



## Gender differences in purchase intentions and reasons for meal selection among fast food customers – Opportunities for healthier and more sustainable fast food



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### ABSTRACT

Understanding the factors that influence food selection and dietary behavior is fundamental to support the successful translation of dietary goals into consumer behavior. The present study aims to identify gender differences in fast food consumers' reasons for actual fast food meal selection and their purchase intentions. Based on this background, possible opportunities toward implementing healthier and more sustainable fast food options are discussed. Data were collected at three fast food restaurants from different parts of Denmark among randomly selected customers (aged 15 or above). The customers were approached after having ordered their meal. They filled out a questionnaire on reasons for their actual fast food meal selection and purchase intentions in relation to four hypothesized burger menus, including a regular beef burger menu, a wholegrain beef burger menu, a nutrition labeled beef burger menu and a nutrition labeled chicken burger menu. Results showed that the majority of the fast food customers expressed a wish for healthier menus (55% males vs. 64% females agree or strongly agree,  $p < 0.001$ ) and more sustainable menus in terms of environmental impact (43% males vs. 52% females agree or strongly agree,  $p < 0.001$ ), however only 7% of the participants' meals included healthier food choices ( $n = 740$ ). Habits, taste and price were the main drivers among both genders for the actual meal selection. Compared with women, more men expressed that actual food choice was based on offers and promotions ( $p < 0.001$ ), and on food perceived as the most satiating ( $p = 0.001$ ). With regard to purchase intentions, the majority of men preferred a beef burger menu (healthier or regular) over a healthier chicken burger menu or a wholegrain burger menu, whereas the majority of women responded positively to either of the healthier-labeled burger menus ( $p < 0.001$ ). In conclusion, the study shows that having a focus on gender differences is of particular importance in order to improve the food nutrition environment and support healthier food selections among fast food customers.

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### 1. Introduction

Out-of-home eating and in particular eating at fast food outlets have been associated with an increased risk of becoming overweight and obese (Nago, Lachat, Dossa, & Kolsteren, 2014; Rosenheck, 2008). Fast food meals tend to be energy dense, high in total and saturated fat and salt content and eaten in large portion sizes (Bauer et al., 2012; Chand, Eyles, & Ni, 2012; Hearst et al., 2013). Evidence suggests that adults do not sufficiently

reduce non-restaurant intake to compensate for additional energy intake on days consuming at restaurants (Nguyen & Powell, 2014).

In response to concerns from health authorities and consumer organizations, the fast food industry has engaged in some voluntary initiatives aiming at improving the healthfulness of its offerings, including the possibility of selecting healthier side dishes (Kirkpatrick et al., 2013), healthy labeled meal selections such as Weight Watchers' approved menu items (Anderson & Miroso, 2014) or Heart foundation Tick Approved meals (Wellard, Glasson, & Chapman, 2012). Garcia and colleagues have reported a small reduction in the sodium content of national fast food meals over a 4 year period as a response to Australian efforts to reduce dietary sodium (Garcia, Dunford, Sundstrom, & Neal, 2014).

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Finally, mandatory point-of-purchase calorie menu labeling at chain restaurants has been implemented in several states and localities starting with New York City in 2008 (Dumanovsky et al., 2011). Yet, overall dietary improvements of the available fast food meals (Namba, Auchincloss, Leonberg, & Wootan, 2013), and actual purchase rates of the nutritionally improved fast food meals still seem to be limited (Atkinson & Palmer, 2012; Wellard et al., 2012; Dumanovsky et al., 2011; Finkelstein, Strombotne, Chan, & Krieger, 2011). Additional efforts are needed besides availability of healthier options and nutritional information to obtain substantial dietary improvements not only among the most health-conscious customers but also among the wider consumer population.

Many factors are involved in individual dietary choices. Ecological approach studies suggest that the food environment in which the individual lives, including the effect of one's peers, influences dietary choices as much as the individual's personal characteristics, such as one's attitude or self-efficacy toward healthy eating (Baranowski, Cullen, Nicklas, Thompson, & Baranowski, 2003; Lesser et al., 2013). Whereas many consumers would like a healthy and sustainable diet and lifestyle, their good intentions are thwarted by non-conscious buying patterns and factors such as familiarity, taste expediency, price and how options are presented. The decision-making process in a fast food restaurant is very hasty, a condition that favors making automatic, heuristically based decisions (Lesser et al., 2013). Moreover, fast food is often regarded as a treat, and this may not fit with consumers' perception of a healthy meal (Rydell et al., 2008; Watkins & Jones, 2014).

There is a clear gender difference in food selection and behaviors. In general, females have been frequently reported to engage in far more health-promoting behaviors than males and to obtain healthier lifestyle patterns (Arganini, Saba, Comitato, Virgili, & Turrini, 2012). Dumanovsky and colleagues found that women were more likely to report using calorie information in fast food restaurants after the implementation of a regulation requiring chain restaurants' menus to contain details of the energy content of all menu items (Dumanovsky et al., 2011). Studies conducted in modern western societies report consistent associations between gender and specific foods, where meat (especially red meat), alcohol, and big portion sizes are associated with masculinity, while vegetables, fruit, fish and sour dairy products are associated with femininity (Arganini et al., 2012).

Understanding the factors that influence food selection and dietary behavior is fundamental to supporting the successful translation of dietary goals into consumer behavior. The present study aims to identify gender differences in choice reasons and purchase intentions of fast food consumers. Based on this background, possible opportunities toward healthier and more sustainable fast food options among consumer groups are discussed.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Study design

The present study was part of the Danish EatWell (SpisVel) project which is a public-private partnership development project consisting of partners from governmental agencies, private food companies, fast food chains and universities. The project aims at achieving a greater availability of nutrition labeled fast food meals and dishes. The project uses the Keyhole label, which is a common Nordic label for healthier food products that takes into account the content of energy, fat, salt and sugars, as well as the content of fruit and vegetables and wholegrain in different food groups (Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, 2013). As a member of this partnership project, the burger restaurant chain participating in

the present study planned to introduce a healthy Keyhole-labeled menu as part of their future menu offerings. The healthier food choices at the time of data collection included burgers with whole-grain buns, wraps made with wholegrain tortillas, main dish salads as well as carrots, a green salad or sliced apples as side dishes.

Three fast food restaurants, all part of the same burger restaurant chain, agreed to participate in the present study. They were chosen to represent different customer profiles. One restaurant was situated in the center of a larger city, one near a highway and one was situated in a smaller town. The data collection took place in the autumn 2013. The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

### 2.2. Data collection

At each restaurant, customers were included in the study during three consecutive weekdays: Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays in the time slots of 11:00–15:00 (lunch) and 17:30–19:00 (dinner). The customers were randomly approached after having ordered their choice of food and drinks. They were asked to participate in the study focusing on fast food meals and to fill out a questionnaire while seated at the tables. All participants gave informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study. Inclusion criteria were the following: age of 15 or above and having a meal at the restaurant. It was not required that customers ordered the food themselves. Customers having only dessert were excluded. Participants were asked to return the questionnaire to a research assistant near the exit after having finished their meal. The research assistant asked the participants about their actual meal selections, including portion sizes, as well as possible left-overs, and filled the answers into a pre-coded form. Further the research assistant asked the participants if the questionnaire had been fully understood. A breakfast voucher was then offered to all the participants. One-third (33%) of the customers approached declined to participate in the study. The most often mentioned reason to decline was lack of time. Relatively more males compared with female customers declined to participate (66% vs. 34%, relatively). Average estimated age of non-respondents was 36 (SD 13) years.

### 2.3. Questionnaire

Survey questions were developed based on a literature review as well as stakeholder and expert opinions (i.e. project partners, food service operators and food and nutrition professionals) and was pilot tested among 32 fast food customers in one of the participating fast food restaurants.

Background information included self-reported information regarding gender, age, weight and height, and educational level based on the questionnaire from the Danish National Dietary Survey (Knudsen et al., 2011). The questionnaire included questions on fast food consumption frequency; "How often do you eat fast food/take away" and "how often do you eat fast food/take away from a burger restaurant?" Response options were: never, once every second months or less, about once a month, 2–3 times a month, 1–2 times a week or 3–4 times a week or more. Regularly fast food consumers were subsequently defined as those eating fast food once a month or more.

Information regarding the participants' reasons for choosing their fast food meal was obtained by asking the question "What were your reasons for choosing your meal?" A maximum of three reasons could be selected from a list of eight pre-defined options. Participants had the opportunity to name other reasons in an open-ended question. Five of the eight pre-defined options were identified and selected on the basis of a literature review on fast food choice reasons as well as stakeholder and expert opinions,

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