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The Master of Disguise: Fast Food Chains and Their Influence On Youth

So cheap, so convenient, and so comforting – qualities so alluring, it is easy to disregard the life threatening nature of fast food. Children and teens are especially vulnerable to such tempting qualities of junk food, since fast food chains have developed a marketing omnipresence on television and in schools. In fact, as Michael Pollan, a prominent food journalist reveals, “one in three of [American children] eat fast food every single day!” (109). Evidently, the fast food industry has successfully permeated daily life, making processed food so commonplace and desirable that youth have become brainwashed to alter their lifestyle and diet, preferring high sodium and cholesterol packed foods in place of home cooked meals and nutritious produce. Moreover, fast food menus deceive children and parents, advertising low prices and images of happy eaters, blinding customers to the ingredients that comprise their food.

It is also significant to consider federal food policy, which accounts for why junk food is so accessible and affordable in comparison to wholesome fresh food; for the U.S. government subsidizes junk food additives instead of fruits and vegetables. Despite such an overwhelming presence of fast food corporatism, there is hope: the food movement. Considerable research, exposes, and community activism is growing in resistance to the corporate fast food regime. For example, Michael Pollan, the author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, exposes the true nature of our industrial food, as a poor manifestation of processed corn. Furthering the argument about junk food manipulation, writer Eric Schlosser argues that multinational corporations use target marketing in schools so that children and parents perceive junk food establishments as their loyal

friends. Alternatively, writer Daniel Imhoff advocates for the return of “victory gardens” as a means of restoring our national health and food security.

While cheap, convenient, and comforting ready-made food may seem like the best economic value, in reality, the excessive consumption only provides youth temporary satisfaction and costly long-term health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Therefore, in order for meaningful change to occur, our nation’s youth, parents, and politicians have to collectively reevaluate food policy, eating habits, and food values.

Lack of self-restraint and laziness are common explanations for youths’ growing waistlines and health issues; however, such assertions overlook the root of the problem. The majority of our food today contains large quantities of engineered corn products adding unnecessary dosages of sugar. Behind the friendly façade of a nicely packaged burger, fries, and shake is actually a load of processed corn products, the source of extra calories. Yet, these corn products are never mentioned on the menu. Pollen informs readers that “corn accounts for most of the surplus calories we’re growing and ... eating” in which food producers “transform the cheap [surplus] commodity into a value added consumer product— a denser and more durable package of calories” (103). While corn may sound nutritious, the refining process completely strips all nutrient value from the corn to create high fructose corn syrup, corn flour, corn oil, corn preservatives, and corn starch— just to name a few. Unfortunately, since corn is so abundant and cheap, American junk food franchises use corn in place of natural ingredients to make their products, which is why junk food is so affordable in comparison to fresh natural food. But is the low cost worth the long-term health ramifications? For every chicken McNugget and Big Mac a child enjoys, that child is consuming large amounts of corn and sugar that exceed the daily maximum of the suggested intake.

Equally distressing, as Pollan reveals, is that the U.S. government “subsidizes high fructose corn syrup... but not carrots” in which “the cheapest calories in the supermarket will continue to be the unhealthiest” (108). In other words, our government is working in conjunction with the food industry to stimulate the obesity epidemic by making it more expensive for families to provide healthy alternatives for their children. Instead, the government should reallocate funds for organic farmers and subsidize grocery stores to promote the consumption of other vegetables and less processed foods. Redrafting a farm bill that seriously considers our youth’s health is one strategic step to ending the obesity epidemic.

Inexpensive prices lure youth to gorge on empty calories full of salt, sugar, and fat at the expense of their health. This phenomenon of eating junk food has manifested into an alarming health concern; according to the surgeon general, “obesity today is officially an epidemic ... costing the health care system an estimated \$90 billion a year” (Pollan 102). But what about the individual healthcare costs? For every dollar parents are supposedly “saving” by purchasing value priced processed food, they are actually funding their children’s chance of becoming overweight and possibly developing type II diabetes. In other words, the real price on the menu is not stated: pay one dollar now and thousands of dollars later for health bills. But, unfortunately it costs time and money to eat healthy. Today, it is more likely that busy parents with a limited budget will purchase their child processed junk than fresh ingredients to prepare a home cooked meal. While it might appear that buying food from the fast food empire makes “economic cents” as Pollan argues, because one gets more calories and energy per dollar, in reality consumers are only digging their own grave (108). If junk food continues to be as cheap as it today, youth will continue to feast on inexpensive processed foods, ultimately sacrificing their well being.

It is also important to note the alarming quantity of fast food children are consuming at popular eateries. Bargain deals, supersizing options, and two-for-one specials, as Pollan discusses in “The Consumer: A Republic of Fat,” persuade customers to believe bigger is better. Companies manipulate youth by providing more food at a lower cost making young consumers believe the company is serving their best interest. Consequently, kids consume more than they should since larger portions cost less than smaller portions. But bigger is not better. As Pollan reports “a recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, predicts that a child born in 2000 has a one in three chance of developing diabetes” and “today’s children may turn out to be first generation of Americans whose life expectancy will actually be shorter than their

parents” (102). I present this statistic as a call to action. We should not be complacent with this current state of affairs. It’s not just the responsibility of our government to fix our broken food system and imbalanced diets. Concerned friends, parents, students, and politicians need to rise up and take action to restore the future of our youth’s health.

The lure of junk food is not just the price but also the sensual pleasure it offers. Comfort food from McDonalds, Burger King, and Taco Bell, is clearly designed to appeal to our human appetite for fats, sugars, salts, and carbohydrates. Thus, by injecting corn-based sugar products into our food, we crave more and subsequently purchase more. Writer Maureen O’ Hagan confirms this biological temptation paradigm in her article, “ Kids Battle the Lure of Junk Food” stating that when eating comfort food it makes “you feel good, your brain actually changes” because it “[activates] the brain’s emotional core” (13). Fast food companies capitalize on children’s “human desire for sweetness” by manipulating the food with cheap corn emulsifiers and high fructose corn syrup, consequently threatening the livelihood of our future leaders. The health of our nation’s youth is not the priority of fast food industries; maximum profits are. Similarly, for adolescents, immediate satisfaction, not long-term health issues, is their priority, thus, youth are the perfect demographic to manipulate. Since neurobiological senses are chemically wired to prefer such foods, adolescents have a double battle to fight: their own biology and the unavoidable dominance of junk food advertising.

Fast food is ever-present in America, but more concerning is the accessibility and prevalent advertising in public schools. Public schools are supposed to be centers of learning, free from corporate interests, but, as Schlosser reveals once more, fast food chains are threatening this very foundation. For instance in many Colorado public schools, junk food corporations have infiltrated schools using their economic capital to market their products in

school hallways, classroom teaching materials, and cafeterias (52). It appears that children attending these schools are trained to be fervent consumers, not critical thinkers. Placing soda vending machines in every hallway and selling sugary fatty foods in the cafeterias is detrimental to students' health. Clearly, revenue takes precedence over children's health; however, it would be in the school's best interest to provide healthy food to produce healthy minds and subsequently high-test scores. But unfortunately, as Schlosser explains, corporate sponsorship between food corporations and schools "is to cover shortfalls in a school district's budget" (51). With limited taxpayer and government support, public schools are vulnerable and at the mercy of junk food hegemony.

Although junk food corporations support schools financially, these brainwashing corporations are the antithesis of support, for they implement negative eating habits. While it is easy to cast blame and judgment on school leaders who permit corporate interference, all Americans are responsible for upholding health standards for our nation's youth. Our civic duty compels us to demand more money be allocated for schools even if it has to come from our taxpaying dollars. In order to help end the obesity epidemic, schools have to educate students about nutrition and health. Especially since children spend a large portion of their time at schools, teachers have the opportunity to teach more than academics but lifestyle habits.

The desire for junk food among youth is more than just about eating appetizing cheap food; moreover, it is a social custom connoting belonging, acceptance, and status. For example, hanging out at the local fast food eatery afterschool or at the mall food court on the weekend are important social practices that dictate a teen's social status. Thus, it is hard to influence youth to reevaluate the way they eat when they highly regard fast food chains. Youth need to reconsider what is a good time and find alternative fulfilling activities. One proposal for improving the

health of our youth, is investing in garden projects at schools, parks, and community centers. Garden projects can teach teens to take responsibility for their health. Daniel Imhoff, author of “Food on the Front Lines” argues that gardening is beneficial for the body and mind as “farming’s physical activity and working with nature are found to be profoundly therapeutic and healing. Growing food and connecting with consumers provides farmers with a positive mission and sense of responsibility and purpose” (18). Furthermore, it’s a practical way to provide fresh produce to families that otherwise is expensive in supermarkets. We have to arm our youth with the necessary tools for production in order to cultivate a healthy lifestyle. I propose that gardening become the new social practice among youth. While this is not the only necessary solution to end the current health crisis, it is one immediate practice that could help change the adolescent mindset, culture, and consciousness about junk food. Gardening can assist youth to take responsibility and practice self-determination for their health, teaching good habits that they will carryout throughout their life.

While junk food is comforting and temporarily satisfying, it is not food for the mind, body, and soul. Even though fast food chains market themselves as family-friendly and hip for teens, they are not serving the best interest of youth. When eating ready-made food, cheap prices often take precedence over any consideration about what ingredients are in the food. But, as the saying goes, you are what you eat. So, if you want to help end the obesity epidemic, alongside youth, parents, and teachers, you ought to fight with your fork and knife against the ubiquity of the fast food empire and demand that the U.S. government subsidize vegetables, not cheap sugar products, and also provide funding for gardening projects.

Works Cited

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