

Fast Food Consumption Habits of University Students in Sri Lanka

H.A. Dimani Tharuka Hapuarachchi

Visiting Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

This research investigates the factors influencing fast-food consumption among university students in Sri Lanka, considering the economic challenges and prevalence of this dietary trend. The study draws on established definitions of fast food, emphasizing the interchangeability of the terms “fast food” and “junk food,” with a crucial distinction that not all fast foods are inherently unhealthy. Notably, the research explores the nutritional implications of fast food consumption, highlighting the findings and addressing the changing eating patterns identified by previous studies. The study is driven by the evolving trend among Sri Lankan university students, mainly during the economic crisis, where the younger population, determined by economic constraints, turns to inexpensive fast food options available within university canteens. The research aims to observe and analyze the factors influencing this consumption pattern. The materials and methods involve demographic analysis through an online questionnaire, encompassing both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The survey targets 265 undergraduates, revealing a significant preference for fast food, particularly during lunchtime. The study employs factor analysis techniques, with a focus on the principal components factor (PCF), to interpret the motivations behind students’ fast food choices. The analysis identifies four key factors influencing fast food preferences: the relation between product quality and pricing, ease of convenience, offerings and customer service, and time constraints and limitations. The conclusion synthesizes the findings, emphasizing the nuanced understanding gained through factor analysis regarding the complex motivations behind university students’ fast food consumption. The research contributes valuable insights for stakeholders in academia, the fast-food industry, and policymakers. Recommendations are personalized to the Sri Lankan context, proposing strategies such as local nutritional awareness campaigns, promoting local fast-food alternatives, incorporating cultural sensitivity in marketing, establishing university canteen guidelines, fostering community engagement, and supporting sustainable agriculture initiatives.

Keywords: Fast Food, Consumption, Factor Analysis, University Students

Introduction

Fast food is termed as food that is ready to eat and can be served quickly. "fast food" and "junk food" are often used interchangeably [1,10]. While most junk foods are fast foods due to their quick preparation and serving, it's important to note that not all fast foods are necessarily unhealthy, especially when made with nutritious ingredients.

Ludwig et al. (2001) found that fast foods are generally acknowledged for their poor nutritional quality, being low in essential elements such as iron, calcium, riboflavin, and vitamins A and C [2]. The consumption of high-fat fast foods is linked to increased energy and fat intake, coupled with a lower intake

of essential nutrients [3]. Notably, shifts in eating patterns, such as the rise in meals eaten away from home, larger portions, meal-skipping, and increased fast food consumption, may contribute to this trend [4]. Kaushik, Narang, and Parakh (2011) stress that the fast food culture is gaining traction among the younger generation. Factors such as ready availability, taste, affordability, marketing strategies, and peer pressure contribute to its popularity among children and adolescents [5,11]. Fast food establishments are designed to prioritize speed, efficiency, and uniformity [6].

The significance of fast food consumption extends to various aspects of health. Additionally, the nutritional habits formed during adolescence can have lasting effects. These habits include irregular meals, frequent snacking, eating away from home, and adopting alternative dietary patterns, all of which characterize the food habits of young adults stemming from adolescence [7, 12].

Afolabi et al. (2013) mentioned that eating fast foods for meals or snacks is especially popular with young adults [8,13]. During early adulthood, many changes begin that lead to the development of diseases of aging several years later [9,14].

Due to the prevailing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, a significant trend has emerged among the younger population, particularly at the university level, where many decide to fulfill their main meal requirements by resorting to the consumption of fast foods. The accessibility of affordable fast food options within university canteens has become a practical solution for students dealing with economic challenges, providing them with a viable and cost-effective alternative for their daily sustenance.

Therefore, the focus of this research is to observe and analyze the factors that play a pivotal role in influencing the consumption of fast foods among university students in Sri Lanka.

Materials and Methods

The primary research instrument utilized for data collection was an online questionnaire, incorporating both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Drawing on insights from prior studies, the questionnaire comprised four sections encompassing a total of twenty attributes. The target population consisted of university students in Sri Lanka, and a survey was conducted among 265 undergraduates.

Demographic analysis

In the questionnaire analysis conducted among university students, it was observed that 55.1% of the participants identified as male, while 44.9% identified as female as mentioned by the table 1. Marital status revealed that 6.8% of the students were married, whereas the majority, comprising 93.2%, were single. Regarding living arrangements, 56.8% of the participants reported residing at home, 28.6% in hostels, and 14.6% in boarding facilities. A notable finding was that 97.4% of the undergraduates acknowledged consuming fast food, whereas 2.6% did not assist in such dietary choices. Further analysis of fast food consumption patterns among students revealed that 67.2% preferred fast food during afternoon, 1.1% in the morning, and 31.7% in the evenings. The frequency of visits to fast food establishments varied, with 15.6% of students opting for daily visits, 19.6% once a week, 49.4% twice a week, 10.6% once every two weeks, and 15.7% once a month.

Table 1: Demographic details of the respondents

Factor and the levels	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	55.1

Female	44.9
<i>Marital Status</i>	
Married	6.8
Single	93.2
<i>Living Arrangement</i>	
Home	56.8
Hostel	28.6
Boarding Facilities	14.6
<i>Status of Consuming Fast Food</i>	
Yes	97.4
No	2.6
<i>Fast Food Consumption Pattern</i>	
Morning (Breakfast)	1.1
Afternoon (Lunch)	67.2
Evening (Dinner)	31.7
<i>Frequency of Visit to Fast Food</i>	
Daily	15.6
Once a week	19.6
Twice a week	49.4
Every two weeks	10.6
Once a month	15.7

Source: Survey data, 2024

Distribution of factors under the principal components factor (PCF)

The survey delved into various aspects of the participants' fast food consumption, aiming to explain the reasons behind their choices. The responses gathered were subjected to a comprehensive analysis using SPSS software, incorporating factor analysis techniques.

The study initially assessed the necessary factors to elucidate preferences in fast food consumption. Subsequently, a Varimax rotation was employed to pinpoint the distinct variables composing these factors. To ascertain the appropriateness of the explanatory variables for factor analysis, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett sphericity test were utilized. Eigenvalues were figured in the initial factor analysis resolution to determine the number of factors (principal components), that come with variance and cumulative variance assessments.

Factor analysis was conducted to assess whether the 10 variables queried align under specific factors, aiming to scrutinize the construct validity of the motivations for fast food consumption. Initially, the KMO and Bartlett sphericity tests were employed to evaluate the utility and applicability of the factor analysis results and determine the compatibility of the data for factor analysis application.

Table 2 indicates a KMO value of 0.664, and the Bartlett sphericity test yielded a significant value of 0.00. These results lead to the conclusion that the data is suitable for factor analysis, as both the KMO and Bartlett sphericity tests demonstrate compatibility with the application of factor analysis.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett results

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.664
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	176.432
	df	169
	Sig.	0.000

Source: Survey data, 2024

Factors are extracted based on eigenvalues greater than 1 displaying the number of factors. Factors (Table 3) that are formed about the factor analysis results consist of values shown.

Table 3: Mark assessment scale, variance explanation

Beginning eigenvalues				Total load factor (Rotated)		
Factor	Total	Explained Variance %	Cumulative	Total	Explained Variance %	Cumulative
1	1.865	19.236	19.336	1.833	18.358	18.358
2	1.399	11.206	30.442	1.345	11.489	29.847
3	1.285	10.295	40.737	1.176	10.009	39.856
4	1.198	10.299	51.036	1.217	11.180	51.036

Source: Survey data, 2024

As outlined in table 4, Factor 1 is identified as the "Relation between product quality and pricing", explaining 18.358% of the variance. This factor exposes that the favorite for fast food is influenced by factors such as hygiene, quality, and price. A parallel survey highlights the significance of cleanliness as the most crucial factor impacting students' preference for fast food consumption.

Factor 2 (Table 4), titled "Ease of convenience", explains 11.489% of the variance. This factor encompasses elements such as the aesthetic appeal of the location. The conclusion drawn is that factors like decoration, ambiance, food quality, convenience, service speed, menu variety, and availability of special products collectively play a substantial role in shaping the preferences of young individuals toward fast food establishments.

Factor 3 (Table 4), termed "Offerings and customer service", accounts for 10.009% of the variance. Students express a preference for fast food products that align with their taste preferences, are prepared under healthy conditions, feature pleasant services, and address customer complaints.

Factor 4, highlighted in Table 4, is labeled as "Time constraints and limitations", explaining 11.180% of the variance. This factor comprises aspects such as the time-saving nature of fast food preparation and time constraints arising from work life. Another survey confirms this finding, emphasizing that the primary reason for students favoring fast food is its quick and easy preparation, aligning with the prioritization of time efficiency.

Table 4: Factor loadings for fast food consumption preference scale

Factor		Components			
		1	2	3	4
Factor 1	<i>Relation between product quality and pricing</i>				
	Food hygiene	0.598	0.506	0.125	0.258

	Quality of the food	0.592	0.285	0.397	0.385
	Reasonable prices	0.755	0.654	0.678	0.289
Factor 2	<i>Ease of convenience</i>				
	Good appearance in the place	0.634	0.705	0.285	0.398
Factor 3	<i>Offerings and customer service</i>				
	Proper to palatal delight	0.698	0.568	0.759	0.660
	Preparation of foods in healthy conditions	0.274	0.238	0.605	0.566
	Service quality	0.236	0.285	0.442	0.392
	Evaluation of complaints	0.098	0.129	0.196	0.167
Factor 4	<i>Time constraints and limitations</i>				
	Preventing time as preparation of foods does not take considerable time	0.258	0.397	0.331	0.425
	Working as a employee (fulltime/ parttime)	0.632	0.665	0.498	0.776

Source: Survey data, 2024

Conclusion

The analysis revealed that a majority of the respondents recognized consuming fast food, with significant proportions favoring lunchtime consumption. Four factors were identified through factor analysis: The relation between product quality and pricing, Ease of convenience, Offerings and customer service, and Time constraints and limitations,

The factor analysis results demonstrated that the survey data were suitable for this analytical approach, as indicated by the KMO and Bartlett sphericity tests. The identified factors provide a nuanced understanding of the complex motivations behind university students' fast food consumption, contributing valuable insights into the fast-food industry.

Recommendations

Considering the Sri Lankan context, where economic challenges and the prevalence of fast-food consumption among university students have been highlighted, the recommendations can be adapted to address specific local factors:

- **Local Nutritional Awareness Campaigns:** Launch targeted campaigns emphasizing traditional and locally available nutritious food options. Promote the importance of incorporating local ingredients into daily diets, showcasing their health benefits.
- **Local Fast-Food Alternatives:** Encourage the development of local fast-food options that offer healthier alternatives rooted in Sri Lankan cooking. This could involve supporting small businesses or local entrepreneurs to provide nutritious yet convenient meal options.
- **Cultural Sensitivity in Marketing:** Work with fast-food establishments to ensure that marketing strategies align with Sri Lankan cultural values and preferences. Promote local flavors and culinary traditions to make healthier options more appealing.
- **University Canteen Guidelines:** Establish guidelines for university canteens to include a variety of traditional and healthy meal options. Collaborate with local vendors who provide balanced and nutritious food choices at affordable prices.

- **Community Engagement:** Involve local communities in awareness campaigns and initiatives. Leverage community support to support healthy eating habits and encourage students to choose nutritious alternatives over processed fast food.
- **Sustainable Agriculture Initiatives:** Promote sustainable agricultural practices and local food production to ensure a continuous supply of fresh, local ingredients. This not only supports the local economy but also contributes to the availability of healthier food options.

By customizing recommendations to the Sri Lankan context, stakeholders can address the unique cultural, economic, and dietary factors influencing fast food consumption among university students, promoting a healthier and more sustainable approach to dietary habits.

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