

## Fast Food and Impatience

Almost everyone is aware of the health problems with fast food, but now Canadian researchers demonstrate how mere reminders of fast food can make us hurry and become impatient. In their first experiment Chen-Bo Zhong and Sanford DeVoe of the University of Toronto instructed 57 college students to read a short paragraph unrelated to fast food and type it on a computer. Next they were told to keep their focus on the center of the computer screen and ignore images of objects that flashed briefly in the corners. Hidden in these images were either blank squares or logos of fast food restaurants, including KFC, McDonalds, Taco Bell, Burger King, Wendy's, and Subway. Although all the students reported noticing the objects in the corners of the screen, none of them detected the fast food logos, which were shown too briefly (roughly 80 milliseconds) to reach consciousness. Next they were asked to read two unrelated passages in a row, and the researchers measured the time it took to read the first one. **Results:** Controlling for individual differences in initial reading time, those students who were exposed to the fast food logos read the second passage on average 15 seconds faster than the other students. These results suggest that even unconscious exposure to fast food cues may cause us to speed up what we're doing, even when there is no time pressure.

The second experiment looked at the effect of exposure to fast food cues on preferences for time-saving products. First, an independent group of students rated various household products, including shampoos (2 in 1 versus regular), detergents (high efficiency versus regular), skin care solutions (3 in 1 versus regular), and toasters (4 slice versus single slice), on time efficiency. Next 91 students were divided into two groups: one was instructed to recall a time when they had eaten at a fast food restaurant, and the other was instructed to recall a time when they had gone grocery shopping. All students then completed a "marketing survey" rating the desirability of the previous household products. **Results.** Those students who had recalled eating in a fast food restaurant on average gave higher ratings to the "time efficient" products than did those who had just thought about going grocery shopping.

The last experiment examined the impact of fast food exposure on delaying gratification. Fifty-eight students were randomly sorted into two groups. One group was instructed to rate the "aesthetics" of two fast food logos (McDonalds and KFC); the other rated the aesthetics of logos of two inexpensive local diners where the service was known to be slower. Next both groups participated in a decision task in which they made a series of choices between receiving a fixed amount of money (\$3.00) immediately or a higher amount ranging from \$3.05 to \$7.00 one week later. Can you guess which group was more likely to want the hard cash right now? **Results.** Those students exposed to the fast food logos chose higher later dollar amounts than the other students before they would give up the immediate \$3.00. In other words, for the "fast food group" it took a higher amount of money promised later to offset the \$3 offered immediately.

So what are the implications of this research for people in general? It would seem that reminders of fast food are enough to make us hurry up in other activities (even reading), choose more time saving products, and make it harder for us to delay gratification.

Certainly such reminders are everywhere, from newspaper ads to television commercials to neon signs up and down our streets. If the influence of these signs and symbols is really that widespread, are we more impatient ordering food from McDonalds than say at a fancy sit-down restaurant? Do we speed up driving by a KFC? Is the effect on people who eat fast food regularly greater than on those who rarely do “take-out”? It would also be interesting to study the influence of other time saving logos, like Sprint or Apple, on our daily behavior. Would they have the same pull for impatience and instant gratification? Finally, it is also unclear how long these effects last. Do we slow down and take our time when not reminded of fast food? It might be interesting to take note of your own behavior around fast food next time you pull into the Drive-Thru.

If mere exposure to fast food symbols can influence our behavior, what other influences push and pull us in little ways every day? A recent study by researchers at the University of Michigan surveying attitudes about health risks found that if the surveyor merely sneezed before asking the questions, the respondents estimated higher risks of contracting a serious disease. Another recent study by researchers at Columbia University found that having a female experimenter merely pat the participants on the shoulder caused them to take unusually high financial risks in an investment game.

What sorts of things influence your day to day behavior? If you're interested, here's an experiment you can do. It's called mindfulness. Pick a random day out of your week and observe your own reactions to the little things going on around you. Take some notes. Pay attention to changes in your speed (fast or slow), your tension level (high or low), mood (up or down), response to people (open or closed), and of course your thoughts. At the same time note what is going on around you, even subtle things, like what you're looking at, who's around you, overheard conversations, other sounds, even temperature and weather. If you detect an influence of some kind, see if you can counter it by focusing on something else or consciously making yourself “go the other way.” You just may find yourself a fascinating subject.

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