. The number of respondents per theme was used to calculate the percentage per sample size using a calculator.

Ethical consideration

The proposal was submitted to the University Higher Degree Committee and the Ethics Committee of the University of Venda for approval before data collection. Permission to conduct research in block F4 residence was granted by the house Father (see Appendix C). Research respondents were not exposed to undue physical or psychological harm. Respondents were told the nature of the study to be conducted and given choice of either participating or not participating and those who agree signed the consent form (Appendix A). The researcher kept the nature and quality of respondents' performance strictly confidential. During focus groups session only letters were used to identify individuals. Findings were reported in a complete and

honest fashion, without misreporting what has been found or intentionally misleading others about the nature of the findings. Full acknowledgement of all used material belonging to others was done.

Findings

Lack of time

When respondents were asked if they consume fast food, 36.7 % which were; three respondents from group 1 (C, D, & E), one respondent from group three (E), four respondents from group 4 (A, B, C & D) and three respondents from group five have said that they consume fast food because they sometimes lack time to prepare their own meals due to school work. They further said that it becomes worse during exam times because they will be doing a lot of studying.

People overwork, set time to watch television & surf the internet, but many people don't set the time to do the things that are important to them, for example cooking nutritious meal. Students under population studied, expressed lack of time as the main factor that influence the consumption of fast food. Similarly results were found by Atkins and Bowler (2001) in the study; "food in society, economy, culture and geography" in London, where it was said that due to a busier lifestyle of the consumers, emphases are increasingly being placed on quick meals solutions. Also similar results were found by Jekanowski *et al.*, (1997) from the study; "the impact of demographics, market characteristics and price on the consumption of food-away from home", were it was found that consumers combine meal time with time engaged in other activities such as work. Due to a busier lifestyle of tertiary students, emphases are increasingly being placed on quick meal solutions. Changing in living conditions also influence lack of time because students start new lives once they locate to University residence.

Lack of cooking skills and cooking utensils

Conversely 10% which were respondent B from group one, respondent A from group three and respondent E from group four have said that they consume fast food because they are nice and are not easy to prepare at home or here at school since the ingredients and cooking methods are hard to find. They also said that lack of knowledge; time and utensils to prepare such foods also contribute to the factors that influence them to buy fast food instead of cooking for themselves.

Many people lack cooking skills and this limits their ability to consume healthy balanced diet. People who don't feel confident when cooking often tend to rely on pre-prepared foods or take aways, which can be high in fat, salt, sugar and lot more expensive than making the same dishes themselves. The current study indicated that respondents consume fast food because they are unable to prepare tasty foods at the school residence due to lack of knowledge (recipes) and utensils to prepare such foods. Correspondingly the study from the National Consumer Council (2003) on "Everyday essentials, Meeting basic needs", reported respondents on low incomes identifying the barriers to a healthy diet as being not being able to cook, despite believing fast foods to be more expensive and less healthy.

Changes in living conditions

On the other hand 13% of the population studied, which were respondents B & C from group two, respondent B from group three and respondent E from group five have said that the reason they consume fast food is because since they are here at school they have no one to help them with cooking.

To add on that they continued saying that, unlike at home where there are other family members who can prepare food for them, here at school when they are feeling tired, hungry and lazy to cook they opt for fast food.

The increase on fast food consumption arose from the changes in many living conditions. The current study has shown that the changes in living conditions contribute to the consumption of fast food among students. Students change their eating habits when they locate in the University's residence. Students said "since we are here at school we have no one to help with cooking, and therefore when we feel tired and lazy to cook we opt to fast food". Similarly the results of a National Nutrition Survey by Mclean and Podger (1995) indicated that secondary and tertiary learners eating habits often change due to increased socialization with friends, part-time work and a generally more independent lifestyle. They tend to have more meals outside of the home, thus making their own decisions regarding what to eat.

Fun and craving

20% which were three respondents from group two (A, D & E), respondent D from group three, respondent A from group five and respondent C from group six have explained that they eat fast food for fun simply because they are nice, irresistible, cheap and available everywhere. Majority of fast food visits among individuals are spontaneous. In this study respondents have shown to eat fast food for fun simply because they are nice, irresistible, cheap and available everywhere. Similar results were obtained by Grieger (2000) in his study, Fast food craving conquered, where the respondents explained that they eat fast food unplanned. "We see fast food sign as we are driving by and before we know it we are munching." Moreover, other factors such as consumer attitude towards the price of the fast food significantly influence the cravings and frequency of fast food consumption (Park, 2004).

Socializing

Only 10% of respondents which were one respondent from group one (A), and two respondents (D & E) from group six has indicated a factor such as socializing with friends or partners, wherein they just decide to take themselves out as friends/ and partners and eat at the restaurant or buy takeaway. People at all stages of life cycle are likely to mention the role of food in social contact (Baum, 2003). In this recent study, UNIVEN students have indicated a factor such as socializing with friends/ or partners, wherein they just decide to eat out at the restaurants. Similar results were obtained by Park (2004) in the study; "Consumer values of eating out and fast food consumption in Korea", were it was found that eating out gives consumers to satisfy their hunger, and need for pleasure, entertainment and social interaction and the mood transformation.

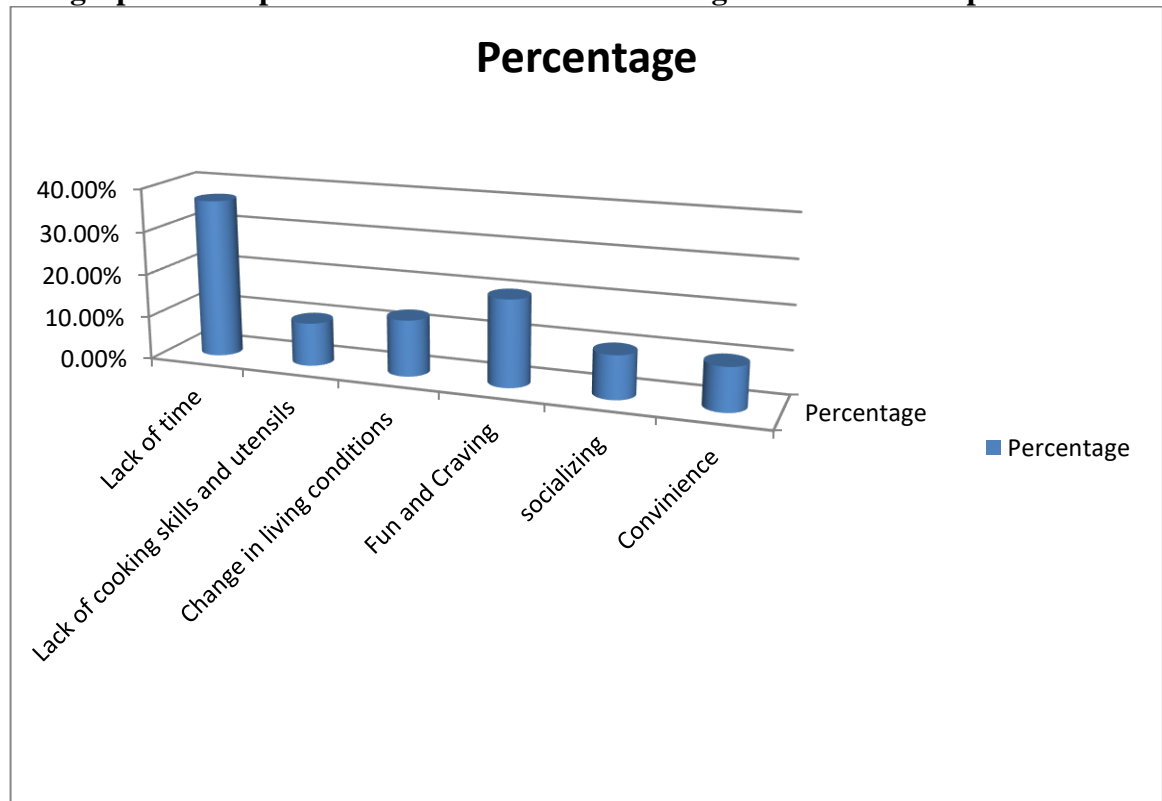
Convenience

10% of Respondents which were A & B from group six and C from group three said that they consume fast foods for convenience reasons like when they are busy, feeling hungry and being away from the room (outside the campus).

Convenience is anything that is intended to save time, energy or frustration. The recent study have revealed that students under the studied population consume fast food for convenience reasons, which was explained as being away from the room (outside the campus) and feeling hungry. Similarly a pilot study of college students in Spain and United States on fast food perception came to a same conclusion, when students were asked why they buy fast food, majority of students indicated convenience which was defined as proximity, lack of time, in hurry and speed of service as the main reason (Bryant & Dundes, 2006).



Bar graph results presentation of factors influencing fast food consumption



Factors influencing fast food consumption

Conclusion and recommendation

In conclusion consumption of fast food among university student is very common with a vast variety of reasons why they consume fast-food. However in this study majority of students (36.7%) reported to consume fast food due to perceived lack of time to prepare one's meal. Fast food consumption was found to be more frequent among students especially during lunch times and throughout the day during exam period. Other factors influencing fast food consumptions amongst students were; lack of cooking skills and cooking utensils, changes in living conditions, fun and craving, socializing, & convenience.

Recommendations

- Fast food outlets should be regulated to include wide range of nutritious food to enable the consumers to eat balanced meals even at the restaurants.
- Regulations to only allow advertisement of healthy options of fast food advertisements on different media
- Include basic nutrition education in primary & secondary schools in South Africa

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