
Consumer Perception and Preference of Fast Food: A Study of Tertiary Students in Ghana

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Abstract: The study explored the perceptions, preferences and factors contributing to the growth of fast food among tertiary students. To meet these objectives, a sample size of 159 consumers was taken from the two leading tertiary institutions in Cape Coast; University of Cape Coast and Cape Coast Polytechnic. Pretested semi-structured questionnaires were administered to the respondents and the data were analyzed using SPSS version 20. The results were presented using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations, tables and charts). Findings from the study indicated that the growth of fast food is perceived to be as a result of urbanization, people working for long hours, growing interest in exotic meals, advertising, availability of commercial buildings and rise in income. Those who do not patronize fast food perceive them to be unhealthy, expensive and too foreign. Those who patronize however perceive them to be convenient, time saving, delicious, good for fun and change, and expose them to likable environments. To place an order for fast food, consumers prefer them in the form of both “take-away” and ‘eat in’ services. The most preferred menu happened to be the exotic ones (i.e. Pizza, burger, rice etc). The findings proved to be more significant and revealing as they will help marketers to analyze the behavioral characteristics of consumers’ with respect to the consumption of fast foods.

Keywords: Fast Food, Consumer, Consumer Behaviour, Perception and Preference

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction and Background

Rapid urbanization coupled with busy lifestyle and advancement in technology has greatly changed the way of life of many people including people in the developing countries. The effects of these changes have altered the tradition of cooking and eating at home. People are now more reliant on ready-to-eat meals offered by businesses for their daily sustenance and popular among them are fast foods.

Fast food is the “general term used for limited menu of foods that lend themselves to production-line techniques; suppliers tend to specialize in products such as hamburgers, pizzas, chicken or sandwiches” [1]. First popularized in the 1950s in United States, it typically refers to food sold in restaurant or store with preheated or precooked ingredients, and served to the customer in a package form for take-out or take-away [2]. The concept has spread beyond the US to other regions of the world contributing to a global fast food market worth of USD 477.1 billion which is expected to reach USD 617.6 billion in 2019[3].

The most obvious advantage of fast foods are, they are convenient, quick to serve, readily available alternative to home food and quite affordable [4]. Consumers patronize fast food to save time, satisfy their hunger, for pleasure and for social interactions [5]. Before the advent of fast food, people needed to buy a lot of ingredients from the market to prepare food to serve to the family on time. To many people, fast foods conveniently replace such activity as life is increasingly becoming too busy and hectic.

Whiles convenient and economical for modern day lifestyle, fast foods have some disturbing disadvantages. They are typically high in calories, fat, saturated fat and salt which have been pointed out as the major cause of heart disease in human, diabetes and obesity [4, 8]. Such research findings has led to critics of fast food calling for consumers to abandon its patronage[6] resulting in a number of fast food chains changing or introducing healthy meals to their menu. Also because fast food concept relies on speed, uniformity and low cost, they are often made with ingredients formulated to achieve certain flavor or consistency and to preserve freshness. This requires a high degree of food engineering, the use of additives and processing techniques

that substantially alter the food from its original form and reduces its nutritional value [7].

Fast food businesses have been growing in popularity in Ghana in the past decades. Run by both local entrepreneurs and foreign multinational firms, they serve the Ghanaian consumer with variety of exotic dishes including pizza, hamburgers, fried chicken, French fries etc. Their operations are more formal and are generally located in buildings on the high streets or buzzing areas of cities and gas stations. There is however a paucity of national data and literature on consumer perceptions and preferences of fast food consumption in the country. This paper therefore sought to fill the research gap by exploring the influencing factors, perception and preference of fast food consumers in the Ghanaian society with particular emphasis on students in tertiary education.

1.2. Empirical Review of Consumer Behavior and Perception towards Fast Food

A study of fast food perception conducted by [9], compared a survey data of college students from Spain and the United State. Findings from the study indicated that consumer perceptions about fast food are cultural and gender specific. More American college males (61%) considered value (amount of food for the money) to be a priority than did other respondents (35%) and relatively few American college males (29%) cited nutritional status as important (versus 60% of other college respondents). Convenience of fast food is more important to Americans (69%) than Spaniards (48%) while more Spanish college students (49%) than Americans (18%) objected to the proliferation of fast food establishments in their own countries.

[4] conducted an exploratory study on consumer perception about fast food in India to estimate the importance of various factors affecting the choice of fast food outlets by young consumers. Results from the study indicated that young Indian consumers have passion for visiting fast food outlets for fun and change but home food is their first choice. They feel homemade food is much better than food served at fast food outlets. They have the highest value for taste and quality (nutritional values) followed by ambience and hygiene. Further, consumers felt that fast food outlets must provide additional information on nutritional values and hygiene conditions inside kitchen.

[10] in a study sought to explore the differences in fast food preferences, perceptions and patronage between Indians living in high-and low-income neighborhoods. Findings from the study revealed that participant from high-income neighborhoods were more likely to perceive western-style fast food as fast food, while people from the low-income neighborhoods were more likely to identify food sold by street vendors as fast food. Also the findings revealed that participant from both low-income and high-income neighborhoods visited fast food restaurants for the same reasons as convenience, price, social enjoyment and quality meals. Both groups preferred home meals over restaurant meals and recognized that home cooked food were healthier.

[11] conducted a research on consumer perception of food

franchise. The objective was to seek consumers' perception about two fast food franchises, McDonalds and KFC. The research concluded that consumers attached great importance to factors such as quality of food, facility layout, service quality- speed and cleanliness. Taste and quality of food items were however the most important factors that influence consumers.

2. Method

2.1. Study Design, Area and Period

A cross-sectional study was undertaken from May to November, 2014 among students of University of Cape Coast (UCC) and Cape Coast Polytechnic (CCP) in Ghana. The two institutions studied are leading institutions among many in the country as far as tertiary education is concerned. They however share quite different academic units. UCC runs more faculties than CCP with programs ranging from diploma to doctoral degrees whiles CCP runs diploma and degree programs.

2.2. Study Population, Sampling and Data Collection

The study population consists of all the mainstream tertiary students of Cape Coast. Students study under access, distant learning, sandwich and evening school were excluded from the study due to difference in characteristics in terms program and lifestyle.

Sample size of one hundred and fifty nine (159) students from the population was used through a pretested structured questionnaire. The study instruments were both primary and secondary data. The students were stratified into various academic levels and self-administered questionnaires to them randomly. The data gathered were analyzed using descriptive statistics and results presented in tables, percentages and charts.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Figure 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Out of the 159 respondents, 95 (59.7%) were males and 64 (40.3%) were females. 119 (74.8 %) were between the ages of 18-25 years, 27 (17%) were between the ages 26-35 years, 11 (6.9%) were between 36-40 years and 2 (1.3%) were 40 years or above. Majority of the respondents 62 (38.4%) were level 200 students, 38 (23.9%) were level 300 students, 33(20.8%) level 100 students, 17 (10.7%) level 400 students and 10 (6.3%) were graduate students. The average income or pocket money of the respondents was between GHC101-GHC500 per month.

3.2. Patronage Patterns of Fast food

3.2.1. Definition, Usage, Like or Dislike and Reasons for not Buying

Figure 2 depicts that 114 (71.1%) of respondent defined fast food as food sold by restaurant chains and 39 (24.5%) as

food sold by street vendor. 135 (84.9%) of respondents have tried fast food before while 24 (15.1%) have not. Out of the 135 who have tried fast food before, 117 (86.7%) liked it and 18 (13.3%) disliked it. Respondent reasons for disliking or not trying fast food were that, fast foods were unhealthy, expensive, too foreign and other just like home food.

3.2.2. Frequency of Fast Food Patronage and the Time Visit to Fast Food Outlets

Figure 3 shows the frequency of fast food patronage and the time of the day respondents usually visit fast food outlets. The results indicates that majority of respondents 121 (76%) patronized fast foods once a while and 103 (64.8%) usually visits at lunch time.

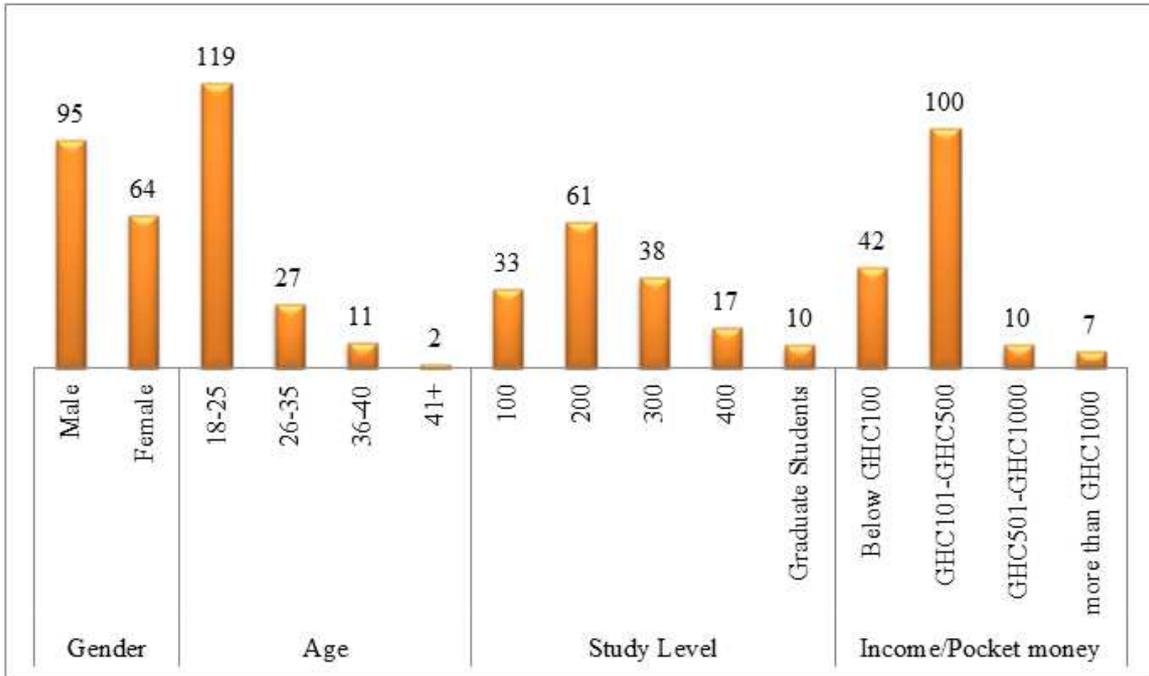


Figure 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Source: Survey Data, 2014

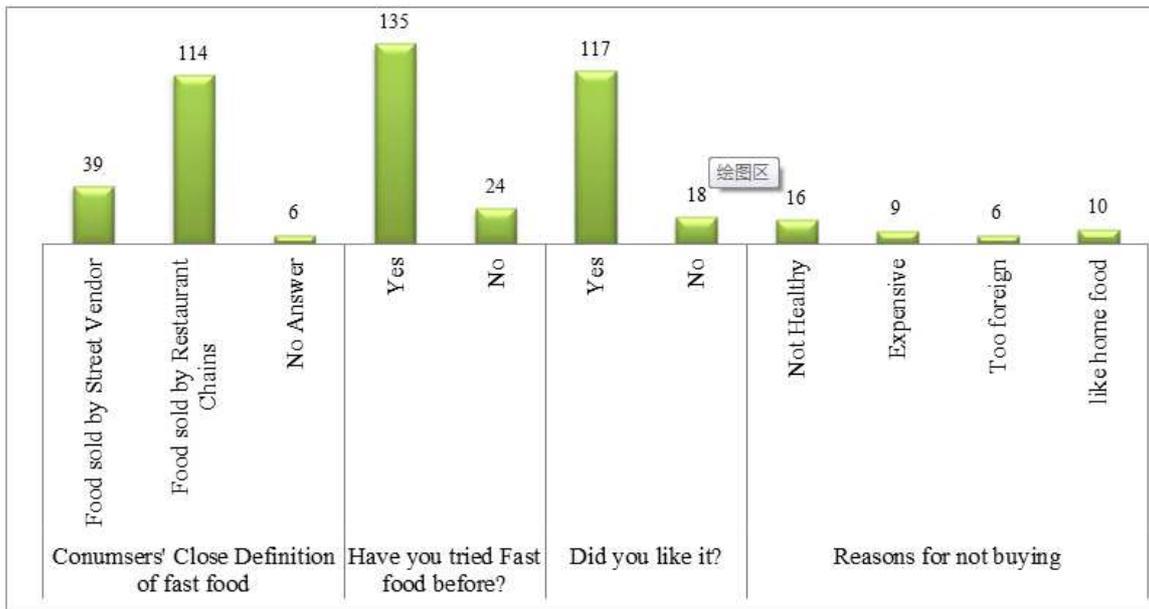


Figure 2. Fast food definition, usage, like or dislike and Reasons for not buying.

Source: Survey Data, 2014

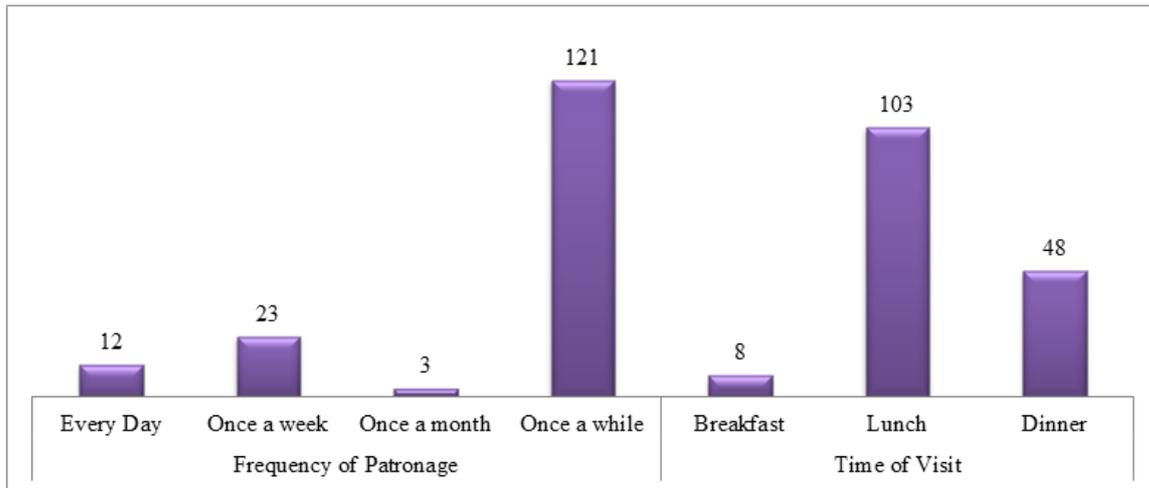


Figure 3. Meal type and Frequency of Patronage.

Source: Survey Data, 2014

3.2.3. Reasons for Patronizing Fast Food

Table 1 represents the mean score of consumers' reasons for patronizing fast food on a five point Likert scale. Some of

the reasons include; it saves time, convenient, for a change and fun, offers variety of menu, and delicious among others.

Table 1. Consumers reasons for patronizing fast food.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Saves time	159	1.00	5.00	4.0818	.89279
Convenient	159	1.00	5.00	3.8742	.95296
For Change and Fun	159	1.00	5.00	3.6981	1.03578
Variety of Menu	159	1.00	5.00	3.4969	1.07252
Delicious	159	1.00	5.00	3.4780	1.18448
Like the Environment	159	1.00	5.00	3.0566	1.18666
Inexpensive (Price)	159	1.00	4.00	2.8176	.96689
Location of Outlets	159	1.00	5.00	2.4780	1.10142

Source: Survey Data, 2014

3.3. Perceived Popularity of Fast Food and its Contributing Factors

Table 2a reports the mean score of fast food popularity as perceived by respondents. Perceived factors contributing to the growing popularity includes urbanization, long working

hours, growing interest in exotic food, advertising, availability of commercial buildings and rise in income with corresponding mean scores reported in Table 2b on a five point Likert scale.

Table 2a. Perceived Popularity of Fast Food.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fast food has become popular among Ghanaians	159	1.00	5.00	3.8302	.80511

Source: Survey Data, 2014

Table 2b. Perceived factors contributing to Fast Food Popularity.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Urbanization	159	1.00	5.00	4.2704	.86189
Long Working Hours	159	1.00	5.00	4.1321	.92170
Growing Interest in Exotic Meals	159	1.00	5.00	3.6478	1.01967
Advertisement	159	1.00	5.00	3.5472	.97888
Availability of Commercial Buildings	159	1.00	5.00	3.3270	1.07029
Rise In Income	159	1.00	5.00	3.2013	1.12385

Source: Survey Data, 2014

3.4. Consumers' Perception of Fast Food

of fast food on a five point Likert scale.

Table 3 depicts the mean scores of respondents' perception

Table 3. Consumers Perceptions on Fast Foods.

Key	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Home food is better than fast food	159	1.00	5.00	4.5157	.90606
Fast food consumption causes Obesity and heart diseases	159	1.00	5.00	3.6730	1.15011
Fast food is a form entertainment	159	1.00	5.00	3.3899	1.16332
Fast foods usually have clean environments	159	1.00	5.00	3.3836	.99873
Fast foods usually offer healthy meals	159	1.00	5.00	2.8931	.97819

Source: Survey Data, 2014

3.5. Consumer Preference of Fast Food

Figure 4 depicts consumers' preference for fast food. On preferred eating service, the results indicates that 76 (47.8%) of respondents prefer "Take Away" meals, 15 (9.4%) prefer "Eat In" meals and 68 (42.8%) prefer both "Take Away" and "Eat In". The types of food preferred by respondent are as follows; exotic meals 88(55.4%) local meals 15(9.4%) and

both exotic and local meals 56 (35.2%).

Local meals preferred by consumers are as follows; rice meals 68 (44.3%), Grilled Fish 57(36%), Grilled meat 38 (24%) and Fries 34 (21%). Preferred exotic meals of consumers' are as follows; Pizza 142(89%), Hamburger 114 (72%), Rice meals 98 (62%), Noodles 90 (57%), French fries 73 (46%), Hot dogs 61 (38%) and Salads 31 (19%).

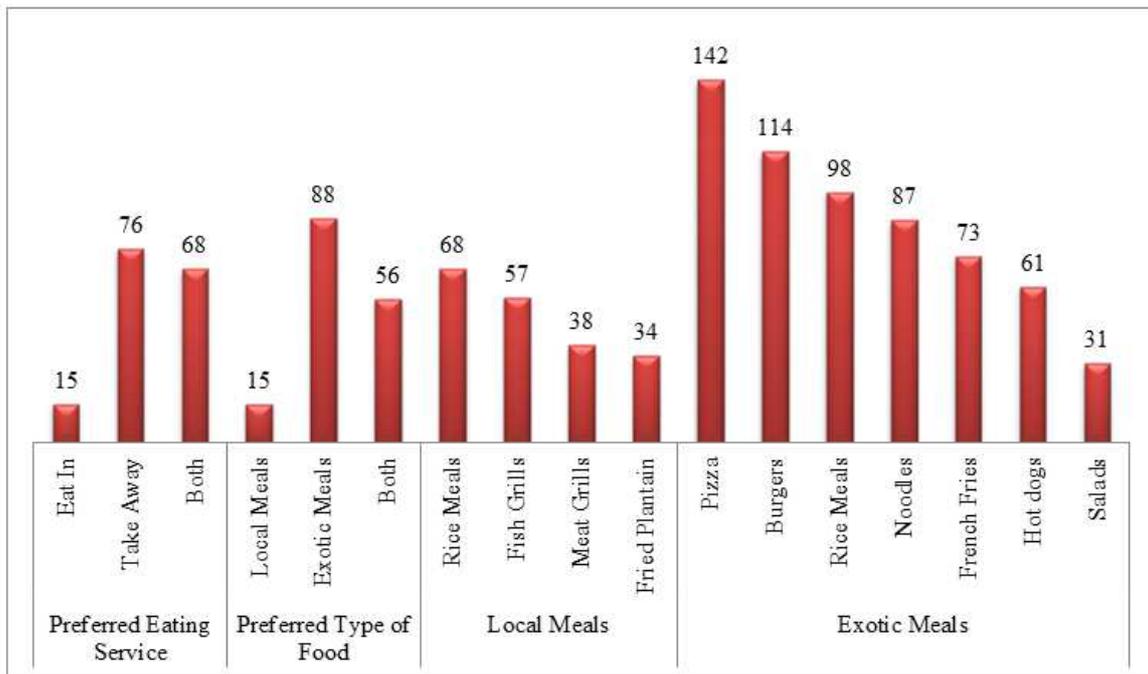


Figure 4. Fast food preference of consumers.

Source: Survey Data, 2014

4. Discussion and Conclusion

4.1. Discussion

In the course of our survey, we sought to explore the perceived growth of fast food in Ghana and its contributing factors, consumer perceptions and preferences. The survey focused on tertiary students in the Cape Coast Metropolis. The results indicated that most consumers of fast food were between the ages of 18 and 25 years (Figure 1), with male

(59.7%) patronizing it more than female (40.3%).

Consumers' knowledge on fast food was measured by asking the question, "Which of the following statements most closely match your understanding of fast food"? Options respondents could choose from were "food sold by street vendors, such as "kenkey" (maize meal) and fish, "wakyee" (rice and beans)", "food sold at restaurant chains such as Sizzler", and "no answer". In [9] research on "differences in perceptions and fast food eating behaviours between Indians living in high- and low-income neighborhoods of Chandigarh,

India”, respondents from high-income neighborhood were more likely to report fast food as food sold at restaurant chains. In contrast, respondents from low-income neighborhoods were more likely to report fast food as food sold by street vendors. In this present paper however, majority of the respondents (71.1%) reported fast food as food sold by restaurant chains, with 24.5% reporting fast food as food sold by street vendors [Figure 2]. This finding confirms the perceived definition of fast food as given by Indians living in high-income neighborhoods of Chandigarh.

[Figure 2] continues to reveal that 84.9% of respondents have tried fast food before. Out of the 84.9% who have tried fast food, 86.7% liked it and continues to patronize it. Reasons for other respondents who have not tried fast food before (15.1%) or have tried but disliked it (13.3%) were that, fast foods were unhealthy, expensive, and too foreign and others just like home food.

Whiles the study indicated a high patronage of fast food among tertiary students, Figure 3 reveals that consumption is not on frequent basis; 76% of respondents consume fast food once awhile, 14.5% consumes at least once a week, and 7.5% consumes fast food every day. This is quite consistent with [12] finding on Consumer Characteristics influencing fast food consumption in Turkey. With regards to the type of meal (breakfast, lunch or dinner) usually purchased, Figure 3 depicts that going out for lunch was the most preferred time of visiting fast food outlets followed by dinner and breakfast.

The study further revealed that consumers consume fast food because, it saves time, convenient, delicious, provide variety of menu, offers change and they like the environment (Table 1). These results are in harmony with findings from other research works that consumers patronize fast food because it provides them with various benefits as disclosed in table 1 [4, 9, 10, 13].

Regarding the perceived popularity of fast food in Ghana, the study revealed that this has become possible as a result of increased urbanization, long working hours, and growing interest in exotic meals, advertisement, availability of commercial buildings and rise in income (Table 2a and Table 2b).

Consumers’ overall perception of fast food as shown in Table 3, depicted that majority perceive home food to be better than fast food with a mean score of ($\bar{X} = 4.51$, $SD = 0.906$), fast food consumption as a cause of obesity and heart diseases ($\bar{X} = 3.67$, $SD = 1.150$), as a form of entertainment ($\bar{X} = 3.39$, $SD = 1.163$), as usually having a clean environment ($\bar{X} = 3.38$, $SD = 0.999$) and fast food meals as unhealthy ($\bar{X} = 2.89$, $SD = 0.978$) respectively. [4, 8] findings support these views as given by the respondents.

Concerning consumers’ preference of fast food, figure 4 revealed that “Take Away” was the more preferred service for most consumers 47.8%, followed by 42.8% of consumer preferring both “Take Away” and “Eat In” services. Consumer’s generally preferred exotic meals (55.4%) to local meals (9.4%), whiles 35.2% of consumers preferred both

exotic and local meals. Pizza, hamburger, rice meals, noodles, French fries, hot dogs and salads were then most popular exotic meals preferred by consumers. However, the most preferred local meals according to the consumers include rice meals, grilled fish, grilled meat and fries.

4.2. Conclusion

The present findings contribute to the understanding of consumer perception and preference of fast foods in the Ghanaian market, an area that has received little attention within the academic literature. Expressly, this study provides insight into the factors contributing to the perceived growth of fast food in Ghana which is as a result of urbanization, people working for long hours, growing interest in exotic meals, advertising, availability of commercial buildings and rise in income. These consumers, who currently patronize fast food, do so for the reasons that they perceive them to be convenient, time saving, delicious, good for a change and fun as well as preference of the environment. Those who do not consume fast food however perceive fast food as unhealthy, quite expensive and too foreign as related to Ghanaian dishes.

The study has an inherent limitation due to its focus on tertiary students making it quite difficult to generalize the findings. It however provides the opportunity for further investigations. For example, in future, it will be important to further examine consumer perception and preference according to gender, economic and social status. Study on the opportunities and challenges in the fast food industry will also enrich literature on fast foods.

In the nut shell, the study revealed significant opportunity to marketers as far as consumers’ behaviour regarding preference, usage pattern and understanding of food market is concerned. The findings can be used as a basis to pattern marketing strategy towards satisfaction of the fast food market.

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