

Study finds exposure to fast food can make us impatient

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Fast food is not only bad for your body, but may also harm your bank account.

Eating habits have shifted dramatically over the last few decades--fast food has become a multibillion dollar industry that has widespread influence on what and how we eat. The original idea behind [fast food](#) is to increase efficiency, allowing people to quickly finish a meal so they can move on to other matters. Researchers at the Rotman School of Management, however, have found that the mere exposure to fast food and related symbols can make people impatient, increasing preference for time saving products, and reducing willingness to save.

"Fast food represents a culture of time efficiency and instant gratification," says Chen-Bo Zhong, who co-wrote the paper with colleague Sanford DeVoe to be published in a forthcoming issue of [Psychological Science](#). "The problem is that the goal of saving time gets activated upon exposure to fast food regardless of whether time is a relevant factor in the context. For example, walking faster is time efficient when one is trying to make a meeting, but it's a sign of impatience when one is going for a stroll in the park. We're finding that the mere exposure to fast food is promoting a general sense of haste and impatience regardless of the context."

In one experiment, the researchers flashed fast food symbols, such as the golden arch of McDonald's, on a computer screen for a few milliseconds, so quick that participants couldn't consciously identify

what they saw. They found that this unconscious exposure increased participants' reading speed in a subsequent task compared to those in a control condition, even when there was no advantage to finishing sooner. In another study, participants who recalled a time when they eat at a food restaurant subsequently preferred time-saving products—such as two-in-one shampoo—over regular products. A final experiment found people exposed to fast food logos exhibited greater reluctance for saving—choose a smaller immediate payment rather than opting for a much larger delayed payment.

"Fast food is one of many technologies that allow us to save time," says Sanford DeVoe, "But the ironic thing is that by constantly reminding us of time efficiency, these technologies can lead us to feel much more impatience. A fast food culture that extols saving time doesn't just change the way we eat but it can also fundamentally alter the way they experience our time. For example, leisure activities that are supposed to be relaxing can come to be experienced through the color glasses of impatience."

The researchers point out that it's impossible to know whether fast food in part caused the value for time efficiency in our culture or is merely a consequence of it—but it's clear from their findings that exposure to fast food reinforces an emphasis on impatience and instant gratification.

"Given the role that financial impatience played in the current economic crisis," says Chen-Bo Zhong, "we need to move beyond counting calories when we examine the consequences of fast food as it is also influencing our everyday psychology and behavior in a wider set of domains than has been previously thought."

More information: The complete study is available at:
www.rotman.utoronto.ca/newthinking/fastfood.pdf

Provided by University of Toronto

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