

“TANGY TEMPTATION: McDONALD'S & MARKETING TO A FOODIE WORLD” 1

**TANGY TEMPTATION:
McDONALD'S & MARKETING TO A FOODIE WORLD**

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Abstract

Over ten years ago, journalist Eric Schlosser released a muckraking treatise on the fast food industry. Titled *Fast Food Nation*, the book upturned over nearly every aspect of one of America's most significant economical and cultural industries. As more individuals read Schlosser's book, joined Occupy movements, and watched the economy take a turn away from more hegemonic powers, they also watched a lot of television, specifically food television. Since starting up in 1993, The Food Network has ballooned into a lucrative operation for the co-op between Tribune Co. and E.W. Scripps, with broadcasts to over 96 million homes in 2008 (Swenson, 2009). This fascination with food media has resulted in a subculture that consumes images as easily as meals. This culture dutifully watches programs that inspire a passion for food and DIY recreation. Viewers connect with this industry that espouses gourmet cuisine and fresh, home-grown ingredients. Their connection bears more weight than with McDonald's corporate executives and systematically-produced burgers. Rather than a fast food nation, America is on its way to becoming a food nation, as evinced by a media eruption that surrounds food.

This study aims to explore the events that have created a food-savvy society, and what this societal shift indicates for fast food companies, specifically McDonald's, which occupies “a central place not just in the business world but also in American and global popular culture” (Ritzer, 2013, p. 6). This societal shift has created a dichotomy: Consumers are making new choices independent of hegemonic fast food corporations, while the corporations themselves are attempting to stay relevant in this fresh mindset. This study investigates the division between an individual consumer and corporate responsibility, a division that is becoming more ambiguous. Once the sign of American culture, McDonald's now is answering to the food culture it contributed to more than ever. In response, the corporate

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culture cosmetically changed profoundly, and it has changed its identity. Consumer discretion between food sources and products created the “foodie”; it also is what is changing McDonald's around completely. “The fast food industry embodies the best and the worst of American capitalism at the start of the twenty-first century-its constant stream of new products and innovations, its widening gap between rich and poor” (Schlosser, 2001, p. 6). Are recent efforts by McDonald's bridging the gap in tastes between affluent gourmets and mainstream Americans? In light of a market where everyone seems to be a “foodie,” the present study poses this question:

RQ1: In an increasingly food and health-minded culture, what changes have so-called “unhealthy” and culturally ingrained fast food restaurants made in their approach to marketing and advertising, and what do they reveal about the demands of consumers?

Chapter One: We are what we eat

As long as humans have enjoyed eating, they have also discussed their meals, whether boasting over their latest kill or chatting about an enterprising chef. Among religious beliefs or socioeconomic statuses, consumption of food and drink is a delineator. Eating is one of the more distinguishing characteristics of cultures, oftentimes being the simple presentation of a nation's grander lifestyles and rituals (Telfer, 2008, p. 25). In a globalized society, it is also bringing cultures closer and closer. International cuisines are appearing in suburban strip malls while fast food giants open internationally. Meister writes “food from primitive times has been intimately involved in creating identification and consubstantiation” for human beings (2001, p. 175).

Food gave people a pursuit that redefined the entire human experience. Douglas states the meal is what brought humans out of nomadic lifestyles and into trade and barter, a “human transformation from hunter and gatherer to market-conscious consumer” (in Meister, 2001, p. 170). In contemporary times of trade and barter, the collection and discussion of food has matured into a hobby, manifested in user-created reviews and independent food blogs. The term “foodie,” mockingly coined in Barry and Ley's 1984 book *The Official Foodie Handbook*, has come to represent a subset of Americans. With the increase in food media, this pursuit becomes more and more accessible even to those without a lot of disposable income, making the “foodie” a subset that grows daily. Though it includes just about any occupation, the “foodie” is usually an upwardly mobile professional with years of casual learning about food products, a high disposable income, and a knowledge that makes them more than passive consumers (Fattorini, 1994). The “foodie” has acquired this knowledge and casual yet obsessive learning through accessible food publications and programming. The foodie feels adequately fit for publishing their own opinions about the

quality of food in restaurants, at homes, or at a friend's house. (Fattorini, 1994). This leisurely pursuit perpetuates a liberal-bourgeois idea of food consumption that borders on snobbery and ostentatious opinion, not in general and easily understood terms (Wood, 1996). In fact, those who “take trouble” with food hold it as the basis of civility, meaning those who aren't picking apart their food are “boorish” or base (Telfer, 2008, p. 23). People craft food personalities to the point where the adage “you are what you eat” makes more sense than ever before.

Beyond using food as a delineator of socioeconomic status, the foodie subset has raised restaurants to be places of recreation in addition to being places of nourishment. The “foodie” has deified its nourishment, and others are catching on, spending less each year on luxury goods such as cars or jewelry and more on experiences such as spa treatments, traveling, and dining out. In *Lucky Peach*, Chris Cechin, an online video producer, claims “we have made a legitimate pop celebrity of food” (2012, p. 58). He notes a legitimate shift in the mass mindset about food and restaurants, citing media as the bridge for the gap. “Bad restaurants are closing all the time, and good ones are opening. If we're a bit smarter as a whole about what good food is—healthwise, tastewise—is food TV so wrong?” (Cechin, 2012, p. 61).

Included in that shift is a relatively new phenomenon where chefs are suddenly not service workers, but celebrities. 2011 cable networks took in more revenue than major networks, with Food Network ranking as seventeenth on most-watched cable channels (Cechin, 2012). Food Network's subject matter centers around the fantasy of cooking celebrities, with no realistic or responsible depiction of the food world (Cechin, 2012, p. 60). The network commodifies and promotes the ideology of “excessive consumption, technological dependence, and the commodification of nature” (Meister, 2001, p. 173). “The

dump and stir format” of Food Network shows does not incite a lot of active choices, but instead crafts an intangible and non-participatory (Cechin, 2012, p. 61). Food television does not appear to be inspiring viewers to “cook along,” nor is it getting them moving. “By associating domestic cooking with professional restaurateurship, magazine and television programmes [sic] blur the distinction between amateur and professional in the eyes of consumers,” giving viewers the knowledge, the looks, and the attitudes of the professional without necessarily the active responsibility or stresses of the food and beverage industry (Fattorini, 1994, p. 28). Food television is stressing the aesthetics and the experience of food, but in a passive way that has viewers glued to the couch, and not to a stove. “The victory of the aesthetic, the intrinsic qualities of the food, over the realities of financial considerations that occupy the everyday lives of catering professionals is the stuff that “foodie” television is made of (Fattorini, 1994, p. 27). Indeed, passive living has bitten off more than it can chew.

Broadcast television is experiencing a more remarkable revision in regard to food-based programming, while food-focused print seems to be immune to the struggles of bygone print publishing. With slumping subscriptions, companies are spending less advertising money on food products. For 2012, the amount of ad pages for food and food products is down by 17% since 2010-2011. In that same time, both Kraft Foods and Nestlé, two food product giants, together reduced their ad money for magazines by about 60% (Matsa, 2012). Large corporations are pulling their commodities out of the public eye. Strangely enough, food media as a subject has never been healthier, indicating a power shift in less of a product and more of an ideal. In the midst of advertising pulls and sinking magazine subscription, 2011 saw the release of 28 new food magazines, indicating an emerging field that is not bound to the fate of news magazines (Matsa et. al, 2012). The typical three daily meals (or maybe more) are ruling the media and the minds of its viewers. In essence, our media diet as

well as food diets are changing and therefore shifting the operations of corporations, and the fast food industry has taken notice.

The present study is divided into chapters, with chapter one providing the context for studying food culture's impact on the fast food industry. Chapter two includes a review of the relevant literature and recent explorations surrounding the fast food industry, specifically the McDonald's Corporation. Chapter three explores the methodology employed to conduct the case study on the McDonald's Corporation. Chapter four presents the results from qualitative investigation while Chapter five discusses the implications of the research as well as provides recommendations for further study. At the essay's end is a references section that lists the used resources in this investigation.

Chapter 2: The quintessential American food: The hamburger

Literature Review

With food media's contemporary trends and innovative techniques, the status quo may be under scrutiny. The fast food meal in particular has been pushed aside and laid bare in the media explosion. In size and profit, no other fast food company knows these changing food trends better than McDonald's, the leading global food service retailer. With more 33,500 restaurants in 119 countries employing 1.7 million people and feeding even more, McDonald's is a brand of colossal status and is the foremost example of the American fast food industry. Though the fast food industry as a whole has witnessed a marketing shift in both audience and content, for the intents of this research, the focus is on McDonald's.

Where does this fast food giant stand in the eyes of an American audience? For an audience that watches well-manicured hosts polishing off elegant dishes, the plastic-wrapped burger, once an image of Americana, may be an image of scorn. With more purchasing power in the hands of more “food snobs,” McDonald's is the target of derision now more than ever. “Elitists have always looked down at fast food, criticizing how it tastes and regarding it as another tacky manifestation of American popular culture” (Schlosser, 2001, p. 9). The food media eruption may have created a passive audience; it has also created an entire subset of critical looks at the giants in charge. The first years of the 21st century featured a mass media investigation into how typical Americans were eating. One of the most well-known examples was 2004's *Super Size Me*. This low-budget documentary based around a simple premise: director Morgan Spurlock would eat nothing but fast food from McDonald's for 30 days and trace changes in his health. During his trips to McDonald's, if asked to “super size,” or upgrade his order to the largest size possible, Spurlock accepts the suggestion. After 30 days, Spurlock notices weight gain, lethargy, and his doctor demands that he stop his experiment.

After the release of independent documentary *Super Size Me*, McDonald's did remove super-size fries and sodas from its national menu, and some noticed believe the film hurt sales among some demographics in some regions (MacArthur, 2005).

If *Super Size Me* created a wave, *Fast Food Nation* created an empire, on par with the capitalistic food businesses it exposed. Originally serialized in *Rolling Stone*, Eric Schlosser's investigative journalism turned into a 300-page book by Houghton Mifflin, uprooting everything from artificial flavoring to manufacturing practices. The work was later adapted for younger audiences in a marketing eerily similar to McDonald's. *Chew On This: Everything You Didn't Want to Know About Fast Food* toured libraries and bookstores in an expensive campaign catered towards “an age with a huge amount of marketing flooding every aspect of their lives” (MacArthur, 2005). *Fast Food Nation* was pulled into a feature length film, produced in part by Participant Films, later bought out by Fox Searchlight. Fox, a major distributor brought a pop star-studded cast to a fictional, “character-driven slice-of life look at a small town in Colorado” (MacArthur, 2005). The big names, among them Ethan Hawke, Patricia Arquette, and Greg Kinnear in the title role, brought even more national scrutiny and cynicism to the nationwide McDonald's chain. The film that intended to combat the hamburger patriarchy ended up grossing \$2 million worldwide, a small dent in comparison to the \$23 billion McDonald's made that year. The only other thing Schlosser was missing was a costumed mascot to compete with Ronald McDonald.

The *Fast Food Nation* empire got people thinking about eating, not just watching televised eating, and ten years later, a shift in that status has manifested itself in the minds of the customer's tastes. At the end of *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser speculates that McDonald's would sell free-range, organic, grass-fed hamburgers if people demand it. “They will sell whatever sells at a profit. The usefulness of the market, it's effectiveness as a tool,

cuts both ways. The power of the American consumer has not yet been unleashed” (Schlosser, 2001, p. 269). With food culture becoming more prominent than ever, the market is seeing this American consumer being fully unleashed; this consumer thinks before it chews, and pays with legal consequences.

“Sue the Bastards”: A taste for individual responsibility

The initial efforts behind Schlosser's exposé, though now a little out of date, created a profound new food media interest and profound headaches for fast food. In contemporary food-attentive society, more customers are paying attention to the origin of their food causing food to “become an environmental and social cause both” (Cechin, 2012, p. 59). In the midst of copious servings of food media, the food-conscious individual has emerged. On one hand, individuals might be photographing their lunch and posting it to social media sites, but some are also taking action against the food industry. Through lawsuits and individual activism efforts, the difference between the industry and consumer responsibility for healthy eating is now a topic of debate for the courtroom floor. If a nation of eaters is overweight, is it a personal decision or an industry responsibility? The industry is responding to criticism, but it is shirking responsibility for increasingly obese (but more gastronomically aware) Americans. Journalist Tracie McMillan describes the debate as “either Americans are stupid and lazy, or we are dealing with a problem that won't be solved solely by lectures and individual choice” (2012, p. 9). Even those consumers taking responsibility do so in an oblique yet conscious way, as Malpass writes “they accept they do have certain responsibilities . . . they might be asserting finite limits to how much they, as individuals, can be expected to be responsible for” (Szmigin, Corrigan, & McEachern, 2009, p. 225). Szmigin et. al continue on to define flexibility of responsibilities as an ability to modify their decision-making environment, like a fast food chain (2009, p. 226). For an obese nation, consumers have a lot of flexibility, and

their influence is modifying fast food at a corporate level.

The biggest targets for criticism are the nation's largest food corporations. Grassroots efforts stretching from regulating children's marketing to mandating nutritional facts on every package have brought attention to less attractive aspects of food service operations, and a robust outlet for food-themed media allows more opportunities than ever to promote an environmental and social cause. Within the ranks of citizen journalists, there are also citizen food critiques. McDonald's, the 7th most powerful brand in the world, does not seem to be shrinking in size or market share, but it is taking the punches in stride (MacArthur, 2005). The company is in a battle of words as much as a battle of diet. Interestingly enough, Subway's slogan “Eat Fresh” allowed the sandwich chain to surpass McDonald's as a world leader in fast food (VanAirdale, 2012).

The words on a label have a much bigger impact than words can actually say. James Surowiecki jokes in a *New Yorker* column that “most of us don't have a fixed idea of how much we want, instead, we look to outside cues, such as the size of a package or cup, to instruct us,” a distinction that is causing McDonald's to literally undergo some downsizing as well as re-labeling (2012). The appeals to size and labeling pertains largely to lawsuits involving obesity. From 1993 to 2008, the amount of obese U.S. adults increased by almost 90%, and many people attributed large gains to prevalence of fast food options (Haomiao, 2010, p. 222). Indeed, with costs of obesity-related problems exceeding \$75 billion a year, the pull of responsibility is coming to a head (McMillan, 2012). *Pelman v. McDonald's* (2003) redefined what a consumer can claim in a lawsuit and how liable fast food corporations like McDonald's is for damages related to obesity. The landmark case centered around the daughters of a New York couple, whose father blamed McDonald's for misrepresenting itself and advertising overconsumption of its products (Robinson, 2005). According to the

plaintiffs, the industry should be held legally responsible for expanding waistlines (Robinson, 2005). The case ruled in favor of McDonald's, but set a precedent for the power of a fast food corporation during obesity lawsuits. Nutritional facts have been available in the form of pamphlets since 1987. Consumer plaintiffs must show products are inherently dangerous because they are high in cholesterol, fat, salt, and sugar. They must demonstrate that advertised products are processed to being more dangerous than expected. Finally, plaintiffs have to show fast food products can provoke consumer to “misuse” food products by over-consuming them (Robinson, 2005, p. 302). Cases like *Pelman v. McDonald's* seem to ask whether it is the McDonald's Corporation's responsibility to implement dietary changes, or if overweight consumers need to be making more sustainable choices. McDonald's may have colossal burgers and sodas, but it is the public who pays for them, in money and in health.

The fast food industry has been plagued with attempts to muzzle its corpulent body, in ways that echo tobacco regulations, on taxes, labels, litigation, and marketing restrictions (Kwan, 2009, p. 481). Much like a “sin tax” on tobacco products, proposed legislation aimed at high-calorie and sugar-loaded foods seeks to encourage healthier alternatives. In the wake of Spurlock's *Super Size Me* and Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, 19 states had such taxes by 2000. States such as Arkansas use the \$40 million it gets from a 20-cent tax on liquid soft drinks to fund Medicaid, and others following suit want to use the accumulated funds for physical education programs (Jacobson, 2000, p. 854). In the summer of 2012, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg worked on a ban on sugary soda beverages larger than 16 ounces, a “kind of stealth tax on consumption that leaves average-sized sodas unaffected while reforming people's behaviors and desires” (Surowiecki, 2012). These taxes stood in opposition to the Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act, also known as the Cheeseburger Bill. This 2004 bill, introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives,

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exonerates fast food companies from claims of weight gain due to eating fast food. It failed to pass in Congress, but reduced versions appeared in legislation at the state level (Robinson 2005).

Parallels to tobacco draw some strong comparison from citizens. Like tobacco, fast food products have received allegations of addictive qualities, perhaps due to their ability to create a routine in customers, whether it's grabbing a breakfast sandwich on the way to work or an inexpensive lunch of Big Macs for a board meeting (Robinson, 2005). However, while fast food may allow habits to form due to convenience and cost, there are no addictive qualities in it, according to the American Psychological Association, which states addictive food would need to include three stages: intoxication, tolerance, and withdrawal (Robinson, 2005, p. 302). All the same, these foods represent a hard mold to break individually, as they are “cheap, convenient, and accommodating to our busy lifestyles” (Kwan, 2009, p. 491).

Foodies could say that much of a meal is based on the atmosphere. A 2003 YouTube video campaign by Dr. Erin Carr-Jordan, a child psychologist and mother of four, brought scrutiny to not just the food kids were eating, but also the environment they were eating in. McDonald's has always tailored a division of its corporate personality to children. “Every month about 90 percent of American children between the ages of three and nine visit a McDonald's”; eight-year-olds might be their most important audience (Schlosser, 2001, p. 47). Their branded plastic playgrounds called “Playlands” formed a crucial part of a franchise's architecture and the McDonald's experience. Dr. Carr-Jordan began a pathogen-finding effort, documenting her results on YouTube. McDonald's, which claimed “stringent sanitizing procedures for weekly, daily, and spot cleaning” did not like what was turning up in the lab. Among dirt and rotting food, results indicated four strains of staphylococcus and streptococcus, both of which are serious pathogens that kids were unsuspectingly crawling in.

Though Dr. Carr-Jordan could not find any major viruses such as listeria or MRSA, she found enough bacteria and inappropriate graffiti to start a video campaign that advocated for safe places for kids to play during their McDonald's experience. The video campaign found its way to the Senate when Illinois State Rep. Jack D. Franks's 2007 bill suggested that “places that sold food and had indoor playgrounds to comply with sanitation standards,” including a more regulated clean-up of the miniature play tubes (Hernandez, 2011). The bill failed to pass, but people had spoken; media would be their toolbox for social change.

Among other litigation against McDonald's includes the 2001 lawsuits that claimed false french fry advertising. Due to vegetable oil's instability at high-frying heats and lacking flavor, McDonald's continued to use beef tallow and lard to cook its fries. Animal fat-based cooking, high in saturated fat, raises blood cholesterol and risks for coronary heart disease. Beef fat-fried potatoes caused discontent with health-minded consumers, and vegetarian consumers were outraged when advertising claimed a cross-over to vegetable oil. In particular, Indian consumers, whose Jainism religion strictly forbids eating or wearing any cattle products, sued for false advertising (Sundram, 2001). All the while, McDonald's continued using tallow and fat. Later that year, McDonald's ended up paying \$12.5 million to settle the suit and changed the frying oil's chemistry, with ironic results (Robinson, 2005, p. 301). Though the new fries they are using have less saturated fat, they are actually higher in calories (Wu, 1997). This suit, based in deception, created some changes in the composition and cooking of McDonald's fries, as well as feeding suspicion of corporate food.

The Internet allows a more viral spread of public outcry than any french fry ad campaign McDonald's could have introduced. While chicken nuggets rumors on the Internet made 2010 the “worst PR year for McDonald's,” it was also rated 49th in *Corporate Responsibility* magazine.'s Top 100 Best Corporate Citizens and one of 2010's Most Inspiring

Brands from *Forbes* (Landman, 2010). That same year, Sally Davies took her own series of food photographs. These were not for blogging to her friends or reviewing a neighborhood restaurant. She purchased a Happy Meal, put the Chicken McNuggets on a plate, and photographed them daily for six months. After all of that time, she saw that a Happy Meal looks the same (Landman, 2010). However, 2010 also saw the viral spread of an Internet hoax involving the production of Chicken McNuggets. Pictures of the pre-cooked chicken depicted something that looked a lot like strawberry soft-serve ice cream, instead of what any reasonable person would think chicken resembled. The image showed a thick pink and gooey sludge that supposedly was the raw ingredients of the nuggets. McDonald's responded with its own counter-campaign: Visitors to its website can watch Chef Dan Coudreaut, executive chef of McDonald's, in cooking demonstrations that no doubt emulate cleanly arranged Food Network performances. As a PR-friendly rebuttal to the Internet controversy, the spiky-haired and professionally groomed chef proclaims “the only meat used in Chicken McNuggets is chicken breast meat.” Much like the individuals, at the corporate level, the use of food media trends is becoming a successful marketing tool. As people want to know a record of a company's social responsibility, McDonald's has been replying with consumer-focused marketing as well as a new emphasis on sustainability and low-calorie options.

Mohr concludes that many consumers will invest and value socially responsible companies regardless of price (2001). McDonald's found a way to make the consumer the cause, and it took a big problem to do so. 2003 was the first quarterly loss McDonald's had experienced since 1965, so a strategy was needed to create change and recover (Boscor, 2011, p. 56). Way-too-rapid expansion, the issues with cleanliness, and negative customer reviews led to a menu revitalization (Sanburn). In 2003, McDonald's introduced a new corporate philosophy, called “i'm lovin' it,” that emphasized individuals. The response invigorated

McDonald's financial value. The company's first global marketing campaign, “i'm lovin' it” brought revenue up 11% from 2003 to 2004 (MacArthur, 2006). Since then, marketing efforts have taken on more initiatives recognizing individual concerns on quantity, safety and quality turning McDonald's into a new kind of experience.

The “i'm lovin' it” campaign sought to reflect a more personal and customer-oriented experience of McDonald's, one that recognizes diversity (Boscor, 2011, p. 56). Even though the taste is standardized across the world, McDonald's emphasized the consumer “i.” Whether serving beer in Germany or Chicken SingaPorridge, a McDonald's menu seeks to appeal to the public's taste, with the individual at the center. “What determines the content of the menu is, of course, operators' perceptions about public taste” (Wood, 1996, p. 5). The fast food menu is reasonably standardized; the public could not have more options. Of 12 national fast food chains, there are 3,039 possible meal combinations, according to Anne Landman in a 2010 study for PRWatch. For an industry iconic for the simple burger and fry, fast food offers an abundant choice.

No matter how big the appetite or the menu, the customer is always right. Wood (1996) asserts that it's an industry's responsibility to respond to consumer preference. Marketing seems to reflect the meaning of consumer choice, with the brand boosting retail reputation and creating something abstract for products (Schröder, 2005). Consumer choice created the foodie; it is also revamping McDonald's.

Scientific research also favors the customer. Adam Drewnowski, Director of the University of Washington's Center for Obesity Research, said “better to improve the diets of many than to seek perfection for the few,” and the McDonald's brand is directing a massive menu overhaul in what appears to be a response to consumer desires (Proud, 2011). In 2004, perhaps in correlation to the loss in 2003, Granny Smith apple slices, marketed as Apple

Dippers, found their way on the menu. 88% of individual consumers were aware of the fruit option, yet apples were selected in only 11% of Happy Meals. The Dippers became an essential part of Happy Meals, making McDonald's the responsible unit in a healthy eating initiative. By mandating fruit servings and restricting french fry size in every Happy Meal, McDonald's is working towards making the recommended daily serving of produce (Final Pledge). Unfortunately, even this effort has met some issues, as 296,224 units of apples were recalled after listeria monocytogenes was found on the processing equipment (Srutledge, 2012). Recalls happened in 36 states, to avoid any kind of listeria-related infections. These recalls were not on the official website, but the branding emphasis on healthy choices were.

Industry response to changing trends

As “a sense of responsibility emanates across the personal and social domains,” consumers are looking for brands that facilitate their domains (Dutta-Bergman, 2012, p. 85). Snyder and DeBono (1985) discuss two types of consumers: high self-monitors and low self-monitors, and these distinctive customers divide marketing into two directions. High-monitoring people are adept at tailoring their behavior to fit social and interpersonal situations, making their social domain a personal responsibility. Their behavior displays situation-to-situation shifts that seeks to impress. Within the context of marketing, they react more to image-oriented advertisements. Such consumers want to buy an ideal, and these are the kind of individual consumers that experience-based marketing targets. These consumers are the ones that see music and décor as a supplementary way to enjoy food. They are influenced most with appeals to images, meaning food television styles could be particularly persuasive. Low self-monitoring people do not mold their personalities and are more aligned with quality, service, and cleanliness. Soft-selling marketing has little effect on these people. They react more favorably to product quality oriented ads, willing to pay for products if it

was marketed with a quality claims. Low involvement shoppers claim that 57% of the purchases are impulsive and 26% were routine (Snyder & Debono, 1985). As the foodie becomes less of a social strata and more of a mainstream label, high-monitoring people, with their preoccupation of changing habits and modes of life, are becoming more common.

Whether marketing to high or low self-monitoring customers, “the industry's overall position is that, at the bottom, individuals are responsible for what they consume” (Buchholz, 2003). All the same, McDonald's is making individual responsibility easier and easier, due to a more customer-centered marketing structure. Initially, McDonald's organized itself around “usually speedy and efficient operations rooted in QSC, or quality, service, and cleanliness” (MacArthur, 2006). A uniform store design and flavor for the food created the ability for McDonald's to spawn into franchises that offered consistency. Many customers find comfort in knowing that thousands of miles away, whether in Dubai or in London, they can get a hamburger that tastes just like home. Contemporarily, McDonald's appears to be working more attentively in becoming a customer-centered option, as the market grew and traditional advertising was not delivering results (Boscor, 2011, p. 52).

New ad campaigns by McDonald's, ones that center on people's emotional needs are seeking to create an all-new image for the company (Dutta-Bergman, 2012). Their corporate image may be most famously associated with Big Macs and chicken nugget photos, but “corporate image is only partially built on tangible product and process attributes” (Schröder, 2005, p. 214). The rest of the McDonald's image comes down to the fast food experience itself, which may have changed more profoundly than the food actually has. Over the last ten years, the corporation has responded to grassroots activism with its own kind of community-based advertising, based in local sales and co-op promotions, “to overcome the image of a greedy multinational without a care for local folks' well-being (MacArthur, 2006).

Beyond re-crafting Playlands that accommodate to FDA regulations and ads, new franchises implement contemporary interior designs that bring sleek aesthetics to the “gaudy and round” designs franchises were founded upon (Schlosser, 2001). These cosmetic changes are doing more than cleaning up the inside; they are attempting to change the way people think about fast food. With the implementation of free Wi-Fi and coffee-themed drinks, McDonald's is crafting itself not as a place to refuel on road trips, but as an experience. McDonald's once targeted kids with Disney-inspired playgrounds and characters such as Grimace and Mayor McCheese. Now, new designs repurpose the brand as a place for parents to also relax and escape. Their new formula appears to be based on the industrial competition. Starbucks, which centers around “friendly, knowledgeable service from the store staff, comfortable places to sit down and relax, nice music, and in-store events to keep customers coming back for more,” crafts its marketing around experiences, without even mentioning the coffee it sells (Rentas-Giutsi, 2003, p. 44). In a similar way, McDonald's has taken a cue from this strategy in order to recreate itself, with the idea of changing the atmosphere, starting with the tables and working to the food. Offering a wide range of products can no longer allow a company to set itself apart from competing restaurants, so the food must be secondary to the philosophy of the company (Boscor, 2011, p. 56). Without further ado, marketing enters the picture.

Neil Golden, chief marketing officer said, “We win over the holdouts by changing how we think about the food. We also believe that there are more people that would want to come-if they could feel better about the product” (O'Brien, 2012). For customers, a large portion of which consumes experience-based food television programs, an aesthetic and abstract redesign in this manner is directed at them. McDonald's may have a new appearance but relatively the same menu.

McDonald's is making a highly conscious effort to transform the way people feel about products that have changed only slightly in the last 50 years. Media are their toolbox: It made people aware, but it also helped in creating sales for things besides hamburgers. The company reduced price promotion portrayals in ads by over 60% in the early 2000s (MacArthur, 2006). Simultaneously, it promoted items that are not considered the iconic tastes of fast food, such as coffee drinks and items under 400 calories. What determines the content of the menu is, of course, operator's perceptions about public taste (Wood, 1996). Public taste here means public preferences and evaluations, which Gurney believes “the eye and the ear are capable of finer discriminations than the senses of taste and smell; that the eye and the ear have more powers of recuperation; and that it is difficult to remember tastes” (Telfer, 2008, p. 20). If sight and sound is what causes more aesthetic reactions, then McDonald's is on the right track with redesigns and commercials that stress fresh ingredients. “Fresh has nothing to do with food at all. It's become a convolution, tied up with manufactured images of authenticity, transparency, and even morality-the fleeting ecstasy of doing what consumers are persuaded to believe is the good, right thing” (VansAirdale, 2012). By playing off of the post-*Fast Food Nation* notion of accountability, McDonald's is harvesting the full benefits of a refreshed image (VanAirdale, 2012).

Despite criticism, whatever McDonald's is doing is creating tremendous profit for the company. Fundamental changes in American society drives extraordinary growth in the fast food industry, and no change could be so fundamental as a socially conscious, food-obsessed environment (Schlosser, 2001, p. 4). Logically, a shift focused on the individualized food experience of exclusive options ought to depose the McDonald's standardized structure. If a consumer's tastes can be universalized, what makes them unique? In light of statistics, the company has never done better. Revenue has increased from both the free-standing franchises

at the bottom rungs to advertising budgets at the top. In 2011, the average free-standing McDonald's made \$2.6 million, an increase of 13% since 2008. The advertising budget for McDonald's is \$2 billion, which has no industry competitors (O'Brien, 2012). Some of those funds go towards creating a three-pronged strategy: a national, co-op, and more importantly, a local marketing plan.

This study draws on the social psychology theories of Snyder and DeBono (1985), exploring what direction McDonald's is moving in. Perhaps the corporate side of McDonald's is not viewing its market differently. In fact, they may not have to: “Fast food has joined Hollywood movies, blue jeans, and pop music as one of America's most prominent cultural exports . . . it enters the body and becomes part of the consumer” (Schlosser, 2001, p. 10). Fast food could perhaps be labeled a necessary evil, something that is not changing or becoming healthier, yet something that people are still eating in mass quantities. McDonald's may be experiencing an “emperor's new menu effect,” in that it has not changed substantially other than “new packaging, same meal.”

Based on the literature presented, this study is based on the following question:

RQ1: In an increasingly food and health-minded culture, what changes have so-called “unhealthy” and culturally-ingrained fast food restaurants, specifically McDonald's, made in their approach to marketing, and what do they reveal about the demands of consumers?

Specifically, the study seeks to find whether McDonald's is a true trendsetter in the fast food industry or just following the shift in consumer tastes for a profit. Boscor writes that “a company's success is highly dependent on adopting a customer-oriented approach” (2011, p. 57). McDonald's may have more than meets the menu.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study serves as a contemporary exploration of the McDonald's brand. Using a qualitative, case study approach of an extensive literature review and interviews, this study aims to describe and explain the shifts in marketing from fast food giant McDonald's in a food media-saturated environment. Since the topic of food-related media and its impact on marketing practices is novel, existing literature that substantially explains the phenomenon is limited.

Due to the researcher's desire to gain a holistic and meaningful description of the fast food marketing environment, a case study research design was considered most appropriate for the research. “The case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomena” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). and definition of research questions and literature review, 2) determination of data collection and analysis techniques, 3) preparation to collect the data, 4) collection of data, 5) evaluation and analysis of data, and 6) preparations of recommendations based on results from the data (Simons, 1980; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009).

Since a case study relies on multiple sources of evidence, an exhaustive literature review of scholarly and popular literature coupled with in-depth interviews were employed as data collection techniques. The researcher decided to use documentation of both scholarly and non-scholarly sources. The researcher kept notes and dates for all uncovered information, compiling relevant collected data into a notebook arranged chronologically and usable by an outside source. Using a wide breadth of sources allowed the researcher to address an almost exhaustive number of issues within the McDonald's organization as well as build from each preceding piece of literature (Yin, 2009). In-depth, focused interviews, or “guided conversations,” with key people in McDonald's followed a specific list of questions in a short

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time (Yin, 2009). While some of these guided conversations revealed some interesting facts about operations at McDonald's, the researcher used the interviews as a chance to receive professional perspective, or any perspective at all. In some areas where the corporate perspective was not strictly defined in documentation gathering, the researcher asked the same questions across all subjects to get more candid responses (Yin, 2009). By doing this, the researcher gained valuable insight that bolstered the literature as well as create new information avenues to explore. Yin describes documentation as evidence as written reports of events, progress reports, formal case studies, as well as mass media clippings, which allow a timely, inexpensive and accessible wealth of information (Yin, 2009). The researcher looked at annual reports McDonald's published within the last 10 years, corporate press releases, as well as news clippings from a variety of sources, including mainstream press outlets such as *Slate* or *The New York Times* or more watchdog-oriented mediums such as PRWatch. Getting this wealth of stories helped off-set reporter's bias as well as “augment and corroborate” one another, though the search was imperfect, it provided the the background necessary to have a familiarity with the material (Yin, 2009). Having a familiarity with relevant, though at times extraneous, material allowed for more natural conversations with industry experts at a later date.

Following the review of relevant documentation, focused interviews were conducted to augment the information gathered from that review (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990). The focused interview is when a participant is interviewed for a short period of time. “In such cases, the interviews may still remain open-ended and assume a conversational manner, but an interviewer is more likely to be following a certain set of questions derived from the case study protocol” (Yin, 2009, p. 107)). For this portion of the case study, the researcher relied heavily on first-hand reports from current and former executives affiliated with the

McDonald's corporation. The researcher sought out contemporary perspectives that have been relatively undocumented up to this point. Focused interviews were the method of choice for several reasons. First, Yin (2009) suggests that interviews are “on of the most important sources of case study information” (p.106). Second, they served as the central source for targeted information that could help corroborate or contradict the documentation gathered. Third, interviews provided an opportunity to gain the explanation, inference, and balance that was not available through other data collection technique. Finally, the amount of literature that shines a negative lens on McDonald's was copious; therefore, the researcher hoped to receive some insight and perspective from the verbal reports of those individuals that may have received lived and responded to that criticism.

Four interviews were conducted with former executives as well as individuals involved with the McDonald's corporation. These individuals were either directly employed by McDonald's or work directly with McDonald's in their consulting capacity as a communications. In some cases, an interview subject met both categories, such as the executive that served as a Vice President of Communications during the early 2000s for McDonald's and is now Vice President and Chief Communications Officer at Commonwealth Edison. Regardless of title, all interview subjects had substantial experiences in publicity and communication campaigns in conjunction with McDonald's.

Participant selection

The researcher used a purposive sampling method, convenience sampling, to assemble a group of relevant professionals that could provide insight on the topic of investigation. Interview participants were found based on 1) their familiarity/accessibility to the researcher, 2) their exposure to the McDonald's corporation, and 3) their degree of relevant experience in the industry. The researcher also utilized the College of Charleston's

Department of Communication Advisory Council, a network of professionals in the communications field to identify potential interview participants. This network of experienced communication professionals has connections in many industries, and several members of the Council provided suggestions for interview subjects, which the researcher pursued. Furthermore, the literature review revealed one former vice president affiliated with McDonald's marketing and a few other potential leads. Using ZoomInfo and LinkedIn, the researcher obtained contact information and sent recruitment emails along with an overview of the research.

Interview protocol

Once participants were identified, scheduled and confirmed they received an email asking for their consent in research; each participant was recorded giving consent over the telephone. These consent forms outlined the aims of the project, purpose of interview among other logistics, and the request for anonymity. After review and approval by the Institution Review Board at the College of Charleston, the interview could commence.

As mentioned, one form of data collection relied on focused interviews conducted over the phone, using recording software. Four interviews that varied from 35 minutes to an hour in length were conducted over the months of March and April 2013. The researcher instigated contact and guided the interview discussion while simultaneously taking notes, and probed where/when necessary. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol to structure the discussions. It is important to note that the interview protocol was reviewed by a panel of experts prior to the interviews; the panel suggested revisions and changes to the wording of the proposed questions for the sake of clarity. Additionally, the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the College of Charleston ensuring for ethical research (IRB approval # HFJF-04-25-2013).

At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were asked for additional resources that may assist in achieving insights and data for the sake of the research, particularly supplementary literature. Participants were also thanked for their time and insight as well as offered an opportunity to receive a copy of the research report.

In sum, the use of interviews gained more accurate and objective information from a corporate perspective than what would be offered through a corporate website, which in many ways, is also a marketing platform. By dissecting and connecting the words of McDonald's executives, the researcher was able to analyze first-hand accounts of the subject matter from a qualified set of sources, making a holistic and more accurate conclusion.

Data analysis

Interviews were fully transcribed following the interview period. Analysis of the data included the identification of common themes and patterns across the data. Triangulation of the data from both the documentation and interview methods was important before moving forward with the analysis; all data were pooled and analyzed for common overarching concepts. Specifically, the researcher used the constant comparative method of analysis to reach conclusions gleaned from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher pored over the transcribed interviews and categorized key words and phrases that spanned the interviews. Instead of relying on time series analysis or explanation as techniques for analysis, the constant comparative method took several case studies and several issues at McDonald's, creating a more holistic and less fragmented glimpse of practices at McDonald's, which also works as a centralized business (Yin, 2009). Looking at several cases also allowed for the observation of emerging patterns, particularly with regards to questions that McDonald's executives said that either supported a recorded opinion or debunked rumors and cliches.

The use of one-on-one interviews gained more accurate and objective information from a corporate perspective than what would be offered through a corporate website, which in many ways, is also a marketing platform. By dissecting and connecting the words of McDonald's executives, the researcher was able to analyze first-hand accounts of the subject matter from a qualified set of sources, making a holistic and more accurate conclusion.

Chapter 4: Findings

When you look at how much you spend on food, what food is in the way of enjoyment as well as health issues, and let's be honest, what it represents as an advertising vehicle, for the major food producers and package goods companies, it's no wonder that every station in America is looking to launch their own show because it's a revenue driver.

- Brad Ball, Chief Marketing Officer, McDonald's Corporation, 1995-1998

The present study incorporated a comprehensive literature review as well as interviews with four participants, each involved with the McDonald's corporation in some capacity. The corporate perspective revealed personal reflection and opinions not revealed in the literature review. In total, the participants averaged around 19 years of direct experience with the corporation, whether in public affairs or in public relations. All four participants provided consent to use their names in association with the data for reporting purposes; as a result, their biographical descriptions follow:

- The first participant was Al Golin, founder of GolinHarris, a global public relations firm that works with McDonald's' on public image and branding. In the late '50s, Golin placed a cold call to Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's. After a half-hour phone call, Kroc offered Golin a job. In the 55 years since, Golin has seen the corporation's culture and politics dynamically shift. He opened the first McDonald's in post-Soviet Russia and has seen branches and new opportunities pop up around the globe.
- The second participant was Erik Gonring, Manager of Public Affairs & Sustainability for McDonald's. Gonring came to McDonald's as a speechwriter covering supply chain communications. His background in sustainability eventually led him to his current position.
- The third participant was Bill Whitman, who served McDonald's for 13 years as the Vice President Communication Officer. Whitman left two years ago to

start Bill Whitman & Associates, a consulting public relations firm focused on brand-building.

- The final participant was Brad Ball, who consulted with McDonald's with his advertising agency Davis, Ball, Colomatto. Ball came to McDonald's in 1995 and served as the Chief Marketing Officer until 1998. Ball oversaw the now-famous merger with one of the most powerful media businesses: the Walt Disney Corporation. This relationship, symbolized in Happy Meal toys and Randy Newman-composed commercials, was worth well over a billion dollars and lasted for 10 years.

After speaking to these four participants affiliated with McDonald's, interview transcripts were analyzed, data were categorized, and themes emerged. Participants expanded on three major areas that also seemed to corroborate the findings from the literature review: 1) consumer responsibility, 2) aesthetic and philosophical renovations to the McDonald's brand, and 3) the state of McDonald's with regards to the original corporate foundation of Quality, Service, Cleanliness, and Value (QSC and V). Finally, though they used some similarly framed rhetoric, participants repeated two buzz words with the frequency of a drive-through customer: "learning curve" and "consistency."

"You can trust McDonald's": The hyper-aware customer is always right

There was no direct indication that McDonald's is taking responsibility for a consumer's unhealthy choices, as *Pelman v. McDonald's* decided. There are no regulations mandating responsible food sales. Participants rarely mentioned arbitrators such as the FDA as driving the changes in both offerings and communication. All of the participants mentioned catering to customer preferences as the largest driving factor behind the evolving corporate communication philosophy. All described their target consumer as a changed

individual with new preferences. While all four wish to aim for the mainstream, McDonald's appears to be pursuing a more mobile and affluent consumer preference. As the participants described, the target McDonald's customer knows what is behind the counter a little bit better. They have been poring over internet rumors and they have been hearing all about the harms of GMOs (growth-modified organisms) or bacterium in places where they eat. "People are a lot more sophisticated these days. They read more, they're more conscious of these things. McDonald's catered to that as well without compromising who they are," Golin indicated in light of the original McDonald's values.

Subjects described these more "sophisticated customer" as a learning curve, something to satisfy with concessions and trendy offerings. As Snyder and DeBono describe, the target McDonald's consumer is now more highly self-monitoring, a customer who places value on having an attractive decór and an experience at McDonald's (1985). The goal is to stay in front of the "learning curve" while carefully moving forward, so as not to distance consumers with complicated claims or alien menus. Gonring explained a higher degree of consumer awareness but also said that being reserved and appropriate with what kind of messages McDonald's transmits to current and prospective customers. The information available to consumers has to be in understandable terms and relevant, especially if it is in an advertisement. The target customer might be more informed to a degree, but they are not sustainability experts, so it is the industry's role to summarize.

One element that reappeared in both the data collection as well as the interviews was the pull between informed consumers and responsible corporations. To exactly what degree is McDonald's responsible for its hyper-aware customers, whether in the messages it advertises to the food it offers? Each participant commented a question referring to the statement from the 2007 Annual Report: "We're individually accountable and collectively responsible." With

the exception of one participant, all interviews expanded on this idea of accountability and collective responsibility. They differed on what defined individuals, saying very little about the “individuals” who have been buying the products and suing the company. Goring elaborated on the concept of responsibility:

One individual can cause damage to the brand and the company, and you need to take that responsibility. You can't take that responsibility lightly. The way you conduct yourself has to be in a way that's consistent with the brand . . . in a way, it guides behavior, similar to our company values.

Others took up the idea that the responsible “individual” was the franchise-owner or employee that bridged the connection between the consumer and McDonald's, as explained by Ball:

The experience you have when you come to my restaurant is my individual responsibility . . . Collectively, the responsibility is everyone of the owner/operators like myself and the company to back up the promise of quality, service, cleanliness, value, and your experience, the trust in what we sell: all of those things.

While the individual consumer was not the focus in the responses about the “individually accountable and collectively responsible” slogan, a consumer consciousness emerged. Participants explained the “conscious consumer” as someone who recently has emerged, one who reads nutritional labels, who wants healthy choices for his or her children, one who watches food programming, and one who may have difficulty trusting a large corporation. “Size has been their [McDonald's] advantage in many cases, huge disadvantage in others,” Ball said. What the participants hope McDonald's provides is a caloric count for its entire menu, a greater sense of supply chain, and the idea of trust from the leading corporation in food service. Marketing, they believe, is a way to change people's suspicion

into goodwill. They are changing the way people think about fast food. It not only tastes good, it does the right thing for “local folks” (MacArthur, 2006). “We came up with a term we called the trust bank which really means building deposits of goodwill,” Golin said.

In the future, as McDonald's makes its steps forward, “doing what's right” may play a bigger role. Whitman believed:

...there's going to be greater transparency around what's in the food, the food's ingredients and how the food is sourced. I think you're going to see more engagement from consumers around how not only those products make their way from farm to fork, but how food service organizations are innovating around supply chain, how they give back to the community where they do business, how they are being more socially responsible in animal welfare practices, in packaging, in how they provide nutritional information for consumers.

The societal implications on more transparency and consciousness also appeared, and participants understood that both consumer loyalty as well as consumer well-being would be important to the longevity of McDonald's. As consumers become more conscious and their purchases reflect responsibility, then the marketing must change. “It is influencing other companies to look at their own business practices and find ways to ensure that they are that much more sustainable and attribute to net benefit not just for business but for society as well,” Gonring said. As one of America's chief exports and lifestyle brands, the corporate side seemed to corroborate on responsibly marketing.

New gloss, same as the old boss?

The world's biggest fast food chain is getting a facelift in corporate philosophy, plates, and people. Their famous mascot no longer graces advertisements, the menu strays from the classic hamburger, and ergonomic chairs and flat-screens are more common décor than

plastic benches and Playplace tubes. When asked about the “fast food facelift” with regards to food offerings as well as the aesthetic and architectural appearance, participants insinuated that, the customer base, not waist, is getting wider. “Before McDonald's broadened its chicken and white meat offering and a greater variety of healthier fare and alternatives to hamburgers, you could see how that the decision by the mom was impacting sales,” Ball said.

Similar to Ball’s reference to “the mom”, the “learning curve,” or what customers expect, has changed, and all four participants sought to explain the specific influences that have greatly impacted the customer base. As a result, discussion surrounded the impact of globalization and food-related media.

The researcher asked many questions about aesthetic redesign, target demographic shifts, and market share. A variety of influences have instigated the change in customers. As the literature review mentioned, the new McDonald's atmosphere for these customers is modeled after experience-based eating (Rentes & Giusti 2003). Interestingly, the participants expanded this by bringing up competitors. The most frequently mentioned competition was fast-casual restaurants, typified by more expensive menu items, gourmet options, and comfortable furniture. The most frequently mentioned examples included Panera Bread and Chipotle. Chipotle, which markets itself under a “food with integrity” message that implements more responsible choices in fast food (VanAirdale 2003). Fast casual restaurants actually received many more mentions than quick-service restaurants (QSR) that McDonald's more likely would be competing with, such as a Burger King or Dairy Queen. “Time-deprived” and business-minded also received mentions and the label “fringe McDonald's customers,” appeared. These are people who have begun to make more purchases of the McDonald's brand, particularly smoothies and specialty coffee beverages. The influence on their purchasing power comes from offering similar products. Gonring specifically touched

on the influence that the competition has on McDonald's decisions for change:

A lot of McDonald's growth over the last 5-10 years has come from replicating other QSR (quick-service restaurants) point of differentiation. McFlurry is really just a way of taking Dairy Queen's market share . . . Then you see smoothies, that's a way of taking Jamba Juice's market share. Coffee: Starbucks, or the McCafé: Starbucks. So you start to see that trend continue, so I think we're good at having a broader menu and doing it well.

These foodie manifestations and menu additions grant McDonald's "a pipeline of not only menu offerings but a pipeline of potential new business opportunities that before the introduction of McCafé, was pretty limited," Whitman said. By moving into other restaurant market shares, McDonald's is effectively buying out competition and offering its own spin. "The idea is to modernize the restaurant experience and give our customers one more reason to feel good about coming to McDonald's," Whitman explained. Goring claimed that having higher quality and cleaner restaurants than the competition will cause the perception of a customer to change. The customer believes that the food is higher quality and tastes better, and they will have a better overall experience, which reaffirms what O'Brien wrote in his *New York Times* piece analyzed in the literature review, citing Neil Golden's belief that more consumers would try to purchase a product if they felt good about the product. Feeling good about food skyrocketed Chipotle's value and cultural role, and it seemed to be doing so for McDonald's.

Panera Bread and Chipotle, which used to be previously owned by McDonald's before going public on its own, were the two most mentioned fast-casual places with similar characteristics yet plenty of "points of differentiation." Ball zoomed in on Panera Bread as a source of competition and "foodie" manifestations that have proven influential of the redesign at McDonald's. "Panera Bread encourage[s] you to enjoy your meal without feeling

like you've got to wolf it down and get the hell out.”

Through the comparisons that the participants referenced between McDonald's and the competition, additional insights began to emerge about the target customer as well as what McDonald's has come to expect.

The architectural redesign seems to be coming around to retain people who choose to dine in, with more comfortable seating, free Wi-Fi, and a cozy environment. Through the four different interviews, the researcher received the full details of the redesign project, which was a byproduct of European redevelopment at McDonald's. This redesign started five years ago, and the “modernization” is set to be complete in 10 years. By then, the participants hope that every single one of the 14,500 locations in the U.S will be re-imaged and participants were excited. “When that happens, there's going to be even more distance between us and our competitors,” Gonring said. The modernization is taking place for two reasons: 1) to compete more adequately in the market place, and 2) to change people's attitudes about the brand.

When asked for particulars about the dining room renovations, participants talked about lingering in a McDonald's or even decorating with furniture that customers are meant to relax in. Whitman touches on this effort to encourage customers to use the space for more than just eating:

For those customers that want to go into the restaurant and spend time and linger, the way the restaurant décor is set up in the dining room affords the customer to come in and experience the restaurant the way they want to experience it.

More specifically, the brand, according to Whitman, is moving in the direction of business travelers plugging in a laptop, and sipping a latte while “getting business done.” This coffeehouse culture, though not traditionally aligned with McDonald's, boosted lesser parts of the brand and helped McDonald's create a new meal. “You've got some unused capacity on

the inside of the store, and it further supported a commitment to McCafé,” Ball said. In fact, when referencing the effort of changing consumer attitudes about the brand, participants consistently pointed to more than just the food. They pointed to the atmosphere as a significant factor in the McDonald's brand. Golin, who has seen the restaurant revisions in their entirety, touched on the importance of the aesthetic change of the restaurant: “When they first got started, a lot of people thought McDonald's was a little garish, with the red and white tile, the neon arches. The transition to the tasteful décor they have today has been a big factor.”

Although décor appears to be a major area of change for McDonald's, participants also mentioned menu redesign, which at McDonald's has practically redesigned the way the mainstream American is eating by creating a 4th meal during the day known as “snack,” stuck between lunch and dinner. The example participants gave of the 4th meal included cheaply produced snack McWraps, which utilize ingredients found in other menu items. It is the strong opportunity for additional profit that seems to drive the creation of the 4th meal. The rationale for the 4th meal was provided by Ball:

One of the reasons that you're also seeing menu changes take place, like McWraps, some of these other products, are to try and capitalize maintaining the food margin for profitability but the consumer price so it can stay in the budget a customer can afford.

Consistently, though maybe unintentionally, the participants used the same examples when describing menu changes and new meal options. As mentioned, snack wraps received attention during the interviews, but the McMuffin overwhelmingly found its way into several different responses, even about seemingly unrelated topics. For its value, nutritional benefits, and being outside of typical McDonald's fare, the Egg McMuffin may just be the next all-American meal. Three of the four interview participants gave the Egg McMuffin, a breakfast

sandwich, as an example during discussion about menu redesign.

For a place that started off on burgers, fries, and shakes, the menu has been redefined along with the American public. Golin referenced the McDonald's breakfast as an example:

They've managed enough to adapt nicely . . . They know how to serve it [breakfast] in the confines of what they are. And have done that successfully. Or their Egg

McMuffin can be altered a little bit-for example, people are conscious of cholesterol, so they have an all-white Muffin, with a whole wheat muffin and that kind of thing.

They're not going to turn off anybody not to go to McDonald's for example. The key is really keeping delicate balance.

Whatever global opportunities open up, whatever lawsuits may happen, McDonald's participants believe in the power of consistency and the power of value. Ball highlighted the Egg McMuffin in the grand scale of the company's mission, "as much as we do in the world for McDonald's, marketing a 300-calorie Egg McMuffin has been a very good move.

It is also worth mentioning that many of the participants mentioned the consistency of the brand, believing that while the world might change its diet, it will not change the core purpose of McDonald's. Golin shared his belief that McDonald's will always stay true to the original fast-food brand that the world came to know as McDonald's:

They're always looking to change without destroying who they are. They're not a health food store. This world is littered with closed health food restaurants. They don't go overboard in making it something that they're not.

The participants stressed cosmetic changes and consumer consciousness; essentially, McDonald's has to do what any operating business needs to do: make revenue. Ball explained how creating a healthier item can neither betray what the McDonald's corporate brand represents nor what makes a food service business work. "What McDonald's has to decide is

that, if they can make a healthier sandwich, but if nobody buys it, what does that tell you?

That it's their responsibility to lose money to make a sandwich that nobody buys?"

Compromised values

As stated in the literature review, McDonald's corporate communication and philosophy is organized around the values of quality, service, cleanliness, and value (abbreviated as QSC and V). "All aspects of quality, service, cleanliness and value, those are the overarching tenants of the brand," Ball said. These abstract terms are what makes up the globe-spanning McDonald's brand, and they are what Ray Kroc originally envisioned while forming the company (Schlosser, 2004, p. 32). These core tenants are important to keep in mind during the reported transitional period. They give a good idea of perspective and comparison as new regulations pass and customers want new options on menus. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked their opinion on the degree to which the aforementioned values have morphed, if at all. While most of the changes participants described were in response to more well-read customers than adhering to abstract philosophy, exploring the original values of the company shed some light on the current situation.

A few participants maintained that the core values to McDonald's corporate philosophy have remained consistent, in a way that is not too different from uniform store designs and food flavors. "There's no other company in that industry [of fast food] that has the solidity that McDonald's has," Golin said. While other participants discussed previous efforts to revamp the corporate values. In fact, some of these attempts resulted in disastrous communication campaigns.

During his time at McDonald's, Ball headed up a national initiative that sought to uphold the corporate values to the extreme; this campaign was titled Campaign 55. To explain, Ball shared, "What I had envisioned was building on the heritage of a restaurant

chain that opened in 1955 ?” Ball voluntarily described how Campaign 55 addressed all aspects of QSC and V: from cleaning restrooms twice every 55 minutes to competitively pricing hamburgers at 55 cents, in the years before the Dollar Menu was introduced.

Although Campaign 55 was intended to be permanent, it “failed miserably” after the first week. Low prices for the hamburgers caused owners to be inconsistent with adjusting prices for other menu items, with potato products increasing by degrees and customers becoming aware very quickly.

Campaign 55 was not the only failure in regard to values. Participants also mentioned some troubles during the '80s, when the company “lost [its] focus on overall restaurant operations and cleanliness.” In addition, the brand's tenants also came under fire in the late '90s and 2000s. As a result, the modification of the QSC and V philosophy is through two strategies: The “i'm lovin' it” slogan and more broadly, the Plan to Win strategy, introduced in 2003 and crafted by Larry Light. “If QSC and V is foundation, the Plan to Win is the architecture that sits on top of that foundation that speaks to how you're going to bring the McDonald's brand experience to life,” Whitman said. Gonring described Plan to Win as a classic business move, something he learned in school but now is having applied globally. Plan to Win is an international campaign, one that brings the brand's abstractions of people, products, place, price, and promotion to more than just the United States, much like “i'm lovin' it” concreted the brand in 2003. “Our quality standards and consistency is something that our customers and foodies to an extent have come to value,” Gonring stated as a reference to the brand's global impact.

Interestingly enough, in all of the discussion of core corporate values, one participant revealed that it was his personal opinion that founder Ray Kroc was a “fabulous, charismatic guy” but a “very basic black and white kind of guy.” He went on to say Kroc, though entirely

responsible for instilling values. would not be the right choice for today's CEO. "He stuck to his principles . . . I don't think he has the kind of sophistication to run this kind of company today." All the same, Kroc's vision is what propelled the company forward. He was once asked what he'd be serving in the year 2000. Kroc replied, "I don't know, but we're going to be serving a lot of it!"

Whatever McDonald's will be selling, its marketing will be carefully engineered to suit a mainstream audience. As more people become aware of their health, nutrition, and source of supply chain, the messages will need to reflect these changes in language that is understandable and markets McDonald's in a contemporary way that is also cognizant of its original values. The national diet may have changed for both media and food, but the participants seemed adamant about maintaining the corporate values of McDonald's, wherever supply chain or technological advances may take them.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and further study

I think the trend is becoming a part of the social contract, if you will, between food purveyors and their customers.

-Bill Whitman, Vice President of Communication, McDonald's Corporation, 2008-2011

As revealed in Chapter 4, several themes emerged from the interviews conducted and the literature reviewed. First, it was apparent that McDonald's is doing what any company worth its 55 cents is doing: focusing on consumer tastes. Consumer tastes were referenced as “learning curves” during the interviews, and it is in the best interest of McDonald's to embrace the learning curves and market items that consumers demand. With that said, one participant [Gonring] said that marketing a healthy burger that nobody likes is not a sustainable business plan. There appears to be a balancing act between recognizing consumer demand/trends and doing what makes sense for the longevity of the brand. What the company faces is answering the question of how to adapt to these consumer tastes without betraying its original values or profit motives. People want quality food, food with integrity, from companies they “trust.” The last thing the consumer wants to know is how these consumer-driven communication strategies are also guaranteeing profit and the highest stock records ever for the company. Interestingly enough, doing the “right” thing in the eyes of the consumer appears to be good business, and as highlighted by interview participants, it is also highly profitable to make consumers feel good.

The second major finding was probably the most unexpected. One of the ways McDonald's is finding a way to market “food with integrity” and more sophisticated tastes is by capitalizing on points of differentiation with major competitors. McDonald's no longer seems to compete with Burger King, it seems aimed to compete with Starbucks and Chipotle, chains with minimal television marketing, higher-priced products, and a definitive brand. Instead of competing with quick service restaurants, McDonald's is going for a fast casual-

influenced brand. Though fast casual restaurants are ostensibly still fast food restaurants, their presentation creates a different impression in people's minds. These are comfortable places to spend time with friends and enjoy gourmet foods. With new architectural designs and more comfortable furniture, “tinges in the décor,” as Whitman called them, consumers can expect to linger with friends or family. The original layout of a McDonald's was deliberately made uncomfortable in order to keep customers constantly cycling out of the dining room as if it were a drive-through. The menu expansion seeks to accomplish something similar:

McDonald's wants to be known for more than hamburgers, its quintessential item.

The final major finding is at odds with the quintessential item at McDonald's. The research revealed a tension between moving forward into contemporary times and tastes while still consistently recognizing Ray Kroc's original values he used to found the company. Past attempts to modify the original tenants of quality, service, cleanliness, and value ended in disaster, particularly in Campaign 55, as Ball unashamedly described. McDonald's is poised on a new image and brand message. The target audience of McDonald's is getting more sophisticated; their tastes more complex, and this is requiring some justification. Competing with fast casual also means the average price of menu items is a little higher, which may affect the tenant of value. While the research revealed the core values of the company have not significantly changed, the way they are conveyed are going to be dramatically different from the previous 10 years.

Implications of the research

The original research question was developed to examine the changes fast food companies. Those tinges in the décor have been the byproduct of following those consumers, following those trends to be able to anticipate what the consumer needs have been making in marketing and advertising strategy, and what those changes reveal about the influence of the

consumers. The findings revealed both structural and philosophical changes to the McDonald's brand communication strategies as well as in the minds of American consumers. This study was instigated by the wake created from the 2003 release of *Fast Food Nation*; since that time, gourmets, marketers, and media have experienced profound changes that question the relevancy of that exposé, especially in light of the financial success McDonald's continues to have. This study sought to explore the how and why behind the “New McDonald's,” the one that has risen from scandal, economic trouble, and lawsuits.

One topic the “New McDonald's” will need to face is who it is actually targeting. Socioeconomics may have a surprising effect on the future of the company and the way it brands itself. Traditionally, the fast food McDonald's offers is convenient and inexpensive, appropriate for working class consumers. In attempting to brand itself as more luxurious and upscale option, McDonald's may cater to more “foodie” consumers, but it may alienate the primary base of consumers that provides the bulk of business. If McDonald's is also spending money on aesthetic redesign, does this also mean that meals will become more expensive in order to make up for the costly revamp? Americans are very familiar with the image of McDonald's, and their associations with the brand have been embedded since the 1950s. If the McDonald's brand is trying to change its image, it could spell an uncertain public. The interviews indicated that marketing efforts from McDonald's attempt to stay behind trends and be conservative in how it presents itself. A radical branding change on the scale described may change the attitudes about McDonald's, but it may also change who continues to purchase food there.

The stream of inquiry surrounding the role of media in this study is important because the media create public consciousness of food trends. As more people are reading and becoming more sophisticated food consumers, as Golin says, they are changing their opinions

about food as well as their food consumption behaviors. How McDonald's is reacting to this more aware, "foodie" culture illustrates the highly influential effect media have had on consumers, and in turn, McDonald's business practices.

This study's findings show that Americans have changing and evolving expectations from food corporations, wanting transparency, healthier choices, and even accountability. They are voicing their opinions and demanding more options, and corporations are constantly changing to meet these consumer demands. The findings of this research provided additional insight about these changes as well as the relationship between the food corporation and consumer. As one participant suggested, the social contract between the two will lead to more transparency, more options, and greater influence from media. After all, public opinion's most influential tool are media.

Impact of the research

What we eat is, such a significant part of our society; it determines a great deal about our health, culture, and values. McDonald's serves millions of people a day, so it is no surprise that Eric Schlosser called the population a "fast food nation." Millions of people are taking part in the exchange of calories and currency for the McRib sandwich, but they are also buying into something much greater and more abstract than food. They are buying into values that define our culture. Whether people are aware or not, the efficiency, diversity, and speed defining the fast food culture also define the capitalistic system as well as our daily lifestyle.

Fast food is an indelible part of our culture, so how the consumer and the corporation interact is important, especially when it comes to corporate efforts in relation to consumer choice. Whether it is "addictive" or not, Americans heavily consume fast food, and the effects

of consumption are starting to show. As a result of higher degrees of obesity and controversy, consumers have spoken out. While the participants that McDonald's does not assume responsibility as a business to encourage limited consumption or alternative options, it is making alterations to what it is known for...fast and fried. Consumers now have more options than ever to pick from a McDonald's menu, and this choice stems from McDonald's response to the consumer voice. A case study - like the present - has the potential for educating consumers and businesses alike in regard to the relationship and interplay between the two. Szmigin provides support to the finding that consumers play a powerful and influential role in this relationship: “[Consumers] are knowledgeable about issues such as food miles, local sourcing, and fairly traded goods and factored these into their choices but such concerns did not always overcome issues, such as taste, price or convenience” (2009, p. 228). As a result, corporations like McDonald’s apparently consider the same issues in their decisions, with heavy emphasis on taste, price and convenience as well.

Recommendation for future research

Although this case study provides an initial glimpse at the ever-evolving marketing strategies of the McDonald’s Corporation, additional research would provide valuable in answering the line of inquiry. It is suggested that the next steps for this case study would be to gather a longitudinal review of McDonald’s finances in relation to the changing marketing practices. Tracing the economic effects of marketing trends on company finances (ie: stock price hikes, revenue, and commodity pricing) would create an even more definitive and complete investigation in regard to the evaluation of efforts. Additionally, there would be possibility of speculating correlation between sales and messages McDonald's is sending out.

Furthermore, conducting a study on the fast-casual restaurant industry that was referenced in the findings of the present study would be interesting. Such a study would

explore how restaurants, such as Chipotle, substantiate their claims that clearly appeal to consumer trends. For example, is there a qualifiable way to support the claim that Chipotle serves “food with integrity”? How does a restaurant purport to be fresh yet compete in a fast, prepared foods market? Though fast-casual restaurants argue their difference from fast-food restaurants, they are competing with all establishments that offer the quick-service meal, with McDonald's included. Finally, what are the shared marketing practices that define the fast-casual restaurant industry and differentiate it from the fast-food industry?

While fast-casual restaurants would certainly be worth studying, further investigating other fast food brands would be worthwhile. Inspecting how competitors like Burger King and Chik-Fil-A are also rebranding themselves in this newer, more conscious consumer's eyes, or even how they are rebranding in response to McDonald's, would be useful to know. If McDonald's is truly going after the points of differentiation it has with fast casual, the corporation is leaving a large void. This void market will have something taking its place. The more the research inspected branding changes, the more accurate of a prediction about the “Next McDonald's” could be.

On a macro-level, additional research on the food trends that result from the consumption of food media would be an excellent study to pair with the findings from the current study. The interview participants from the present study did not elaborate much on the relationship between the fast-food/fast-casual industry and food media. Whether the omission was intentional or unintentional, participants did not talk about the opportunities or even threats of food media and the resulting “foodie” culture. While this case study certainly revealed quite a bit about the characteristics and expectations of the new consumer, their media diets were not discussed. Perhaps examining consumer response to food media messages would be insightful. Further, the content of both programming and advertisements

on popular food media, such as the Food Network, would be worth investigating as well.

Both of these suggested studies would provide an understanding of the effects food media had on consumer preferences and trends.

Limitations of the research

Since the researcher does not have access to the locations, resources, and funds that would have supported a comprehensive case study, the researcher had to rely on existing literature a few interviews to gain a clear idea of the how and why the fast food industry has changed. Pragmatically, the scope of this research ha to be reduced, but the researcher attempted to shed some light onto a phenomenon that is changing the fundamental ways we eat and the business that forms a part of American culture, using the most powerful brand as context for the case.

Further, the researcher recognizes that saturation of the data were not completely observed with only four interviews. Ideally, the researcher would have had the opportunity to interview the three other potential research participants identified through the purposive sampling method; however, time restrictions as well as concerns of the potential participants interfered with their participation. The additional participants would have represented a local McDonald's franchise, a fast-food coop, as well as the McDonald's global communication division. The researcher regrets not being able to gather a more local (as well as global) perspective on the changes taking place at McDonald's

The final course

How and where human beings get their food led to the emergence and evolution of society, and continues to help distinguish differences between cultures. The United States often uses food as a subculture delineator or socioeconomic dividing line. Americans also use

food to make money in the exchange of goods between consumer and vendor. The restaurant industry was originally developed for pragmatism: Food vendors provided convenient meals for travelers on the go or a place of relaxation for ancient Chinese socialites (Van Guhl, 1974, p. 179). However, in contemporary times, the restaurant is a place of social gathering and recreational experiences more than ever before. So the secret behind a restaurant's success today appears to be “placing the customer in the center of the entire dining activity” (Boscor, 2011, p. 57). The focus on consumer tastes and expectations, might reveal the ingredients for a successful and distinct future for McDonald's, a future that may redefine the All-American meal in an effort to appeal to the ever-changing consumer. So, who is hungry?

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