

# The association between socio-economic status and fast food consumption in Australia

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## Abstract

The aim of this review paper is to explore the literature available on socio-economic status and fast food consumption in Australia. It also aims to study similar literature available for other countries, including western nations such as the US and UK. The paper also aims to come up with recommendations, based on the primary findings of the studies that have been examined. The consumption of fast food has grown around the world. There have been studies which have linked higher consumption of fast food to lower socio-economic status.

**Keywords:** Fast Food, Social Class, Socio-economic Status, Australia, Consumer Behaviour

## Introduction

Fast food consumption has increased significantly across the world over the past three decades. Mostly, this growth has also been a result of rapid urbanization and hectic lifestyles. In some cases, especially in case of developing countries, the fast food explosion has been the result of globalization and westernization. This rapid increase in fast food consumption around the world has also resulted in health crises, with more and more people facing diseases such as diabetes and obesity. Obesity has also been linked to cardiovascular diseases as well as cancers.

## Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, research studies that have explored fast food consumption and social class will be reviewed. These will include studies which have focused on various countries, including Australia.

## Results and Discussion

### Social Class

Previous research, such as Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle (1995); Glanz, Basil, Maibach et al. (1998); and Connors, Bisogni, Sobal et al. (2001), based in Europe and the US state that that among adults, the most important food choice motives include taste, health, price, and convenience of purchasing and preparing the food (as cited in Konttinen et al., 2012). There is evidence, studies such as Hupkens, Knibbe and Drop (2000); Lennernas, Fjellstrom, Becker et al. (1997); and Bowman (2006), that says price holds the greatest priority with low income individuals when compared to more educated and more affluent counterparts (as cited in Konttinen et al., 2012).

There have been studies which have explored the food choices of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. According to a study by Konttinen, Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, Silventoinen, Männistö, and Haukkala (2012), individuals belonging to “a lower socio-economic status (SES) tend to consume energy-dense foods more frequently, including energy-dense takeaway options, fatty meats and fried foods” when compared to people belonging to higher socio-economic backgrounds (pg. 873).

According to a study by Terry, Ervin, Soutter, Spiller, Nogare and Hamilton (2017), people from low to middle socio-economic backgrounds purchase and prepare more fast food and ready-made meals due to reasons such as a perceived lack of time to cook meals. Hence, it is not just consumption of fast food in restaurants, or the preferred takeout food, socio-economic status also dictates the kind of food which is consumed inside households.

According to Williams and Jackson (2005), an individual's diet is shaped by their socio-economic status (as cited by Wade, 2017). As per a study by Darmon and Drewnowski (2008), those individuals belonging to lower socio-economic status may consume more fats and salts in their diet, when compared to people belonging to higher socio-economic status, who consume more fruits and vegetables (as cited in Wade, 2017). This is indicative that these individuals from lower economic backgrounds may consume more fast food as compared to fruits and vegetables.

According to Bourdieu (1984), individuals from lower income families usually eat what is most filling and affordable whereas those belonging to higher income households pay more attention to nutrition, preparation, presentation service and entertaining guests (as cited in Terry et al., 2017). This means that for the people belonging to economically underprivileged backgrounds, the priority of eating something which is both affordable and filling, is higher than eating healthy. Hence, price and quantity outweigh health and nutrition.

Other studies, such as Miura, and Giskes (2010) and Lê, Auckland, Nguyen, Terry, Barnett (2013), state that food choice and consumption behaviour was also influenced by the fact that people from lower socio-economic status not having a high regard for food and associated health issues. This could lead to food consumption being less consistent with recommended dietary guidelines (as cited in Terry et al., 2017). Hence, it is not just the matter of price or the question of access to healthy food; people belonging to lower socio-economic status may also not possess sufficient knowledge in relation to food and its effects on health. They may even consider such information unessential, and hence, may not give it their complete attention and effort.

Education has the possibility of getting people to understand nutrition-related information and may "socialize them to adopting healthy dietary habits" (Konttinen et al., 2012, pg. 873). According to Astuti and Hanan (2011), the preferences for restaurants or eating joints are influenced by the social class of people (- as cited in Abdullah, Mokhtar, Bakar, and Al-Kubaisy, 2017).

### **Fast Food**

The term 'fast food' has been used by many researchers and academicians, such as Block, Scribner, and DeSalvo (2004); Richardson, Boone-Heinonen, Popkin, et al. (2011); and Bauer, Hearst, Earnest, et al. (2012), in the course of their study (as cited in Janssen, Davies, Richardson & Stevenson, 2018). Generally, the term 'fast food' refers to food from either domestic or multinational fast food chains such as McDonald's, Subway, Domino's Pizza, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Burger King, Pizza Hut etc (as cited in Janssen et al., 2018). Other authors have defined 'fast food' as food that has from restaurants which give prompt food service, options for carryout/takeout, limited wait staff, and in general, payment before the receipt of food (Block, Scribner, & DeSalvo, 2004 – as cited in Wade, 2017). For the purpose of this paper, the term 'fast food' includes both food from fast food chains, as well as ready-to-eat and takeout food from restaurants which sell fast food.

A large chunk of the consumers of fast food are young adults and youth around the world. In fact, the authors Janssen et al. (2018) state that fast food has been perceived as being a “a key aspect of youth identity, a way of expressing a youthful self and lifestyle image” (pg. 18). Youth from developed as well as emerging countries have been seen as favoring the consumption of fast food. Despite a lot of young people having information regarding the ill-effects of such food, youth consumption of fast food remains high because in general, risk-taking among this group of population in any country is higher than the others.

Food identity refers to individuals choosing or feeling pressured to eat in a manner that is influenced by others. A recent review by Sawka, McCormack, Nettel-Aguirre, et al. (2015) on dietary behaviour in youth found consistent evidence that suggested that individual unhealthy food consumption was associated with peer unhealthy food consumption (as cited in Janssen et al., 2018). In their study on fast food consumption in children, Khan, Powell and Wada (2012) state that lower income families were more likely to consume fast food due to access, regardless of the race they belong to (as cited in Wade, 2017).

Reitzel et al. (2014), in their study of ‘fast food density’, found that proximity to fast food increased the BMI of people by 2.45% per mile from the restaurant (as cited in Wade, 2017).

There have been studies which say that access to fast food is a significant factor in consumption of fast food. This means that close proximity to fast food restaurants increases the probability that the fast food consumption of neighbourhood residents would be higher. According to Thornton, Lamb and Ball (2016), access to a high number of fast food restaurants may encourage greater consumption of fast food products. There have been studies, mentioned ahead, which explore the presence of fast food restaurants around schools, in a bid to target children and young adults. Same is true for economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In this case, there are chances that the residents would prefer to eat fast food, instead of travelling far for buying healthy and nutritious food options.

### **Fast Food Intake in Australia**

According to a study carried out in Melbourne by Burns, Bentley, Thornton, and Kavanagh (2015), families which had financial as well as physical barriers, in form of lack of transportation, were more likely to purchase food from fast food restaurants and chains. foods

According to the study conducted by Thornton, Lamb and Ball (2016) in Victoria, socio-economically disadvantaged areas had greater access to fast food restaurants. The same was found to be true in the neighbourhood of secondary schools. There was greater locational access in case of primary and secondary schools in the most economically disadvantaged area of the major city area.

### **Fast Food Intake in Other Countries**

The explosion of fast food consumption worldwide, especially in countries such as China, India, and Russia, is an example of how, today, fast food is a major portion of food availability and food options in the global market. This is an example of the dietary dependence on imported, processed as well as fast food is becoming stronger globally (Christian & Gereffi, 2017).

In their study on Malaysian university students, Habib et al. (2011) found that 84% of these students consumed fast food (- as cited in Abdullah, Mokhtar, Bakar, & Al-Kubaisy, 2017). According to another study, Moore et al. (2009) found that the participants in their study who had the least education and income consumed more fast food than the participants who had more

education and income (- as cited in Abdullah et al., 2017). Hence, as per this study, both low socio-economic status, as well as low education status, could be linked to greater fast food consumption amongst university students in Malaysia.

In a study conducted by Naidoo et al. (2017) on Singaporean adults, it was found that younger participants, especially those of Chinese and Malay ethnicity, were more likely to eat at Western fast-food restaurants, when compared to participants belonging to Indian ethnicity. As per the same study, women perceived that the availability of pocket money enabled children to eat at more expensive, fast food restaurants. Hence, in a lot of Asian and African countries, western fast food restaurants were one of the more expensive options for eating out. As a result, fast food consumption was not more common among individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds. Instead, youth and children who had a larger proportion of disposable income on hand were more likely to consume fast food in Asian countries.

As per a study conducted by Prabhu (2015) in Manipal University, India, it was found that fast food had become a symbol of 'modern culture' as it satisfies customers in a relatively short time. In the same study, the author found that majority of students preferred to eat fast food. Some of the factors that drove them to make their food choices included quality, timeliness of service, and a reasonable price.

Similarly, in some African nations, fast food consumption is linked to higher disposable incomes. According to Klobodu, Kessner, and Johnson (2018), higher disposable incomes in certain African nations has resulted in higher spending on 'luxury goods' such as fast food, which is considered as a symbol of affluence in these countries.

As opposed to this, in western countries, the consumption of fast food was linked to low socio-economic background. In their study conducted in lower secondary schools in Finland, Virtanen et al. (2015) found that the presence of fast food restaurants near schools was associated with irregular eating habits and a propensity for being overweight amongst youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

As per Ziauddeen et al. (2015), in the UK, economically underprivileged neighbourhoods had the highest density fast food restaurants. These areas also had a higher prevalence of childhood obesity.

A US study by Fraser, Edwards, Cade, et al. (2010) showed fast food consumption in children increased 300% between the period of 1977 to 1996 (as cited in Janssen et al., 2018). This has resulted in an obesity epidemic amongst the youth in the country and lifestyle diseases are affecting these young adults in larger numbers every day. Fast food consumption is also different amongst the different races living in the US. For example, the African American community in the US has been studied extensively for the risk factors associated with their consumption of fast food. According to Wade (2017), several sociocultural factors explain this risk factor including a history of systematic relocation, segregation, and substandard housing. African American neighbourhoods in the US have the highest 'fast food density' – a term defined by Kwate (2008) as the number of fast food restaurants per mile (as cited in Wade 2017).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, it is clear that all the studies agree about the link between low socio-economic status and its link to higher consumption of fast food. Fast food consumption has exploded around the globe, with fast food corporations expanding on a global scale in order to offset the

pressure they are feeling in the US to provide healthier food options. Despite this, reducing fast food consumption has been difficult everywhere, including in the US.

It was seen that in western countries, the economically underprivileged neighbourhoods had higher density of fast food outlets. In western countries, there was a clear link between low socio-economic status and consumption of fast food. But in Asian and African countries, this link was not very clear. In fact, in a few countries, it was seen that fast food consumption was highest amongst youth with higher disposable income as eating at western fast food joints was perceived as being a symbol of 'modernity'. In certain African countries, fast food was seen as a symbol of affluence.

### **Recommendations**

As per a 2011 estimate, more than 25% of Australian children between the ages of 5 and 17 years were overweight and obese (Australian Health Survey 2011-12 – as cited in Boylan, Hardy, Drayton, Grunseit, & Mihrshahi, 2017). With obesity being a big threat to the health of young adults in the country, it is essential that efforts are made to ensure that the consumption of fast food is reduced and that the youth is given both information and motivation to make healthy food choices.

One of the main recommendations of this review paper is that stakeholders must make effort to understand the distribution patterns of fast food restaurants around city areas. This would help policymakers in developing the correct strategy for regulating the number of fast food restaurants, especially those around economically marginalized neighbourhoods and schools. Otherwise, the propensity of fast food restaurants to be located around economically disadvantaged areas may propel the population residing there towards making greater unhealthy food choices. This may result in a greater health crisis, than is being witnessed at present.

Another recommendation is that people from underprivileged backgrounds must be provided with thorough knowledge about food and its impact on health. In addition, steps must be taken to ensure that individuals belonging to low and middle socio-economic backgrounds have greater access to healthier food options and restaurants which serve healthy food.

One recommendation that came out of the study by Burns et al. (2015) says that policies which have the potential to improve people's "financial access to food and lessen the effect of physical limitations to carrying groceries may reduce the purchasing of fast foods" (pg. 143). Here, by 'physical limitations', the authors mean a lack of transportation services.

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