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The Fast Food Industry's Role in the Rising Rate of Obesity Among People of Low Socioeconomic Status

Abstract

Limited financial resources and environmental access to healthy food have caused people of low socioeconomic status to eat fast food because it is affordable and convenient. As a result of frequent consumption of this unhealthy food, there is a high rate of obesity among this demographic. This paper explores the extent to which the fast food industry is responsible for the rising rates of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status. The fast food industry is highly accountable for the increased rate of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status due to economic and environmental factors that drive them towards frequently consuming energy-dense fast food. After bringing this issue to light, it is desirable that efforts to reduce frequent consumption of fast food among this demographic will take place.

Imagine suffering two heart attacks before the age of 56 as a result of being morbidly obese, weighing 272 pounds and standing 5'10", due to frequent visits to the neighborhood McDonald's. Your doctor has warned you that your frequent visits to McDonald's are to blame for your high levels of cholesterol (which caused the arterial blocks that lead to your heart attacks) and your obese weight status that has come from eating fast food products high in fat and sugar. Despite his advice, you continue to purchase the food because it is more readily accessible and cheaper than healthier more expensive fresh produce that can be found in a high-end supermarket. This situation is commonly found among people of low socioeconomic status and leaves many wondering, who is to blame for this situation?

The fast food industry has been criticized on numerous occasions for selling products that contain extremely high amounts of fat and or sugars; making them energy-dense. Intake of this energy-dense fast food is linked to causing unhealthy weight gain, leading to obesity (Swinburn, et al. 130). Obesity is defined as having a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or above, which is a calculated height to weight ratio. Upon further examining the rise in obesity rates, people are starting to see a relationship that shows people of a low socioeconomic status represent a larger population of the obese and unhealthy people in America in comparison to those of more economically stable

backgrounds (Reidpath, et al. 141) (See Table 1).

In an effort to pinpoint the cause of this epidemic, the fast food industry's role in creating poor health among current citizens within the United States of low socioeconomic status will be analyzed. The McDonald's Corporation will serve as the agent for the basis of this research because the company is ranked number one for having the best product value in comparison to the rest of the fast food establishments in the nation (Zagat 2011). This research will explore to what extent the fast food industry is responsible for the rise in obesity among people of low socioeconomic status in the U.S. Opponents of the fast food industry believe fast food corporations should be held more accountable for the unhealthy products they are selling to their customers and should take measures to aid the health of people of low socioeconomic status by providing healthier food options. On the other hand, people believe individuals (no matter what their life circumstances) are responsible for their own health, and the fast food industries should not be held accountable for the lifestyle choices people make that lead to obesity. Although there is debate as to whether or not obesity is a disease or a self-created health ailment, the claims made against fast food companies will be made under the notion that obesity is a disease.

The theoretical framework that will be utilized to structure this research paper is the journal article "Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Excess Weight Gain and Obesity" written by Professor Boyd Swinburn. Swinburn is noted for establishing the WHO Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention and Related Research and Training at Deakin University in Australia. This scholarly journal entry will be used to explore the effects fast food corporations have on the lives of people of low socioeconomic status. Research will reveal that the fast food industry is highly accountable for the increased rate of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status due to economic and environmental factors that drive them towards frequently consuming energy-dense fast food.

Professor Boyd Swinburn and his colleagues at his WHO Collaborating Centre's journal article "Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Excess Weight

Gain and Obesity” serves as a theoretical framework for this essay. Swinburn frames his work utilizing the epidemiological triad, which analyzes the etiological factors¹ of a disease (See Figure 1). Swinburn uses the triad of people (hosts), foods and nutrients (agents or vectors), and physical, economic and socio-cultural factors to explain how the environment affects the onset of obesity (Swinburn, et al. 125). Swinburn points out factors that increase the risk of obesity: being a host of low socioeconomic status², vectors that are energy-dense³, and environments that are characterized as being food deserts⁴ (See Table 2). Swinburn’s break down of economic, environmental and food consumption behaviors that lead to obesity will be utilized to determine why the fast food industry has played a major role in rising rates of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status.

A study of impoverished people conducted in 1966 showed that limited sources of nutrition were the cause of their deplorable health statuses (Brown 239). In response to public outrage that came with these findings, President Nixon had Congress expand the Federal Food Stamp Program as well as the Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children (Brown 239). Positive outcomes were achieved temporarily, but the problem still persisted. In the 1980’s hunger was defined in a Harvard study as a "chronically inadequate nutritional intake due to low income status” officially recognizing a link between health and socioeconomic status (Brown 241). However, during the Regan administration food subsidies for economically disadvantaged people were cut by 24 billion dollars (Brown 247), making it more difficult for less advantaged people to have access to proper nutrition.

1. Etiological Factors: elements that lead to the causation of a disease.
2. Low Socioeconomic Status: Measured by education, income, type of occupation, place of residence, and in some populations, ethnicity and religion. Categorization varies based on the method used for calculating
3. Energy-Dense: Food high in fat and sugar. Excessive consumption causes weight gain.
4. Food Desert: Urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready

access to fresh, healthy, and affordable food.

The economy today is struggling and money is not being pumped into programs to help less fortunate people at a level where they can be financially stable enough to purchase healthier foods. The Hunger and Food Security Module conducted by the U.S. Census and released by U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) determined that over 35 million Americans are currently living in households with serious food problems (Brown 241). These people are classified as being “food insecure” or having diets with reduced quality, increased consumption of energy-dense foods, and restrained food supply (Brown 241). American hunger and poverty expert, Larry J Brown, attributes these conditions to an increase in obesity in the US (Brown 243). The rise of hunger among people of low socioeconomic standing has created a backdrop for the rise in obesity among this demographic. The “more for less” gimmick that fast food offers, financially appeals to people who have limited funds, and the oversaturation of these companies within environment that these people live in does not promote healthy lifestyles.

Despite a call to action released by the U.S. Surgeon General in 2001 to “Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity” to increase health among less affluent populations in America, obesity is still a national issue (US Surgeon General 2001). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Shape Up America, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Obesity are launching campaigns to help combat and prevent the disease (CDC 2004). These organizations are looking to encourage people to make changes in their personal lifestyle, their communities, and eating habits to help people maintain good health. In an effort to aid in combating the obesity epidemic among people of low socioeconomic status, factors that have influenced obesity rates to be high among this demographic will be analyzed.

Fast food giants like McDonald’s are often a focal point of discussion when analyzing the rising rate of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status. Swinburn identifies energy-dense food as an agent of obesity, (Swinburn, et al. 132). Fast food products fall under this category of energy-

dense food because they contain high amounts of fat and sugar. For example, McDonalds' Big Mac Value Meal (Medium Soda, Fries and Big Mac) contains 1150 calories, 48 grams of fat (74% of the suggested daily value), and 69 grams of sugar (Meal Builder 2010). As Swinburn points out, the "physiological-behavioral consequence of a high percent fat diet is a slow weight gain through the 'passive over consumption of total energy'" (Swinburn, et al. 128). As a result of energy-dense fast food not being burned at a rate high enough to break down all that was ingested, the energy consumed accumulates. This causes weight gain, which in time develops into obesity and other health ailments associated with the disease (See Table 3). Fast food menu items contain ingredients known to cause unhealthy weight gain, making the fast food industry responsible for aiding in the onset of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status.

In order to understand the fast food industry's role within the rise of obesity an analysis on the host (people of low socioeconomic status) is essential. People of low socioeconomic status are at a disadvantage when trying to live a healthy lifestyle because they live off of a low income. According to Daniel Reidpath, Director of Public Health at the Institute of Infectious Diseases of Poverty, "as SES [Socioeconomic Status] declines, the risk of obesity increases" (Reidpath, et al. 141). As Swinburn explains, "food prices have a marked influence on food buying behavior and consequently nutrient intakes" (Swinburn, et al. 134). Financial restriction prevents this demographic of people from having the luxury of purchasing fresh produce, causing them to consume unhealthy food which can lead to weight gain and obesity.

A correlation between food prices and nutritional value can be seen in a study conducted by Adam Drenowski, Director of the Center for Public Health Nutrition and the Center for Obesity Research. Drenowski's study focuses in on the cost of U.S. food as related to their nutritional value. His findings show that fruits and vegetables are more expensive than fats and sugars per calorie and per serving (See Figure 2). Drenowski suggests this

difference in cost and affordability “may help to explain why low-cost, energy-dense foods that are nutrient poor are associated with lower education and incomes” (Drenowski 1181). Financial strain and food insecurity within the host raises the appeal of cheap energy-dense fast food that provides the customer with more calories for their dollar (See Figure 3). Further research done by Drenowski and his colleague S.E Specter found “limited economic resources may shift dietary choices toward an energy-dense, highly palatable diet that provides maximum calories per the least volume and the least cost” (Drenowski, Specter 11). The economic circumstance of people of low socioeconomic status causes the fast food industry to play a major role in the lives of economically disadvantaged people because they are more suited to purchase affordable energy-dense fast food rather than healthier, more expensive food.

In order to satisfy hunger, people that are not able to feed themselves with pricy fresh produce rich in nutrition are more attracted to the appeal of feeding themselves at a cheaper price. This creates what Brown cites as being “food insecurity”, which is characterized by “families who do not eat what they know they need because they cannot buy it” (Brown 241). The presence of food insecurity among people of low socioeconomic status has caused these people to turn to fast food companies like McDonald’s where they can purchase more food and calories, for less money because this is a more financially sound.

On the contrary, many believe that obesity is a self-created health issue as a result of over eating and poor self-control. This notion is based upon the belief that obesity is not a disease but a self inflicted ailment. It is difficult to challenge fast food companies’ unhealthy products and solely blame them for causing poor health because those who defend the fast food industry believe that obesity is something brought on by the individual. As a result, Dr. Michelle Mello points out that when challenging fast food companies, “Plaintiffs will have to grapple with the contributory roles of their own unhealthful behavior, such as extensive television viewing, failure to participate in physical activity at recommended levels, and consuming foods

with empty calories or foods high in saturated and trans fats” (Mello 210). Alleviating these contributing factors can help prevent and lower the rise of obesity, but when focusing on the lives of people of low socioeconomic status, management becomes more difficult because options are limited.

Financial strain prevents this demographic of people from being able to purchase food that is healthier and the environment that these people live in does not support a healthy lifestyle. When challenged financially, healthy behavior is compromised and an individual in this circumstance will purchase fast food more often because it is cheaper. As a result, fast food establishments have become a greater factor within these peoples’ lives and are contributing to the increase in weight among these individuals and ultimately the rising rate of obesity. The relationship between people of low socioeconomic status and fast food establishments makes these companies have a significant role in the decline in health among people of low socioeconomic status.

Resources within an environment can affect whether or not a population is able to properly nurture themselves. According to Swinburn, “people living in low SES [socioeconomic status] circumstances may be more at the mercy of the increasingly obesogenic environment and end up taking the default choices on offer” (Swinburn, et al. 133). Obesogenic factors within the environment of an individual of low socioeconomic status include things the increased presence of fast food, and decreased presence of affordable fresh produce. A decreased presence of affordable healthy food options has caused this demographic to eat poorly and be heavily influenced by the oversaturated presence of fast food establishments. A study conducted by Kimberly Morland and her colleagues found “Fast-food restaurants are more prevalent in the low-medium and medium-wealth neighborhoods and become less prevalent in the highest-wealth neighborhoods” (Morland, et al. 26) (See Table 4). Morland’s study also found “there are over 3 times as many supermarkets in the wealthier neighborhoods compared to the lowest-wealth areas (Morland, et al. 26)”. People of low socioeconomic status not only are financially restricted when it comes to eating healthy, they also have limited access to supermarkets that sell

fresh, healthy foods and greater access to cheap and convenient fast food. An environment of these qualities is deemed as being a food desert. A study conducted at the University of Minnesota about eating habits among women and their socioeconomic status shows that living in this type of environment, has affected the eating habits of this demographic immensely (See Table 5). Living within a food desert has caused demographic to lower their healthy food intake and increase fast food intake, which is consequently affecting their health. The heightened presence of fast food establishments within this environment makes the industry very influential and responsible for the rising rates of obesity among this demographic.

Research conducted by Professor Tamara Dubowitz, a researcher from the RAND Corporation, has shown that the socioeconomic status of a neighborhood effects nutrient intake. The study found “Neighborhood SES was positively associated with combined fruit and vegetable intake for whites, blacks, and Mexican Americans” (Dubowitz, et al. 1888). Socioeconomic status positively influenced the consumption of healthy fruits and vegetables. Specifically, Dubowitz’s data showed that “persons in poor families consumed 0.62 fewer daily servings [of fruits and vegetables] than did those in high-income families” (Dubowitz, et al. 1886). Lowered fruit and vegetable consumption among this demographic has developed as a result of having limited finances and, as a result of key obesogenic factors that Morland’s study uncovered; the decreased presence of supermarkets and the increased presence of fast food establishments.

The American Journal of Preventative Medicine recently released a study by Ruopeng An and Roland Sturm, which has countered the claim that food deserts exist. An and Sturm conducted a study in California youth to find a relationship between BMI and the food environment. Their study found “no evidence to support the hypotheses that improved access to supermarkets, or less exposure to fast-food restaurants or convenience stores within walking distance, improves diet quality or reduces BMI among Californian youth” (An, Sturm 131). The results of this study are causing people to question the validity

of food deserts. Many believe that food deserts do not play a major role in the eating behaviors of people of low socioeconomic status and that agency is more significant. As the conclusion of this study notes, “this correlational study has measurement and design limitations. Longitudinal studies that can assess links between environmental, dependent, and intervening food purchase and consumption variables are needed” (An, Sturm 129). This study is faulty because it utilizes correlations to support the hypothesis rather than utilizing causation to support the evidence. The evidence is also very limited and narrow in scope of geography, demographic, and time. This study by An and Sturm suggests human autonomy is the determining factor for rising obesity rates however, when exercising agency people of low socioeconomic status have limited food options to choose from.

People of high socioeconomic status have been able to maintain a lower rate of obesity than people of low socioeconomic status because their environment supports a healthier lifestyle. The contrasting environmental conditions of low and high socioeconomic neighborhoods correlate with obesity rates in America, demonstrating that socioeconomic status is a key factor in obesity rates (See Table 4 and Table 5). With this established, the presence of fast food companies in poor neighborhoods have become more significant to people of low socioeconomic status than those of high socioeconomic status. People of high socioeconomic status are able to maintain a healthier lifestyle despite the presence of fast food establishments (which are less prevalent in these neighborhoods) because they “have greater opportunities for healthy eating” (Swinburn, et al. 133). People of high socioeconomic status have access to higher quality food sources that are healthy, and less exposed to fast food establishments, encouraging them to stay healthy. An increased presence of fast food establishments within the environment of an individual that has restricted access to healthy food makes these companies a significant factor within these individuals’ living environment. Fast food establishments are significantly responsible for the rising rate of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status because they

are a preferred source of nutrition within an environment that does not encourage healthy eating, and encourages the consumption of fast food products. As a result, frequent consumption of energy-dense fast food has led to the increased rates of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status, making the fast food industry highly accountable.

Breaking down and examining the etiological factors of the environment, as Swinburn does in his study, helps demonstrate the extent to which the fast food industry is responsible for the rates of obesity among individuals of low socioeconomic status. By identifying the fast food industry as a contributing factor to the decline in health among people of low socioeconomic status, plans of action can be made and acted upon to help solve the obesity epidemic among this demographic. This epidemic must be stopped to help increase the healthiness of the less fortunate in America so that they can position themselves to live healthier, more prosperous lives. Efforts to help decrease the rate of obesity can also help reduce the overall healthcare spending on ailments associated with the disease which currently costs \$190.2 billion per year (20.6 percent of total expenses) (Kelley 2012).

People of low socioeconomic status can be aided with establishing healthy eating habits by action being taken within their neighborhoods. The influence of the fast food industry on this demographic can be reduced by increasing the presence of affordable fresh foods and decreasing the oversaturated presence of fast food establishments within the environment of these people. Government subsidized fresh food stands could provide people of low socioeconomic status with healthier, affordable food options. By doing so, these people would be able to exercise agency at their own discretion and have healthier food options available for them. Most importantly, the fast food companies must acknowledge how significant their presence is within neighborhoods of low socioeconomic status, as well as the rest of the nation. Fast food industry giants like Burger King, Wendy's, KFC, and Pizza Hut must follow the lead of McDonald's, who is already in the process of revamping their menu to help provide customers with healthier products

(Proud 2011). By doing so, people of lower socioeconomic status, as well as the rest of America can begin taking steps to lower obesity rates across the nation.

The fast food industry plays a significant role in the lives of people of low socioeconomic status due to economic and environment factors that drive them towards frequently consuming energy-dense fast food. The findings of this research paper show financial restraint and environmental factors of this demographic drive individuals toward frequently consuming fast food and do not encourage or support healthy eating habits. The fast food industry has taken on a significant role in the lives of these people. The low cost of fast food and its high-energy content is more appealing to people with low incomes because purchasing fast food financially more efficient than spending money at the supermarket on fresh and healthier food. The fast food industry can be identified as a significant contributor to the rising rate of obesity among people of low socioeconomic status as a result of reduced availability to healthier and affordable alternatives that accommodate the financial standing of this demographic.

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