

FAST FOOD: HARM OR BENEFIT AMONG YOUTH

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Abstract: Fast food has long ceased to be just a convenient meal – it has become an integral part of modern consumer culture, especially among young people. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of fast food on health, mental well-being, and social behavior among youth. The reasons for the popularity of fast food, its long-term consequences, and possible ways to minimize harm are examined. The article presents data from international studies and real cases of healthy eating programs implemented in different countries.

Keywords: fast food, youth health, food addiction, food marketing, obesity, cognitive impairment, heart disease.

Introduction

Modern life imposes a fast pace, forcing young people to seek quick and affordable solutions in all areas, including nutrition. According to WHO data (2023), approximately **60% of young people aged 16 to 25** regularly consume fast food, while **35% do so daily** [1]. This leads to an increase in obesity, metabolic diseases, and cardiovascular disorders.

Global trends in fast food consumption

- In the **United States**, more than **50% of all food expenses** are spent on fast food restaurants [2].
- In **Europe**, young people aged **18–30** consume fast food **2.5 times more often** than those over 40 [3].
- In **China**, the fast food industry among youth has grown by **32% over the past 10 years** [4].

The **goal of this study** is not only to analyze the impact of fast food on health but also to identify the social and economic reasons for its popularity and propose strategies to reduce its negative effects.

Research Methods

A comprehensive analysis was conducted, including:

- ✓ **Survey of 193 students** from three universities, aged **16–25 years**.
- ✓ **Content analysis** of advertising campaigns by McDonald's, KFC, and Burger King.

- ✓ **Comparative analysis** of fast food consumption statistics in different countries.
- ✓ **Review of medical studies** on the impact of fast food on health.

Study Procedure

Sample Group

- Survey conducted among **193 students** aged **16–25** from three universities.
- Gender distribution: **52% women, 48% men**.

Tools

- **Online questionnaire** with 16 questions (via Google Forms).
- **In-depth interviews** with 15 participants.
- **Food behavior analysis** (participants recorded their diet in a diary for a week).

Survey Topics

- ✓ **Frequency** of fast food consumption
- ✓ **Reasons** for choosing fast food
- ✓ **Awareness** of health risks
- ✓ **Physical and emotional well-being** after consumption
- ✓ **Financial and social factors**

Data Collection

- **Survey duration: 3 weeks (February 2025)**
- **Data analyzed** using statistical methods (SPSS, Excel).

Analysis Methods

- **Correlation analysis** (relationship between fast food consumption and health status).
- **Content analysis** of in-depth interviews.

Ethical Considerations

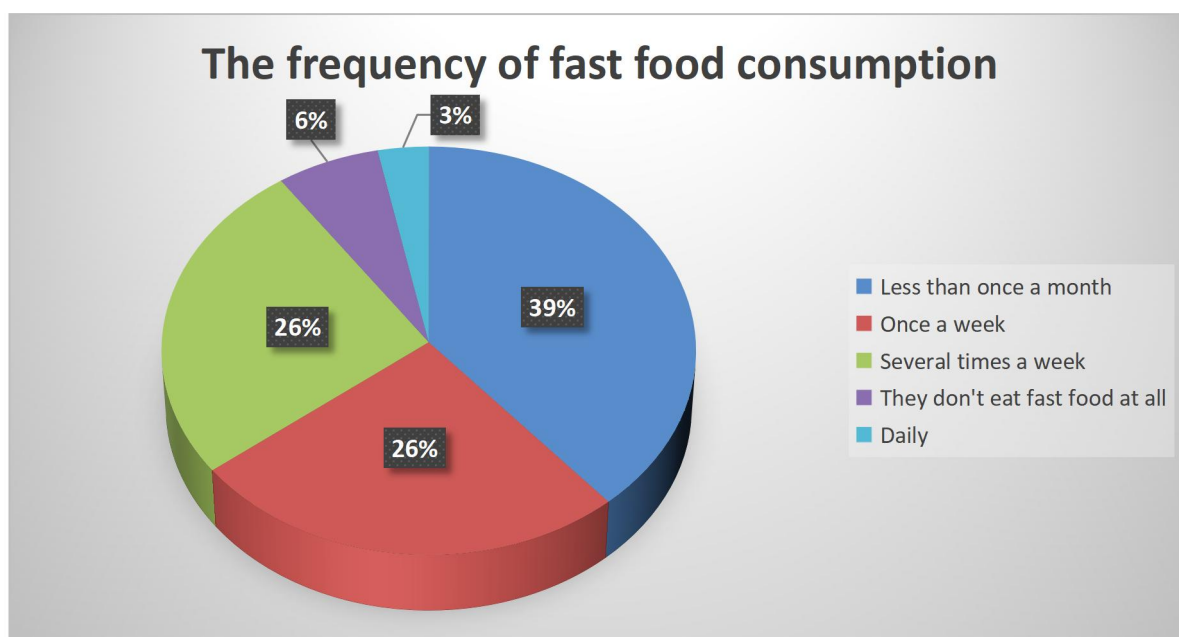
- ✓ **Voluntary participation** – all participants gave **informed consent**.
- ✓ **Anonymity** – no personal data were collected.
- ✓ **Data confidentiality** – results analyzed in an aggregated format.
- ✓ **No conflict of interest** – the study was not funded by fast food-related companies.
- ✓ **Ethical approval** – the study was approved by the university's bioethics committee.

Study Results

1. Frequency of fast food consumption

- 38.7% consume fast food **less than once a month**.
- 25.8% eat fast food **once a week**.
- 25.8% consume it **several times a week**.
- 6.5% do not eat fast food at all.
- 3.2% eat fast food **daily**.

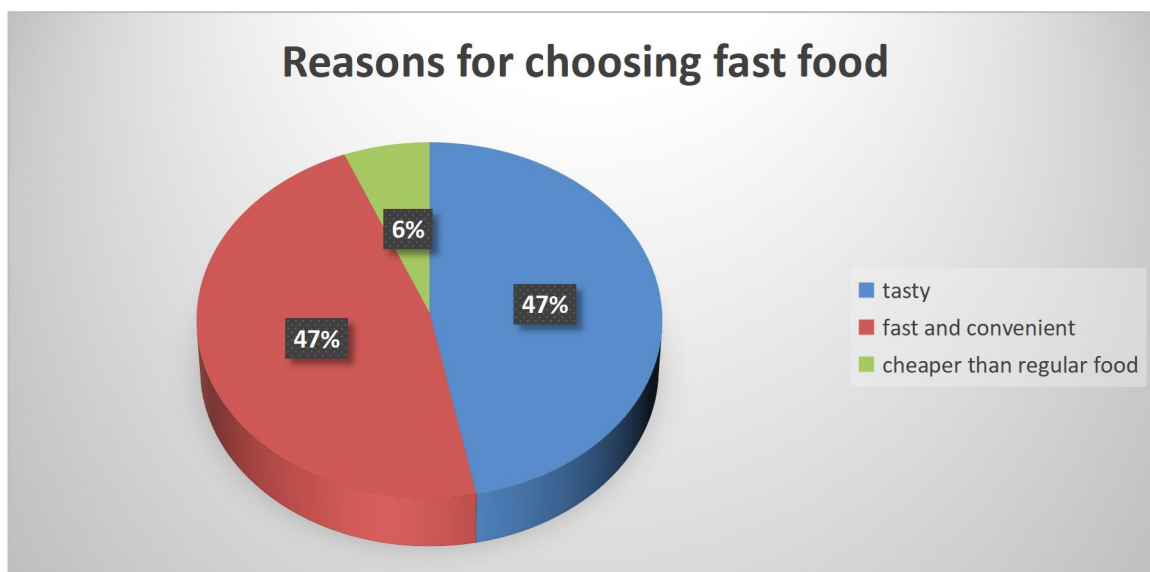
Conclusion: While a significant portion of students try to limit their fast food intake, **55%** consume it **at least once a week**, indicating its high popularity.



2. Reasons for choosing fast food

- 46.9% believe fast food is **tasty**.
- 46.9% choose it because it is **quick and convenient**.
- 6.2% say fast food is **cheaper** than regular meals.

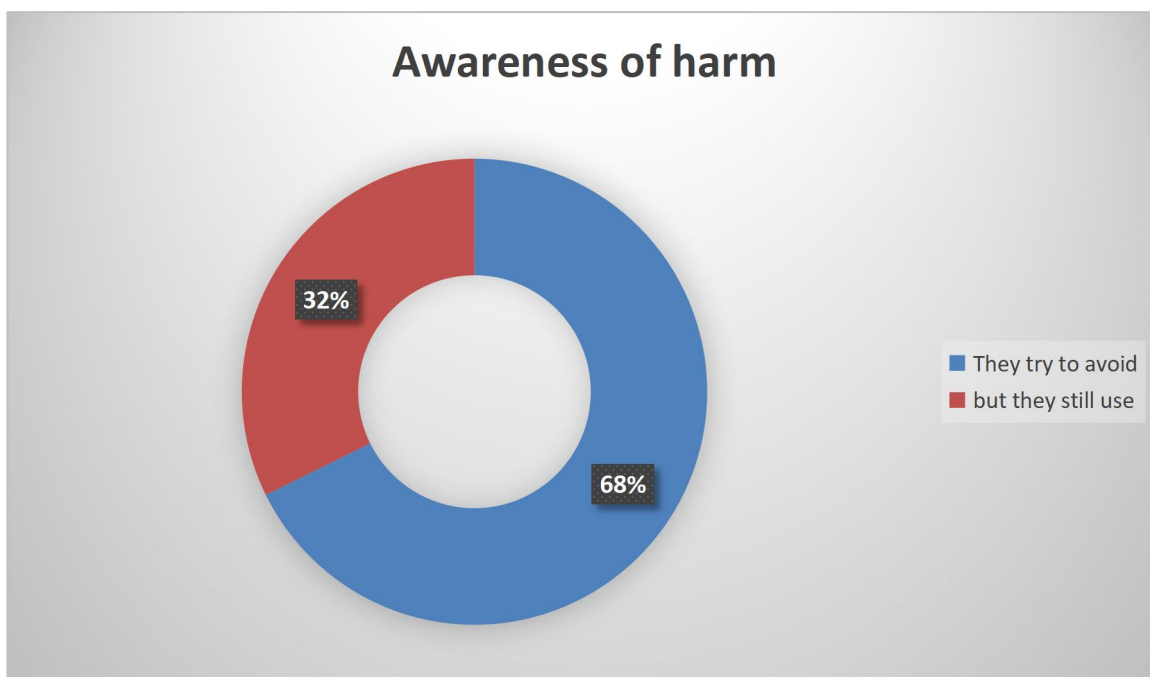
Conclusion: **Taste and convenience** are the main factors influencing choice, while price plays a minor role.



3. Awareness of health risks

- 67.7% are aware of the risks and try to **avoid fast food**.
- 32.3% know about the risks but **still consume it**.

Conclusion: Although most students are aware of the dangers, **one-third continue to eat fast food despite knowing the risks.**

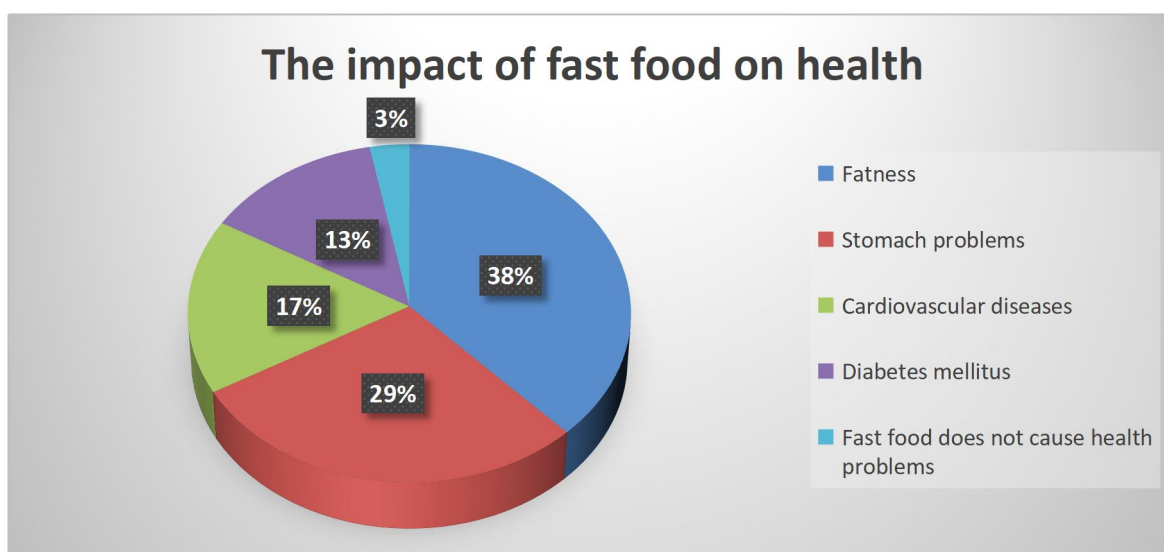


4. Health effects of fast food

Students reported the following health problems linked to fast food:

- 37.9% – obesity
- 28.8% – stomach issues
- 16.7% – cardiovascular diseases
- 13.6% – diabetes
- 3.0% believe fast food does **not** cause health problems

Conclusion: Most respondents associate fast food with **negative health consequences**.

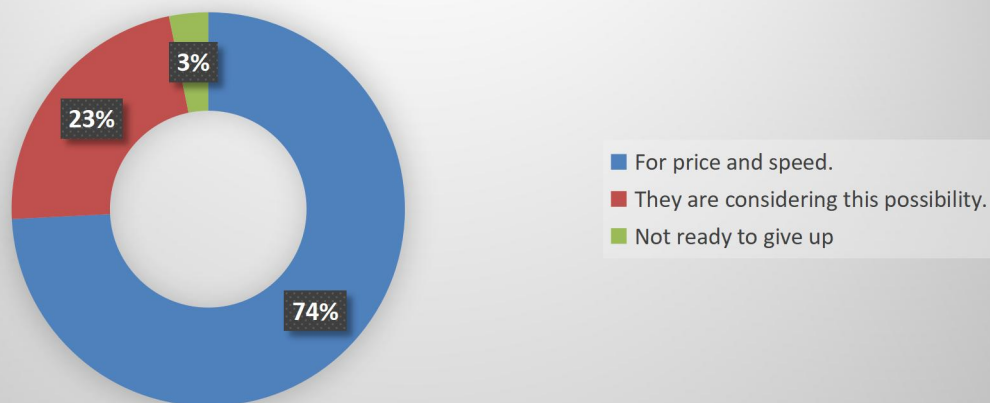


5. Willingness to replace fast food with healthy alternatives

- 74.2% would switch to healthy alternatives if they were **affordable and fast**.
- 22.6% would consider it.
- 3.2% are **not willing to give up fast food**.

Conclusion: The majority would choose healthier options **if they were as convenient and affordable as fast food**.

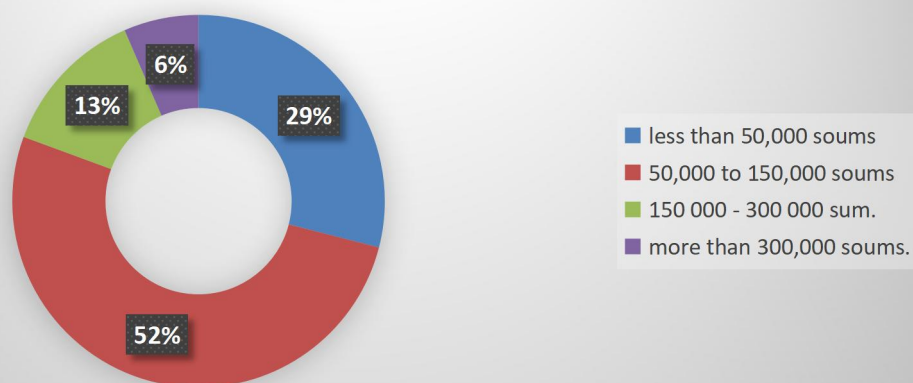
Willingness to replace fast food with a healthy alternative



6. **Average Monthly Fast Food Expenses**
- 51.6% spend between 50,000 and 150,000 UZS.
 - 29.0% spend less than 50,000 UZS.
 - 12.9% spend between 150,000 and 300,000 UZS.
 - 6.5% spend more than 300,000 UZS.

Conclusion: Most students spend small amounts on fast food, but 19.4% are willing to spend 150,000 UZS or more.

Average spending on fast food per month



7. **Fast Food Ordering Methods**
- 61.3% prefer eating fast food at a café/restaurant.
 - 32.3% order delivery to their home or office.
 - 6.5% opt for takeaway.

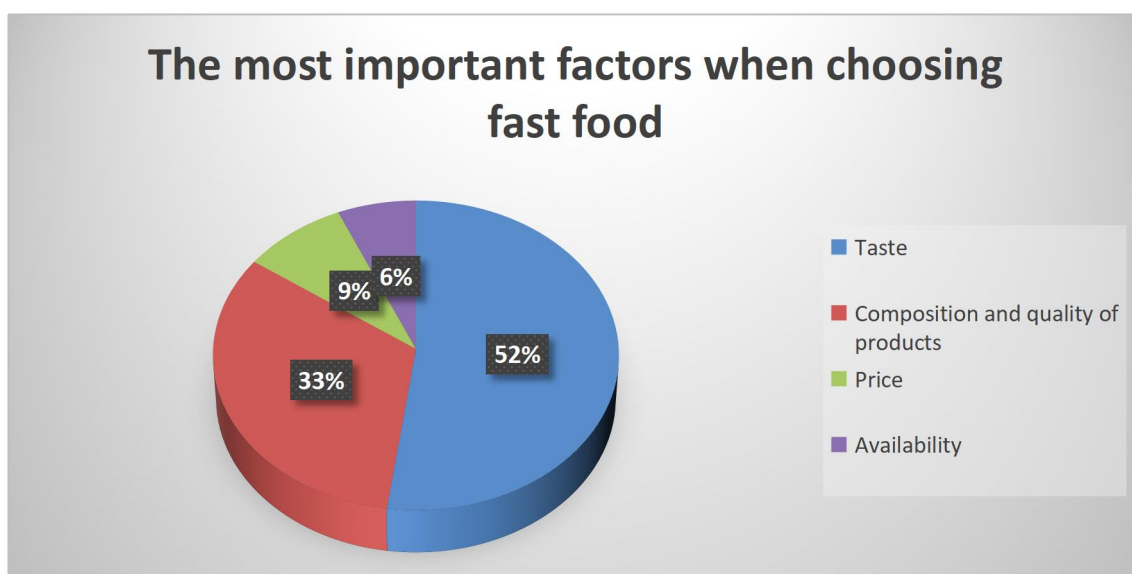
Conclusion: Fast food restaurants remain the main place of consumption, but online delivery is becoming more popular.



8. **Key Factors in Choosing Fast Food**

Key	Factors	in	Choosing	Fast	Food
•	52.2%	—	—	taste.	
•	32.6%	—	ingredients and product	quality.	
•	8.7%	—	—	price.	
•	6.5%	—	availability (near home/work).		

Conclusion: Taste is the main factor in choosing fast food, while price plays a smaller role than expected.



General Conclusion Based on the Study Results

1. Influence of Advertising and Psychological Triggers

Fast food marketing relies on three key elements:

- **Color scheme** (red and yellow stimulate appetite).
- **"Childhood effect"** (Happy Meal and toy promotions make adults perceive fast food positively).
- **"Hedonistic eating" habit** – Regular consumption of high-calorie food brings pleasure similar to drug addiction [11] .

2. Economic Factor

Many students cannot afford expensive healthy food. In Russia, for example, the average student meal at a fast-food restaurant is twice as cheap as in a home-cooked meal café [12] .

3. How Governments Combat the Fast Food Problem

- **France** – banned fast food advertising for children [13] .
- **Chile** – introduced a tax on fast food, reducing consumption by 14% in three years [14] .
- **United Kingdom** – requires calorie information on packaging [15] .

What Can Be Done? Solutions to the Problem

1. Developing Alternative Fast Food Options

- Encouraging restaurants to offer healthier meals at affordable prices.
- State support for student cafeterias offering balanced meals.
- Expanding the "healthy fast food" concept – salads, vegetable wraps, lean proteins.

2. Limiting Fast Food Marketing Influence on Youth

- Banning fast food ads in schools and universities, as done in France and Chile.
- Reducing sugar and trans fat levels in products, introducing strict quality standards.
- Transparency of information: packaging must clearly display calorie content and ingredients.

3. Raising Youth Awareness About Fast Food Consequences

- Introducing nutrition culture courses in schools and universities.
- Developing interactive programs that show how fast food affects the body.
- Promoting a healthy lifestyle through bloggers and social media.

Conclusion

Fast food has long been an integral part of modern youth life. Its popularity is due to convenience, quick preparation, and appealing taste. However, excessive consumption leads

to serious health consequences, including obesity, stomach diseases, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes.

Key Findings of the Study

- More than 50% of students eat fast food at least once a week, and 3.2% consume it daily.
- Main reasons for choosing fast food: **taste (46.9%) and convenience (46.9%)**. Price plays a minor role (6.2%).
- 67.7% of respondents are aware of the harmful effects of fast food and try to avoid it, but 32.3% continue eating it despite being aware.
- 74.2% are willing to replace fast food with a healthy alternative if it is the same price and prepared as quickly.
- Fast food is linked to obesity (37.9%), stomach problems (28.8%), cardiovascular diseases (16.7%), and diabetes (13.6%).

Socioeconomic Factors of Fast Food Consumption

Fast food consumption among youth has not only medical but also social, psychological, and economic causes:

- Young people live at a fast pace, often juggling studies and work, which forces them to choose quick and affordable food.
- Fast food marketing strongly influences youth through social media, advertisements, promotions, and discounts.
- The lack of available alternatives in student cafeterias and food courts contributes to unhealthy food choices.
- Formation of food addiction: flavor enhancers and high sugar/fat levels create addiction similar to drug dependence.

Fast Food and Cognitive Abilities

Research shows that regular fast food consumption can negatively impact brain function:

- **Memory and concentration decline** – A 2022 Australian National University study proved that students who frequently consume fast food experience reduced attention and memory loss.
- **Increased risk of depression** – The 2023 National Institute of Mental Health study found that consuming fast food 5+ times a week increases depression risk by 51%.

Why Doesn't Youth Give Up Fast Food?

Although most people understand its harm, it is difficult to quit due to several reasons:

1. **Habit and addiction** – Flavor additives create a "pleasant food" effect, encouraging repeated consumption.
2. **Marketing pressure** – Fast food is aggressively advertised, creating an illusion of an affordable and tasty choice.
3. **Lack of alternatives** – Young people often simply have no choice but to eat at fast food restaurants.

Conclusion

Fast food remains an important part of youth diets, but excessive consumption leads to serious health issues, cognitive decline, and increased disease rates among young people.

- Most students **are willing to replace fast food if affordable alternatives appear.**
- **Taste and convenience** are the main reasons for fast food's popularity, while price plays a lesser role.
- **Comprehensive measures are needed**, from developing healthy alternatives to restricting marketing.

If action is not taken in the coming years, obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases among youth **will only continue to rise**. Governments, businesses, and society must work together to improve nutrition culture, offering healthy and affordable alternatives to fast food.

✓ **Only through collective effort can we change the situation and prevent major health problems for future generations.**

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