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Subtly Disfavored Consumption and Its Impact on Consumer Identity

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Management

by

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DEDICATION

To my family:

To my dad, mom, and sister who helped me along this path.

To all of my fictive kin (my academic siblings and unofficial Aunties and Uncles to Jennifer) who helped keep us all sane.

Finally, and most of all, to my husband and daughter to whom I am very grateful for.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Subtly Disfavored Consumption and Its Impact on Consumer Identity

By

Lauren Louie

Doctor of Philosophy in Management

University of California, Irvine, 2015

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This study examines fast food as an instance of everyday subtly disfavored consumption and its influence on consumer identity. Prior research has described how consumers construct identities by using consumption to categorize themselves and others. Prior work has also shown that consumption which evokes strong hedonic responses such as love or hate has significant use in identity and cultural capital processes while consumption which evokes low hedonic responses is less important to identity. This work suggests the importance of understanding consumption characterized by their consumers' subtle hedonic responses. This study applies an ethnoconsumerist framework and employs long interviews and grounded theory analysis to understand fast food culture's integration into lives of young adult American consumers. Findings suggest varied uses to consumer identity and the importance of understanding how such consumption is culturally embedded.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This study examines how consumers treat fast food as an instance of subtly disfavored consumption and the ways this categorization influences how these consumers incorporate fast food into their identity practices. Its focus is on young adult American fast food consumers and the ways they incorporate fast food into their identity practices. “Fast food” refers to a type of foodservice that is often characterized by high speed, low price, high volume, standardization, and its association with a certain set of post-World-War-II American ideologies and values (Ritzer 1996; Mintz 1997). The fast food industry is a multibillion dollar industry which experienced rapid growth from the 1950s onward (Schlosser 2002). A major issue that has emerged for the fast food industry is declining consumption among the contemporary generation of young adults, often called “Millennials” (Consumer Reports 2014; Morrison 2013). Millennials are people born between 1980 and the 2000s, so they are approximately 18-30 years old (Taylor and Keeter 2010). They are often characterized as having “grown up” on fast food because big fast food brands like McDonalds, Taco Bell, and KFC were a prominent part of the American landscape and were expanding globally during their childhood and adolescence (McGrath 2014). However, recent data shows that while fast food consumption for these larger fast food brands has grown among the general population, consumption among Millennials is in decline, particularly among the largest brands such as McDonalds and Taco Bell (McGrath 2014).

Identity

This work uses an interpretive study on young adult consumer identity to better understand fast food's use among this group. "Identity" refers to the sense of who someone or something is for a person and for the purposes of this paper, refers to both their subjective sense of self as well as the selves they publicly express (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Prior work has shown how consumers use their consumption in their identity processes as sources of meaning and means to arrange their lives to further their identity projects (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a; Solomon 1983). Consumption is often most successful when it resonates with consumers' identities and may include even everyday household items or furnishings (Arsel and Bean 2013; Belk 1988). Understanding the characteristics of fast food which leads to different types of identity practices may be key to understanding their behavior.

Identity and Hedonic Response

An important element to understanding how consumption is integrated into identity projects is to understand the range of possible hedonic responses its consumers can have toward it. However, the current literature on consumption and identity has underexplored the ways consumption that produces more subtle hedonic responses is incorporated into consumer identity. Previous studies on consumer identity have shown the ways identity relevant consumption often evokes strong hedonic responses in those consumers. Consumers cultivate their identities by showing certain types of emotions toward their consumption depending on the types of identities that consumption can represent such as through desire (Gopaldas 2014; Fournier 1998; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). Hate toward consumption is further useful to identity because consumers may spurn or try to reduce consumption to avoid undesired identities (Kozinets

2001). Hating certain products or consumption methods is a way to draw group boundaries and reinforce differences between groups (Luedicke et al 2010; Wilk 1999). The consumer research literature has sought to expand beyond this love-hate continuum. Research on "ordinary consumption," for example, describes consumption that is less identity relevant and so integrated into daily life that consumers rarely think about it (Gronow and Warde 2001). Research on consumer ambivalence describes the ways consumers can have simultaneous contradictory hedonic responses, but still often stresses strong hedonic responses over less intense ones (Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997). A potential issue of applying the consumption identity literature then is that fast food may not be incorporated in the same way as the consumption which built this literature. Fast food's history with this population may mean it is not treated the same way. Fast food has become a part of American culture (Jakle and Sculle 1999; Schlosser 2002) and generates cultural meaning through its products, restaurants, brands, logos, origin myths, and mascots (Schlosser 2002). Many of the instances of consumption such as Star Trek, Harley Davidson, and a minimalist design sensibility are based in demonstrating a contrast to mainstream culture. However, fast food is eaten by a large part of the American population with surveys showing 80% of Americans patronize fast food restaurants monthly and 66% do so weekly (Dugan 2013; Taylor, Funk, and Craighill 2006) and styles of use may not be as easy to distinguish. Fast food is integrated into everyday life, but it has also come to be linked with many things people would consider negative such as fears it promotes homogenization or over-standardization (Ritzer 1996), a decline in traditional food practices (Levy 1996), obesity concerns through critiques such as through the film *Super Size Me* (Schlosser 2002), disputed labor practices (Guthman 2003; Schlosser 2002), and even urban legends about what goes in its meat patties (Schlosser 2002). Fast food consumers are likely to have negative hedonic responses

and especially collectively held emotions toward their own consumption and not just toward the consumption practices of others. This work argues that consumption characterized by its consumers' subtle hedonic responses has been underexplored in the literature. Due to cultural factors, subtly disfavored consumption may have different effects on consumer identity and cultural capital practices than expected if moderate hedonic responses were simply weaker versions of strong hedonic consumption responses. There is precedence for this in the literature. Prior work has previously alluded to situations where consumers may have varying degrees of emotions, attachments, and relationships toward their consumption such as using a hated brand only out of necessity (Fournier 1998). Second, previous work has alluded to the ways a person's personality or cultural traits may lead to them experiencing a mixed emotion such as bittersweetness as more than the additive combination of its parts (Williams and Aaker 2002; Hong and Lee 2010). Studying fast food as cultural consumption means we can better explore how consumption may not necessarily produce strong hate or love, but as with fast food—which has become increasingly a part of everyday life for American consumers but is also increasingly marked by more unfavorable associations—we can learn about how more subtle hedonic consumption will not merely act like a reduced version of more traditional, strong hedonic consumption.

Young Adult Identity Transition

This research focuses on young adult American fast food consumers as a way to study consumers during an identity transition. During such an identity "transition" period consumers seek to acquire, discard, or modify their identities (VOICE Group 2010). Prior work has shown ways in which consumption can both aid (McCracken 1988a; Ulver and Ostberg 2014) and

hinder (VOICE Group 2010) consumers who are experiencing identity transitions. During "young adulthood" young adult consumers are just beginning to take on adult identities and both their identities and material lives are often in a state of flux (Arnett 2000; Shanahan 2000). Becoming an adult in contemporary culture is more ambiguous than other identity transitions such as becoming a parent or graduating high school (Shanahan 2000). Shanahan further argues that subjectivity plays a major role, and that potential markers of adulthood such as financial independence, getting a full time job, marrying, having kids, and so on, are no longer reliable indicators in contemporary society. An additional complication for the individual is that contemporary Western culture encourages the individual to determine their own life project despite the ambiguity as to how to attain desired adult identities (2000). The contemporary culture does encourage the use of the market to aid those transitions (West 2010). Herein lies the importance of studying the characteristics of fast food consumption. We can see how these characteristics influence how young adult consumers integrate fast food in their material lives and in their identity projects in their quest for adult identities.

In sum, although there is literature on the role of consumption during identity transitions, there is less literature on the role of transitional consumption that is characterized by more muted hedonic responses. The extant literature on identity transitions and identity in general more frequently studies identity-relevant consumption that is characterized by strong hedonic responses. Furthermore, in the fast food literature there are few studies that focus on contemporary American fast food culture and the perspectives of American consumers. This study therefore seeks to address these gaps through an interpretive methodology which asks – how is fast food as a cultural phenomenon influencing young adult consumers' identity projects?

Research Questions

The goal of this research is to examine fast food as a cultural phenomenon and the way it influences its consumers' identity practices through an interpretive analysis. By looking at the characteristics of fast food consumption we may better understand how consumption is used as these consumers construct identities during a transition phase. This study further conceptualizes fast food as cultural consumption and frequently uses the term "fast food culture" in this work to stipulate that "fast food" is not limited to the material food product but also includes the many meanings, norms, and institutions associated with the food and its delivery. In this regard, this study primarily focuses on consumers' "fast food consumption" in terms of what they eat or purchase, but it also includes the ways their identity is influenced also includes how fast food includes a diverse set of meanings and relations beyond their immediate purchase behavior.

This research addresses the following research questions:

1. How does fast food consumption intersect with the daily lives of young adult consumers?
2. How does fast food consumption intersect with the identity practices of young adult consumers?

Theoretical Framework

This study follows an ethnoconsumerism framework as proposed by Meamber and Venkatesh (2000) in order to derive culturally based categories from the consumer culture and to guide the

study's methodology. The study is based on long interviews with young adult fast food consumers living in Southern California (predominantly ages 18-30).

Using grounded theory to analyze the interview data, this research identifies key elements of fast food culture and identity construction processes from the perspective of these consumers (Corbin and Strauss 2008). This research explores fast food's role when consumers navigate young adulthood and construct identities. Findings suggest the importance of understanding the cultural forces that impact consumers through their interactions with fast food. This research shows how consumers can experience consumption that is both part of everyday life and is also simultaneously disfavored. First, fast food consumption's place as everyday but subtly disfavored consumption is relevant for how consumers live their everyday lives and is frequently a part of their identity practices. The association of certain identities with certain cultural capital is further studied. Second, this research explores the cultural factors that contribute to fast food consumption's place in consumers' thoughts as a form of subtly disfavored consumption. Finally, this research empirically studies fast food as cultural consumption through an ethnoconsumerist framework from the perspectives of young adult American consumers.

Contributions to the Literature

This work's primary contribution is to the consumer research literature. By studying subtly disfavored consumption this work brings together the literature streams on hedonic, identity, and everyday consumption. Prior work usually studied the ways hedonic consumption that evoked strong hedonic response can contribute to consumers' identity and cultural capital processes. Consumption that evokes weak hedonic response is often implied to have little or even no

connection with identity and is usually cast as dispassionate rational cognition, or something more unconscious such as for habitual and "ordinary" consumption (e.g. household utilities) (Gronow and Warde 2011). This work contributes to the literature by addressing the ways consumption may be characterized by less intense muted hedonic responses and the ways these responses can still be culturally significant and meaningful for use in consumers' identity processes. Through this study on fast food we expand on the types of individual hedonic responses and culturally significant collectively held sentiments (Gopaldas 2014) we can use to study consumers.

A second contribution to this work is on consumer identity and cultural capital. Young adult consumers perceive fast food's cultural capital potential differently as an instance of subtly disfavored consumption. Prior research has suggested how identities based in consumption practices support and are supported by the cultural capital that comes to be associated with those identities and the practices that created them (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Often, these articles have concentrated on valorized products, rituals, or methods of consumption, but have begun to study the different ways consumption practices can confer low cultural capital amongst a social group, such as taboo consumption practices and ordinary, routine consumption practices (Arsel and Bean 2013; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Bardhi, Ostberg, and Bengtsson 2010; Cappellini and Parsons 2014; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Gopaldas 2014; Holt 1998; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Much of this work focuses on stigma and the way one group can diminish the cultural capital of another group. This work builds on their research by looking at consumption that is characterized by lower social costs and in which the group is dissatisfied with its own consumption practices. This study explores how fast food's

unique place and history amongst the general American culture and in consumers' own lives can influence how they evaluate fast food's cultural capital potential and therefore construct their identities.

An additional theoretical contribution is to the identity literature by studying fast food consumption's role in identity transitions and the way its consumers can use it to evaluate the progress of their identity projects. Frequently, we study consumption for identity transitions that have a more definitive turning point or end like getting plastic surgery or having a baby (Schouten 1991; VOICE Group 2010) or consumption occasions which are more formal and structured like a wedding or funeral (Otnes et al 1997; Arnould and Thompson 2005). Studies on everyday consumption during transitions also tend to focus on consumption that is meant to work toward their desired identities. This study focuses instead on an instance of consumption that is meant to be discarded or reduced during the transition. Fast food is integrated into their everyday lives and warrants only some stigma but its categorization as representing their identity progress affects how and when they consume it.

Finally, this research empirically contributes to the literature by examining fast food culture through the perspectives of contemporary young adult American consumers. This is done by first conceptualizing fast food as a cultural phenomenon and then exploring how fast food culture is heavily derived from principles that are prominent in our contemporary culture. Studying fast food through the perspectives of young adult American consumers will offer new empirical knowledge because prior literature has less frequently explored these consumers, and they are

more likely to have a unique perspective because they have only known fast food as a global marketing powerhouse.

Organization

This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 explores the literatures on consumer identity, cultural capital, young adulthood, and fast food and how they may inform a study on consumption cultures characterized by everyday subtly disfavored consumption. Chapter 3 reviews the ethnoconsumerist conceptual framework and the methods used in this study. This review is followed by the empirical findings. Chapter 4 focuses on answering how fast food is a part of consumers' identity practices. Chapter 5 studies the role of cultural capital and especially focuses on participants' expectations regarding capital accumulation. The final chapter consists of the conclusion and discussion sections and ends with an analysis of this study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will first review the literature on consumer identity. Next, it will trace the importance of cultural capital for consumer identity processes. Third, it will discuss the acquisition of identities and some of the underlying cultural forces that influence young adults in particular. The final section will review the literature that suggests how treating fast food as cultural consumption in particular will aid our study of consumers' identity and cultural capital practices.

Part I: Consumer Identity

A major stream in the consumer research literature studies consumer identity practices. Identity refers to the way a person characterizes one's self or other actors and groups (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a). Consumers can use their consumption behavior, possessions, and consumption desires as sources of meaning and thus affiliate themselves with different identities (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a; Mick and Buhl 1992). Consumers also use these indicators to interpret and define the identities of others (Belk, Mayer and Driscoll 1982; Solomon 1983). Past work has especially looked at the ways consumption communities and other types of groups use consumption to not only define their own identities but also to construct the identity of "the other" by creating boundaries for what they do not consume or desire (Kozinets 2001; Luedicke et al 2010; Sandikci and Ger 2010). In many of these articles, consumers tend to use or aspire to engage in consumption that supports their identities and to spurn or seek to decrease consumption that does not support their identities (Berger and Heath

2008). Some works even go as far to use terms like "love" (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012) or "distaste" and "hate" (Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux 2009; Wilk 1997) or suggest how we characterize market actors as "heroes," "villains," and even "victims" (Gopaldas 2014; Luedicke et al 2010) to describe the extent of consumers' hedonic responses. More along the lines of my work is research that extends the identity literature by describing ways that both assessments can be mixed and that consumption desires and behavior can contradict, which therefore hinder certain identity processes. For example, past work on consumption paradoxes and ambivalence has suggested ways consumers may hold contradictory goals or emotions (Eckhardt and Houston 2002; Fournier 1998; Mick and Buhl 1992; Otnes et al 1997). This work has often shown that desire and behavior vary with time, such as in the case where fast food is only good for certain occasions (Eckhardt and Houston 2002), and the way buying a product meant for another person may mean contradicting one's identity, such as in the case of buying a greeting card or a gift one would not select according to one's own tastes (Ward and Broniarczyk 2011; West 2010). Fournier's work on consumer's relationships with brands is especially interesting to this research in its suggestion of the ways consumer relationships may be premised on use but low affect, such as the case of "casual friends" who are "low in affect and intimacy" or products that are "marriages of convenience" where consumers are in long-term relationships with products only due to environmental factors (1998, 362). Returning to Gopaldas' article on marketplace sentiment and how marketplace actors can be considered in terms of heroes, villains, and victims, his work also notes certain characters are more strongly stressed than others depending on the strategy in use (2014). His work establishes how strongly we can show contempt, concern, or celebration, but this work now builds on his own by discussing a greater variety of how marketplace actors can be cast just as how literary works not only include purely heroic heroes

and evil villains but also antiheroes and sympathetic villains. In sum, using a product does not necessarily suggest a matching desire for it. This will mean different types of identity processes are being used in those instances than when consumers are more consuming or desiring to consume things that match their desired identities.

Part II: Identity and Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is often an important concept when studying consumer identity. It refers to the knowledge, skills, and other forms of leverage a person can use to gain status and further advantages as a member of a particular culture (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). For example, consumers may not only gain capital as part of a nation or part of a social class but also as a member of consumption communities (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009; Wilk 1999). Works on cultural capital discuss how not all identities are equally accessible or desirable to all consumers (Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013; Holt 1998; Warde 1994). Furthermore, consumers will seek to reject meanings that can threaten the value of their identities or their associated cultural capital (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). Consumption therefore allows participants to display their cultural capital by enacting "taste" (Bourdieu 1984). "Taste" here does not refer to a biological sensation but to the socially constructed preference for certain products, consumption, and styles of consumption over others, such as the desire for certain brands or the way leisure is seen as a route to express creativity versus enjoying the act of applying a skill (Holt 1998). Past work has suggested the ways consumers can use their food choices and desires to enact taste and therefore display their cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Frequently, authors find that a popular way to exhibit high cultural capital is to act as an "omnivore" by displaying openness to all consumption categories (Holt 1998; Warde, Martens,

and Olsen 1999). These authors argue that this preference of omnivorousness both requires more cultural capital to enact and is likely a strategic response to how consumers in contemporary American culture face a proliferation of choices and unclear guidelines for what specific consumption to select (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Warde et al 1999). In sum, food consumption is frequently a part of consumers' ability to acquire and display cultural capital and therefore impacts how they may be able to take on specific identities.

Part III: Identity and Young Adulthood

This section will describe the process of acquiring identities as it pertains to young adults. A key part of understanding how young adults acquire adult identities is to understand the cultural forces that are part of the modern society and the contemporary culture in which they live. "Modern society" refers to modern industrial society from the 16th century onward as well as the many social changes that deeply influenced the ways society had previously structured itself (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). These changes included an increase in secularization, urbanization, rationalization, and industrialization. There was also greater prioritization of the rule of reason and rational order, emphasis that the person is a rational single subject, prominence of market economies, and scope of technological change (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Shanahan 2000). These all influenced what was part of the "contemporary culture" and how it operated by the post-World-War-II era during which contemporary fast food became prominent. Consumer culture studies have particularly stressed how contemporary culture has shaped our modern consumption forms by shaping how consumers are set in relation to production and the way certain market systems have become prominent (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; McCracken 1988a). Contemporary culture therefore shapes the way we talk about consumers and the way we regard

the institutions and norms that surround how people acquire and consume things like food. Particular to this study is how contemporary culture and the consumption forms it bore influence consumer identity processes.

This research asks how fast food is continuously made a part of life for young adult consumers as they take on identities associated with adulthood. For young adults, acquiring adult identities is a process in which they are not only able to turn to the market for help, but in which the contemporary culture actively encourages them to do so (Fournier 1998; West 2010). Works in the literature frequently suggest that many American consumers go through a distinct time between adolescence and "full" adulthood, wherein their identities, roles, social relationships, and material lives are in flux (Arnett 2000; Shanahan 2000). This is the time during which it is expected that they will come to establish themselves as adults. This is not just a matter of age but is marked by things like financial independence, and subjective assessment (Arnett 2000). There are many markers used to assess whether someone may be an "adult," such as leaving home, completing further education, establishing his or her own household, getting married, having children, and so on. However, the way people acquire, maintain and discard these "markers" of adulthood has become increasingly variable (Shanahan 2000).

The literature suggests contemporary culture's effects on social structures may strongly contribute to the way young adults come into adulthood (Miles 1998; Shanahan 2000). There are an increasing number of possible ways that people can attain adulthood, with markers becoming progressively more variable in their dispersion, sequence, and duration. At this time, young adults are allowed greater freedom to explore roles and establish worldviews. People are

increasingly encouraged to determine their life and craft their own path (Arnett 2000; Shanahan 2000). However, this turbulent time may be both positive and stressful for young adults. This time may be particularly stressful if the person's life projects are being thwarted and current social structures afford little ability to attain the paths he or she wants. Pew reports that due to the Great Recession, there has been an increase in multigenerational households and that current young adults, "Millennials," have reported delaying many of the markers of adulthood such as gaining financial independence and having children (Taylor et al 2012). Previous work has suggested that living in a world where people are socially expected to make their own good choices, but with few clear guidelines, has led to strong feelings of insecurity (Ilmonen 2001). Extensive work has shown that consumers frequently turn to the market to help construct desired identities (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Mick and Buhl 1992). Youth and young adults are no exception (Cronin, McCarthy, and Collins 2014; Eckhardt and Houston 2002; Jafari and Goulding 2008; James, Kjørholt, and Tingstad 2009; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Mick and Buhl 1992). This research specifically focuses on the ways fast food consumption may serve as both a potential aid and a potential hindrance to young adult consumers as they transition into adulthood.

Past research has shown consumption can aid consumers during these transitions, such as by helping consumers manage uncertainty, achieve a desired self, cope with liminality, and bridge identities (Solomon 1983; VOICE Group 2010). One particular way consumers may seek to regain security through the market is by consuming a standardized product, thereby allowing more coping capability in other spheres. Miles finds that this may be the case for young consumers who actively seek out a limited menu of athletic shoes because they do not need to

exercise choice and self-identity in every sphere (1998). Reducing risk in that sphere could let them better survive in a Risk Society with increasingly dim job prospects. Fast food is similarly considered to be a familiar, standardized product (Schlosser 2002). Whether it produces different reactions to potentially serving as a "safe" choice amongst these particular young adult consumers will be explored.

However, past work has also found that consumption can produce conflict and negative experiences during role transitions (Otnes et al 1997; VOICE Group 2010). This is particularly acute when consumers are unable or unmotivated to use the market or to change roles. Fast food is frequently associated with childhood and adolescence (Schlosser 2002; Wills et al 2009). This may mean that using fast food, even if it helps consumers gain financial independence or other adulthood markers, may also mean that consumers gain undesired associations that slow or even limit the adult identities they desire.

Specifically studying fast food will be especially helpful to studying contemporary young adults because of their unique history with it. For young adults, the fast food industry was already mature during their childhood years. Assuming an "average" young adult age of 18-27 means the fast food industry was approximately 30 years old when these young adults were being born. This contrasts with many of the earlier fast food articles and works, which studied fast food in its adolescence, before it had become the global powerhouse it is today (Helphand 1978; King 1978; Lohof 1979). This also contrasts with the many works by authors who strongly position themselves against an imagined unreflexive fast food consumer while emphasizing older times (Ritzer 1996; Schlosser 2002). The fast food literature at present has only a few studies that both

examine fast food from a sociocultural perspective and employ the perspectives of contemporary American consumers (Bardhi et al 2010). Speaking with young adult fast food consumers means a strong step forward to learning more about fast food culture from an underexplored part of contemporary fast food culture.

In sum, this research will seek to see how fast food culture influences the acquisition of adult consumer identities because consumers often use the market in order to enact identities. Fast food consumer culture therefore offers a unique insight into the lives of these consumers and their ways of engaging with their world. Its culture was present during their childhood and continues as they seek to take on further adult identities. Fast food may produce unique insights because of its place in society and culture and its connection with contemporary culture: a force that takes a heavy hand in structuring the actions and opportunities available to these young adult consumers as they come to be fully adult consumers.

Part IV: Fast Food as Cultural Consumption and Identity

This final section will describe previous work that suggests the ways we can conceptualize fast food as cultural consumption as well as some of the cultural factors which drive its influence on consumer identity. This section will end with a discussion for how the literature suggests fast food is apt to describe more subtle forms of disfavored consumption.

For the purposes of this paper, "fast food" is a form of food and its service elements whose business model is based on high speed, large volume, low price, and a limited menu (Ritzer 1996). Although researchers agree there were earlier origins for food that was rapidly prepared

or eaten quickly, this paper focuses on the specific cultural and economic forms from post-World-War-II America as exemplified by large chains such as McDonalds and Taco Bell (Mintz 1997; Watson 1997). American fast food has come to be associated with many things, including certain foods, restaurant styles, social identities, and practices (Mintz 1997; Schlosser 2002). Fast food has also become associated with other social forces and commercial cultures, such as speed culture (Brewis and Jack 2005; DeVoe, House, and Zhong 2013), car culture (Helphand 1978; Jakle and Sculle 1999), junk food (Pillsbury 1990, 155), rationalization of society (Ritzer 1996), and minimized effort (Schlosser 2002).

Understanding how food consumption is conceptualized as cultural consumption is important to understanding how we may see how fast food consumption supports consumer identity and cultural capital. Food culture studies (Barthes 1975; Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007) have explained how food is important to people not only as physical sustenance but also for its meanings and how those meanings are related to one another. Those meanings suggest how food "links body and soul, self and other, the personal and the political, the material and the symbolic" (Counihan and Van Esterik 2008, 2). For this reason, consumer researchers have frequently argued that food in particular can be especially helpful in studying consumer culture due to its access to both the everyday and the extraordinary (Fonseca 2008; Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007). Consumer culture studies have drawn from a long history of food studies from other traditions. These past works have studied the way food serves as a communication system (Barthes 1975), how its meanings can guide or affirm other practices (Appadurai 1988; Douglas 1972), how its circulation in society can echo history (Mintz 1979; Wilk 1999), and, particularly for this research, how its consumption can be used to express status distinction and exercise

cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Consumer research studies have likewise incorporated food, including how consumers structure their practices and negotiate roles (Heisley and Levy 1991; Hu, Whittler, and Tian 2013; Marshall 2005), how consumers perform collective rituals (Cronin et al 2014a; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), social reproduction (Cappellini and Parsons 2014; Chitakunye and Maclaran 2014; Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004), how cultural categories are interrelated (Levy 1981), and especially how food supports identities including those that are paradoxical (Cronin et al 2014b; Cross and Gilly 2014; Wilk 1997). These and later works have shown that food is not just a vessel of meaning but must be understood in terms of the people, practices, and institutions it connects as a part of market systems (Karababa and Ger 2011; Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007). Studying food as a cultural phenomenon allows us to study how consumers use its consumption to confer or exercise capital and to craft identities. Therefore, these works show how the literature has expanded from studying food as only a material object to studying food centered cultures.

Previous work has shown how food can be used to study identity and the ways consumers use it to categorize their external environment and live their lives (Wilk 1999; Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007). Past work has studied not only consumption but also marketing related materials such as advertisements, restaurants, and cookbooks and the ways they construct the identities of individuals, nations, acculturation status, and so on (Appadurai 1998; Brewis and Jack 2005; Cappellini and Parsons 2014; Fonseca 2005; Penaloza 1994). Work in food has especially begun to study the ways certain foods may be valorized, such as black tea symbolizing an ideal image of Turkish everyday life (Kravets and Ger 2011, 36) or roast turkey symbolizing Thanksgiving (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

While food has been used in cultural studies, foodservice is less well represented. "Foodservice" refers to the industry that sells prepared food, often with the intent that it be consumed outside the home (Johns and Pine 2002). Cultural articles frequently study food from the focus of the home rather than food prepared or consumed outside the home (Warde and Martens 1998). Additional articles have sought to reverse this trend by studying the cultural meanings and practices related to eating out (Bardhi et al 2010; Brewis and Jack 2005; Fonseca 2005; Riley 1994; Warde and Martens 1998). Notable for this research is the article written by Karababa and Ger (2011), which studied coffeehouse culture in the Ottoman Empire and its contribution to the formation of a consumer subject. Also notable is the article by Thompson and Arsel, which studied consumers of contemporary Western coffeehouse culture and the ways these consumers built culture in opposition to a large dominant brand (2004). What these two articles and the others suggest is the importance of understanding foodservice as a crucial source of cultural practices and as a major instance to infer cultural categories and principles.

Cultural studies of fast food are a small share of the total fast food literature. Most other fast food articles deal in issues such as fast food use models (Block, Scribner, and DeSalvo 2004; Jekanowski, Binkley, and Eales 2001; Rydell et al 2008; Taylor et al 2006), fast food's impact on consumers' health and well-being (Chandon and Wansink 2007; French et al 2001; Grier et al 2007), the fast food industry's management and organization (Leidner 1993; Schau, Dellande, and Gilly 2007), and fast food's geographic dispersion or economics (Davis and Carpenter 2009; Kim and Leigh 2011; Roark 1998). Studies on its cultural impact (Brewis and Jack 2005; Guthman 2003; Jakle and Sculle 1999; Ritzer 1996) are less common. In *Golden Arches East*,

Watson observes that a consumption orientation was rare among cultural fast food studies (1997). This trend continues today, where works that study fast food culture are frequently written from a more distant, non-consumer perspective, such as a marketer (Brewis & Jack 2005) or cultural critic (Ritzer 1996; Schlosser 2002).

Cultural studies of fast food are more common when it is relatively new to the population. Initially, the fast food cultural literature focused on fast food's emergence in Americans' lives in the 1960s and 1970s, when the modern fast food industry was young and growing (Helphand 1978; King 1978; Lohof 1979). However, as time went on, the cultural studies became increasingly interested in how fast food was received by cultures other than the United States, such as in China, France, India, Israel, and Japan (Eckhardt and Houston 2002; Fantasia 1995; Goyal and Singh 2007; Ram 2004; Watson 1997). The literature shifted its attentions to how a transplant from America representing American values was being localized and often resisted. American culture was primarily used as a contrast to those consumers' home culture. Works that do study American consumers' perceptions of fast food usually do so as part of a larger food study (Guthman 2003; Levy 1981) or describe consumers in unusual circumstances, such as homesick international travelers (Bardhi et al 2010). Missing from the fast food cultural literature are the perspectives of American fast food consumers, particularly those who interact with fast food in its more recent global brand incarnations.

A central issue in this literature is therefore that fast food has not been studied as a consumption culture. Prior work has studied fast food as a symbol of daily life and its increasing pace due to fast food's integration into everyday practices (Kniazeva and Venkatesh 2007; Levy 1996).

However, the literature has not taken the next step to integrate these cultural conceptions of fast food. To that end, this research aims to study fast food and its consumption as a cultural phenomenon. Fast food is cast as the central figure for this consumption culture. Its influence as a cultural phenomenon is the focus of our study on consumer identity practices. Consumer cultures are systems of commercially produced meanings and their ensuing artifacts and institutions that are used by its members to interpret and engage in their environment (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Therefore, for this work "fast food consumer culture" refers to the socially acquired (learned) patterns of fast-food-related behavior which people use to interpret and engage with their environment and which are rooted in market systems.

Prior work suggests fast food has strong ties to contemporary culture (Mintz 1997; Pillsbury 1990). This influences the types of cultural factors in which fast food may impact consumer identity and cultural capital practices. As Mintz explains, a distinguishing element of contemporary American fast food is its connection "to a particular era in modern life, to specific cultural and economic forms, and above all to the evolving place of the United States in the world food system since WWII" (1997, 190). First, fast food's business model is heavily based on principles that arose during modern society through contemporary culture. The model depends on making profit by breaking down each step and simplifying the overall process used to make the food. This method owes a great deal to Taylorism and its scientists, who applied scientific principles and rationalization to labor practices in order to make production more efficient (Ritzer 1996). The model also relies on the decline of local farms in favor of a small number of large producers. This allows the foodservice industry easier access to standardized food ingredients. This decline in local agriculture also means consumers are more likely to turn

to the market economy to supply their food, whether prepared at home or purchased ready-made (Pillsbury 1998; Schlosser 2002). Rapid technological change also continues to be contemporary culture's legacy, where increased mass communication makes it feasible to reach a wide audience that could span states, nations, and continents (Brewis and Jack 2005; Fantasia 1995; Pillsbury 1998). Another form of social organization that has roots in contemporary culture and directly contributed to the growth of the fast food model was the popularity of suburban layouts post-World-War-II. These meant cars became a stronger part of life and that businesses, including restaurants, were dispersed in different ways to accommodate how suburban spaces and highways were arranged (Jakle and Sculle 1999; Pillsbury 1990; 1998; Roark 1998; Schlosser 2002). These and many more examples indicate fast food as a cultural phenomenon has strong ties to modern society, which means it can both reflect principles of contemporary culture and perpetuate and encourage other contemporary-culture-based social forces and forms.

As a potential instance of consumption that is part of everyday life but subtly disfavored, fast food is in a unique position to help us study consumer identity and cultural capital processes because of its place in contemporary culture and its ties with young adult consumers. As these consumers were growing up, many fast food restaurants began their marketing to children and expanded globally (Schlosser 2002). In the United States, fast food has grown to become a prominent part of the retail landscape (Pillsbury 1990). Fast food consumption may therefore be considered normative. On the other hand, many contemporary discussions on fast food cast it as something eaten frequently and by a wide portion of the population, often to the point that different groups problematize its integration into everyday life due to concerns over obesity or its business practices (Guthman 2003; Schlosser 2002). Furthermore, contemporary work shows

that fast food may be falling out of favor with young adults (Consumer Reports 2014). This mix of associations suggests we may be missing part of the way fast food's consumption can be part of young adults' lives if we only consider fast food in terms of the strong passions it can evoke versus consumers as "dupes" who eat it without conscious thought. It seems unlikely that we can merely apply the literature on consumption that evokes strong hedonic responses in its consumers because fast food may not do so for all consumers. We also cannot simply use the "stigma" concept because while it appears fast food may have troublesome associations, its everyday integration may buffer its categorization as something "deeply discrediting" (Sandikci and Ger 2010, 17). In sum, fast food's history with young adults means that positive associations and a growing number of negative associations with fast food may indicate that young adults have different, more subtle forms of preference, distaste, and discontentment where fast food is concerned.

Ultimately, the literature suggests food cultures, and therefore fast food consumer culture, can give us unique insight into other cultures, including the consumption and identity practices of its members. Food-centered cultures like fast food culture do not just provide a set of meanings; they also create physical, material objects; influence relationships; co-construct economic arrangements; and support narratives and ideologies. Studying fast food consumption as a cultural phenomenon will therefore allow us to better understand many contemporary social and cultural forces and their impact on consumption behavior, and in the case of this work, identity practices. Fast food started as a corporate initiative based on modern marketing techniques with an aim to capitalize on the post-World-War-II baby boom, increased suburbanization, and expansion of various communication technologies (Schlosser 2002). Today, unlike many of the

older forms of fast food that tend to remain localized, modern American fast food has become global. Firms are able to open locations worldwide. Fast food's growth into a global phenomenon and its continued existence in the United States over the past 50 years suggests an array of cultural forces that may be helpful in understanding cultural processes and the ways they and consumers influence each other.

To summarize, a study that examines fast food consumption as a cultural phenomenon, and in particular, as a form of both consumer and consumption culture, will aid our understanding of cultural processes and how they influence other consumer practices. The focus here is on studying "fast food" and "fast food consumption" from a cultural perspective that takes into account the ways consumer identity is influenced by a consumption centered culture and consumer culture. Studying the characteristics of fast food consumption lets us better understand young adult consumers as they construct identities during this particular transition phase. Therefore, repeated here are this study's research questions in response to these theoretical issues:

1. How does fast food consumption intersect with the daily lives of young adult consumers?
2. How does fast food consumption intersect with the identity practices of young adult consumers?

CHAPTER 3 FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Part I of this chapter will describe the theoretical approach and the purpose of using ethnoconsumerism. Part II will describe the methods used to conduct this research.

Part I: Theoretical Approach: Introducing Ethnoconsumerism

This research uses ethnoconsumerism as a conceptual framework and to guide later methods. The primary focus of this research is to learn how fast food plays a part when consumers craft identities. To do so, the study aims to conceptualize fast food as cultural consumption and to study its use amongst young adult consumers. Therefore, this next section will explain how ethnoconsumerism is apt for this study and how it provides a conceptual framework and corresponding methods for collecting and analyzing data.

Ethnoconsumerism is a conceptual framework and research approach to studying consumer behavior. It is distinguished by its use of theoretical categories generated from within the culture under study (Venkatesh 1995; Meamber and Venkatesh 2000). The approach was created in response to prior work that frequently applied theoretical constructs from one culture and time to all other cultures, with minimal regard for how constructs like “freedom” or “materialism” may have been conceptualized and treated differently in cultures across time and space (Venkatesh 1995, 43-45). Ethnoconsumerism’s purpose is to provide a research approach that brings together a set of assumptions and tools that will aid researchers aiming to learn about consumption in a given culture. It accomplishes this by deriving cultural categories from that culture and using

them in theory building within that culture, with an emphasis on bridging the individual, social, and cultural (Venkatesh and Meamber 2000).

The procedure for ethnoconsumerism is as follows. The researcher examines “practices, words, thoughts, language, institutions and the interconnections between categories” in order to see what types of meanings exist in that culture for the consumption in question (Venkatesh 1995, 27-28). The researcher aims to use data collected both from the field and through textual materials to identify relevant 1) cultural objects/things; 2) practices/experiences; 3) schemes/structures; and 4) social histories/memories. As the researcher identifies these four major groups, he or she is better able to derive the types of cultural categories of consumption that exist, and the relationships between them, within a given culture. Having these, the researcher is then able to construct consumption theory using cultural categories and cultural frameworks for a better understanding of that culture.

There are four reasons why using ethnoconsumerism and an ethnoconsumerist conceptual framework is a good match for this research.

First, a major assumption in ethnoconsumerism is that consumer behavior is grounded in culture and that individual consumption behavior is embedded in a sociocultural environment. This is well suited to this study because this work aims to conceptualize fast food consumption as a cultural phenomenon.

Second, another major assumption of ethnoconsumerism is the importance of change when understanding a culture. A major premise to ethnoconsumerism is that culture is dynamic; therefore, the culture and its cultural categories being studied are liable to change. Not only do both past and present practices matter but both the past and present social forces that shaped them matter as well. This assumption relates well to this study because past work suggests that fast food culture is a changing phenomenon that has distinct histories in American culture and in Southern California (Schlosser 2002).

Third, ethnoconsumerism is important to this study because its approach and suggested conceptual framework provide a good solution for integrating the individual, social, and cultural through its assumption of the consumer as a "cultural being." A primary issue in consumer research and the social sciences more generally is how those three should be related. Ethnoconsumerism is based on the concept of the "modal personality" (Venkatesh 1995, 43). When we see a certain pattern of behavior in the individual occur regularly, it may mirror general trends and patterns of social interactions in the shared culture. This of course does not suggest that there is no individual variability and makes no claims to statistical generalizability; it only suggests that when the researcher finds a certain type of individual orientation or way of consumption that is practiced, we can seek to see how it is a part of a larger social and cultural story. This is particularly appropriate for this study given that this research focuses on the perspectives of fast food consumers, but also takes a keen interest in how fast food culture is part of those consumers' lives as a cultural phenomenon that may operate at different levels of society, almost as a "character" in its own right.

Finally, the ethnoconsumerist approach suggests how participants and researchers are represented in the research project. Past work has stressed the need to balance emic (subject's point of view) and ethic (researcher's point of view) approaches. Ethnoconsumerism bridges the two, where the "cultural native's" perspectives remain important, but the research "story" is not merely an uncritical retelling. Ethnoconsumerism is part of the interpretive tradition wherein the researcher is ultimately only constructing a representation of a culture. Furthermore, members of the culture aid the research process by guiding the researcher toward cultural categories and ways to produce knowledge using the "culture's point of view." This premise of ethnoconsumerism fits with this study because 1) it too is part of the interpretive tradition that emphasizes the research as a product of the researcher acting as interpreter (that is, that a fully truthful rendition is impossible) and 2) in regard to fast food, the literature could easily fall into the trap where it applies theoretical constructs indiscriminately without consulting the culture in question. Ethnoconsumerism is a way to respond to the dominance of Western constructs from a certain time and place. Although fast food culture is known for being from the modern, post-World-War-II Western world, it does not mean that the constructs necessarily fit perfectly with this culture. The literature on fast food frequently characterizes American fast food consumers as either mindless or detached when consuming fast food (Guthman 2003). American fast food consumers are only portrayed as having higher engagement with their fast food consumption during the period when fast food was new to the American landscape (Jakle and Sculle 1999). The archetype of the "mindless American" eater has persisted in the literature that both studies contemporary American fast food consumers (Ritzer 1996; Schlosser 2002) and international fast food consumers (Fantasia 1995; Ram 2004). This ignores how fast food consumption as a cultural construct has changed and denies the American consumer reflexivity, agency, and

sociocultural interactions. The ethnoconsumerist approach therefore aids the research's objective to better learn how consumers craft identities using everyday consumption products, even ones that operate more as something that "everyone does." How consumers consume or employ fast food as a product that has an increasingly long history with them and American culture is something this research aims to discern.

Conclusion for Part I

This work's primary objective is to learn how consumers craft their identities via fast food consumption. Conceptualizing fast food consumption as a cultural phenomenon and desiring to conceptualize the consumer as a cultural subject means the ethnoconsumerism approach and framework is well suited to the task. More fitting is how ethnoconsumerism provides a path that accounts for not only how the practices and objects of fast food consumption are connected with its meaning systems, but also how learning consumer-level identity practices fits in with larger consumption-based sociocultural patterns.

Part II: Data Collection

The primary method of data collection is through long interviews. This research covers 20 interviews, which were transcribed verbatim, creating over 500 typed, single-spaced pages. Two of the interviews analyzed by this project were conducted in September 2012, one in September 2014, and the rest from December 2013 to April 2014. A list of the interview participants is available in Appendix A and the interview protocol is in Appendix B.

Study Sample

This research's focus is on local-area Southern Californian fast food consumers who eat fast food at least twice a month and who are also "young adults" in the sense that they are in the process of taking on adult identities. The following sections will describe how each criterion was determined.

The research aims to have participants who "regularly" eat fast food. The cutoff listed in the study information sheet and used during recruitment was that the participant "eats fast food at least twice a month." This cutoff was selected based on surveys that show the distribution of the American population that consumes fast food, with the categories consuming it twice a month or more encompassing 80% of the population (Dugan 2013; Taylor et al 2006).

Participants' perspectives on fast food culture and what counts as fast food are very important to this study. Therefore, during recruitment, the definition of "fast food" was not explicitly listed so that participants could subjectively determine whether they felt their food habits met this criterion. If participants asked for a researcher-driven definition, the researcher explained that the definition should be based on their own constructs and that it was important that the researcher not give an answer so as not to influence their response. Prior fast food literature tends to limit instances of fast food to only those that belong to a specific foodservice form that specializes in the high speed, low cost, and standardized fare that emerged after World War II (Mintz 1997; Ritzer 1996; Schlosser 2002). In order to better study fast food culture and how it is part of participants' identity practices, the literature's definition of fast food was compared and contrasted with the working definitions generated by participants.

Ethnicity was not given significant attention by participants unless they were immigrants or wanted to stress an alternative food philosophy. All participants consider themselves "American" or at least "half American" and have lived over half of their lives in the United States. As the study progressed, the research also sought to sample participants based on different food lifestyles (Hipster, foodie) as well as with whom they regularly ate meals (family, friends, romantic partners, and so on).

Many past works that describe young adult consumers tends to use diverse cutoffs, such as ages 18-24 and 25-34 (Eckhardt and Houston 2002), 18-25, (Arnett 2000, 469; Rook 1985), 18-29 (Dugan 2013; Taylor et al 2006), 19-33 (Jafari and Goulding 2008), and even from 17 to the mid-to-late-thirties, as many articles cite Levinson's concept of "early adulthood" and the "novice period" (Arnett 2000, 470; Mick and Buhl 1992). However, the literature on young adulthood suggests that other elements—like financial independence, subjective age, and getting married—are more useful when discussing young adulthood as a transitional period, but that there is such increasing variability to when and how people attain these different markers of "adulthood" that age becomes the proxy (Shanahan 2000). My primary sample consists of 20 participants, mostly ages 18-30 (one participant is 40 but shows many other hallmarks of young adulthood). Seven of the participants are female, and thirteen are male. Theoretical sampling aimed to find variety using the major "adulthood markers" such as age, whether the participant is a student, household composition (living alone, multigenerational household, and so on), employment status, and whether the participant is a parent. This sample is primarily made up of relatively affluent middle-class consumers. Even if they themselves are financially constrained,

most reflect that they have had a financially comfortable upbringing. Only two participants (#18 and #19) characterize their lives as having financial strain or lower socioeconomic status.

The research's intent is more oriented toward theoretical discovery and iteration; therefore, purposeful sampling is appropriate. The research goal is collecting qualitative data that is detailed and varied in order to examine a wide range of experiences found within even a single person. This strategy gives a better sense of the types of cultural categories that are possible. Rather than seeking a sample that mirrors the larger population, a purposeful sampling procedure aims to achieve theoretical saturation. "Theoretical saturation" occurs when data collection is no longer producing major new themes or categories. McCracken explains that when using long interviews, eight to nine interview participants is frequently sufficient to discern the major cultural categories (1988b, 17). Sampling was therefore used with an aim toward generating many different experiences, instead of having more interview participants but sparser data. Participants were drawn through the researcher's social network and through snowball sampling.

Long Interview

Long interviews are a form of interview whose aim is accessing the cultural categories and assumptions that a culture uses to interpret and construct the world through the experiences of a member of that culture (McCracken 1988b). Long interviews last from 1.5 to 2 hours. This makes it act as a "highly unusual speech event," which gives time to build rapport and for participants to elaborate on their experiences (McCracken 1988b, 12). The researcher used a protocol that included open-ended questions that invited the participants to act as interpreters and gave flexibility for them to bring in different cultural aspects that were important to them. That

being said, the researcher sought to ensure that each of the major questions was covered during the interview, including 1) how is fast food a part of the person's life?; 2) has his or her use changed?; 3) does fast food as an industry change?; and 4) what about "others" (people, places, societies)? This allowed the researcher to collect interpretations and experiences with fast food as they pertain to participants' lives as well as the lives of other people and entities (nation, culture). Long interviews are well suited to a study that uses ethnoconsumerism, given that they share many of the same assumptions and foci.

Data Analysis

This work reflects a grounded theory analysis of the interviews, with an aim toward discerning cultural categories and the intervening conditions and consequences to consumers' actions and interactions (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008). Grounded theory is a methodology that aims to create frameworks and derive analytic categories through inductive analysis of textual data. By bringing together the data, the researcher can derive theoretical constructs and implications. Its operating principle is that throughout the research process, the researcher systematically looks line by line and then paragraph by paragraph to seek emerging themes through a coding process.

The intent of looking for differences and variations in the categories is to produce fuller more multifaceted theory that is grounded in the data and more useful compared to alternative theories (Spiggle 1994). Grounded theory is well suited to ethnoconsumerism because of its ability to handle the search, interpretation, and comparison of potential meanings, categories, and relationships. They also work well together because they are both suitable for discovery-oriented

research in which the researcher aims to find what meanings exist. This is good for situations such as an exploration of fast food culture when the existing literature either may not have strong knowledge for what is currently taking place or may have mistakenly applied a set of cultural constructs that may no longer apply or do not operate the same way (Venkatesh 1995).

The ultimate goal is to systematically relate to other categories, validate those relationships, and fill in categories that need further development to construct a narrative (Corbin and Strauss 2008). It is this series of narratives and thematic elements that emerged from the transcriptions of the respondents, which follows in the Results section.

Coding Example

“Open coding” looks strictly at what data is present and seeks to break down and categorize that data. “Codes” are labels we attach to a block of textual data to note that it a certain idea or “concept” is reflected in that data block.

Here is a passage from a study participant that will be used to illustrate the grounded theory procedure. Example codes applied during open coding are in brackets.

> “…the way it goes is like - ‘Did you eat yet?,’ ‘No,’ ‘Did you eat yet?,’ ‘No,’ ‘okay, let's grab something. [Social dining] What do you guys want to eat?’ [What do you want?/What would you like?; Seeking to Accommodate] Then nobody makes a decision because everybody’s just like ‘I'll have whatever.’ [No clear leadership; Mismatched Preferences](L chuckles) So then when we finally make a decision it’s, "one of you go out and get it.’ [Car, driving; Helping out the cook]

> Usually um, one of us will ride with the other one just because, take it as an opportunity to talk [Opportunistic/opportunity]. …Because typically my brother and my sister has to go out and get something because my dad is lazy and doesn't like to drive anymore. [Helping out the cook; Social network dynamics, Has your use changed, Role shifts] [Pick up, taking it back]" (Participant #13)

Used concurrently with open coding, "axial coding" refers to the process of relating concepts to each other (Corbin and Strauss 2008, 195, 198). Unlike open coding, where we are breaking down the data into smaller parts, in axial coding we are seeing how the different concepts and categories, represented through the codes or clusters of codes we found in open coding, can relate to each other. It is used to resynthesize the different themes and codes that emerge during open coding. The highest-level concept form is a "category," which groups lower-level concepts through their shared characteristics, defined here as "properties." "Dimensions" then suggest the variations we observe within properties. In this passage and others, consumers often seek to determine a meal choice with family, friends, and romantic partners for which I coded "Third Party." This code was used whenever the participant referred to an additional person during the consumption process such as during the decision, buying, or actual eating. A sample category is "Preference Mismatch," which includes the different concepts that reflect when participants seek to coordinate their desires and knowledge of others' preferences with those others. An example of a property could be "mismatch presence," a dimension can be "high to low," and response strategies can be things such as "conflicting" – high to low, "seeking to accommodate" – high to low, "undesired but done for third person" – high to low, and "emotional investment (toward self-choice versus other)"– high to low.

Axial coding studies how a phenomenon works, such as what its conditions are, what the related actions or interactions are, and what their consequences are (Charmaz 2006, 61). This lets us go beyond this specific instance of a phenomenon and therefore allows us to build theory by having that stronger understanding of a phenomenon and those like it.

Displayed below are two sample categories which are listed with their respective properties and dimensions. During axial coding and then later during the selective coding process, these categories, properties, and dimensions are related to each other and to other categories. For example, these two categories were studied together because they were often described together by participants when discussing fast food in relation to other types of desirable or abhorred consumption and the extent social and individual pressure is actually enforced.

Category: Consumption Desirability
(Desirability of consumption style as well as particular brand, product, and so on)

Properties	Dimensions
Individual	High to Low
Perceived Social	High to Low
Perceived Consensus on Hierarchy/ (horizontal, taste based or vertical, quality)	High to Low
Perceived Substitutability	High to Low

Category: "Stigma"

(Potential socially imposed consequence on self)

Properties	Dimensions
Presence	Present and Not Present
Extent a Culture Accepts	High to Low
Severity of Social Consequence	High to Low
Ambiguity that Stigma Applies (in the current situation)	High to Low
Ambiguity of Enforcement (will consequence be applied)	High to Low

During "selective coding," the researcher seeks to integrate and refine theory by studying the categories and their relationships and selecting key themes and theoretical frameworks. When using open and axial coding, there are many possible frameworks, relationships, and processes. At this stage the researcher focuses on what the primary theoretical "stories" present by selecting the primary categories, removing irrelevant categories, and looking for the internal logics that may structure those particular processes. Selective coding is therefore similar to the axial coding step because the researcher seeks to go beyond description to explanatory and generalizable frameworks in which we can show the variations in conditions and categories. However, selective coding differs from axial and open coding by being less structural and more based on interpretive work done by the researcher through the writing of memos, diagraming of processes, creating of reports on the emerging findings, and discussing of their implications. Below is an excerpt of a memo:

> "...The other list was based on characterizing fast food as a product that we feel reliant on but show little gratitude toward (washing machines, electricity, air conditioners). This newest list was conceptualizing closer at the heart that seems

to be fast food as a limitation. It's a product that's "lower tier" whereas my participants seem to expect they should be moving on (graduating, frequenting) a "higher tier" type product. So in other words, fast food was a good start and what they could afford, but continuing to use it is not really a badge of honor or notable. It's referenced in terms of preferring maybe something different. So here it seems to be mixed in with both class and age. One should be able to afford "better things" with age, age presumably bringing greater income. Although they want healthier foods, it's not like healthy is always key, the emphasis on the better foods it that they can be healthier, but usually it's also they "taste better." It's the hedonic qualities they're looking for still but can't always afford or afford to do too often. Some other products I noted that were seen as reminding consumers of their limitations were bifocals and mini vans. They show America's obsession with youth, the idea of not wanting to get old." (6/12/2014)

CHAPTER 4: FIRST RESULTS CHAPTER

CONSUMER IDENTITY AND FAST FOOD CULTURE

Introduction

This first results chapter will examine how fast food consumption is a part of consumers' identity practices. By focusing on young adults' perspectives of their fast food consumption, we can better learn how they take on adult consumer identities. The research findings suggest three primary ways fast food consumption is a part of consumers' identity practices: by 1) supplying meaning, 2) acting as a tool for measuring and evaluating their progress with their identity projects, and 3) helping them arrange their lives. The chapter will end with a discussion of two cultural forces that drive consumers' use of fast food in their identity practices: agency and orientation toward constraints.

Identity Practices

Consumers construct identities by taking the meanings around them and forming them into stories of themselves or others (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Prior work in consumer identity practices has shown how accepting, rejecting, or using consumption meanings can infuse products, consumption, and the consumer's individual self with meaning or be used to infer characteristics for other people (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a; Solomon 1983). Fast food consumption therefore may facilitate identity construction not only through available meanings but also by being a direct material force that helps these consumers live their lives in certain ways and a tool they can use to evaluate and interpret their environment.

Fast food consumption may therefore contribute or hinder participants' identity projects in many different ways. During analysis these major categories continually emerged – "desirability," "stigma," "the everyday," and "change." Prominent practices and experiences revolved around their ability to evaluate and choose their consumption and therefore identities. These categories matched well with these practices by mirroring their desires and emphasis on selecting consumption and therefore identities that were good for their individual self and their reference groups. Furthermore, the categories that stress the everyday also mirror the ways these choices must actually be integrated and maintained in the consumers' daily lives. Fast food culture was used by consumers in their identity practices in three primary ways: by 1) supplying meaning, 2) acting as a tool for measuring and evaluating their progress with their identity projects, and 3) helping them arrange their lives. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

A) As a Supplier of Content and Meanings for Interpretation and Communication

The first way fast food culture is a part of participants' identity practices is as a source of meaning. These meanings can be learned directly or vicariously. Fast food culture is made up of not only tangible items such as food, tables, and drive-through-windows, but also many other types of meanings, symbols, and associations. Fast food brings to mind many different types of people for the participants, including people who are busy (#15), younger (#7), more obese (#17, #22), less concerned about physical health (#17, #23), of lower income (#8, #12), of lower socioeconomic status (#8, #9, #15), parents with young children (#1), businessmen eating lunch (#14, #22), women eating together (#22), less interested in what they felt was quality family time (#5), lazy (#6), inexperienced or apathetic cooks (#7, #20), less educated (#8, #17), and so on. These meanings are present in fast food culture and can be brought to mind and used regardless

of how the participants actually use fast food or how they categorized themselves. All of these meanings can be used by participants in their identity processes to allow them to interpret, construct, modify, or reject identities, whether someone else's or their own.

Similar to other consumption forms, participants can also consider their identities by deriving meaning from their own or others' specific fast food consumption, such as whether they consumed fast food, how they consume fast food, how often or how much fast food they eat, who they tend to eat it with, how passionate they are about fast food, and so on. Whether a person has ever eaten fast food or currently eats fast food is not very notable. Most people, including these participants, have eaten fast food. Not eating fast food is a distinct characteristic that participants recognize, but it is akin to the idea that the person is making a very conscious choice to avoid fast food (#1, #6, #14). Conceiving of a person who has never had any type of fast food is likely to be a distinct identity as well, but was not discussed by these participants. However, Burger King ran commercials that depicted "Whopper virgins," wherein they filmed people who they reported had not heard of their brand before, portraying these fast food outsiders as very exotic to white Americans (Matejowsky 2010). Furthermore, the "first" time one experienced fast food is something that is not considered memorable which underlies fast food's ordinary nature. Most participants admit they can only recount an "early" time, and some even chuckled at the question. One participant even notes he only knew he likely had "teeth to be able to do it" (#8) when he first had fast food. Instead, fast food "firsts" are usually remembered if they were trying a new restaurant when they were much older, such as participant #14, who explains how he can easily recount his first time at Chipotle but can only recall early memories for the general fast food category.

A common theme that emerged during interviews was how participants describe their desire for fast food or certain types of fast food. Most participants have a favorite brand or particular item, but participants often vary a great deal in how they define themselves according to the larger fast food category. Some talk about themselves as a "living billboard" who buys into the brands (#13). Some build their identity around their antagonism toward fast food or the industry it represents (#2, #6). Many of the other participants are more neutral or stress that they liked fast food well enough but that it still does not compare to other foods. For example, participant #1 explains the extent of her desire for a favorite fast food restaurant, "well, I'm fine with In-N-Out; it's not like I have some kind of something against them, you know. I mean, sure, would you prefer something else, yeah, I'd prefer a filet mignon and, and, (chuckles), you know, just give me a Lawry's steak you guys!"

These meanings can both help and hinder participants' identity projects depending on whether they feel the meanings match their desired identities. Sometimes participants adopt these associations into their own identities. For example, participant #10 explains that fast food is meant for people like him "They should advertise for people who just want to, like for me, on the go, quickness, easiness, and something that tastes good. And, like, I don't care about the healthy side." Another example is how participant #2 considers how easily he was growing accustomed to eating more fast food and was debating whether he could still identify as a resilient consumer.

Participants often use meanings derived from fast food culture to characterize other people. Fast food associations can be used when participants construct identities for specific known others,

such as friends, family members, and romantic partners. For example, people in romantic relationships frequently build their own food identities in relation to their partner. Participants #5 and #6 are newly married (to each other) and define their desire for fast food in relation to each other. Ordinarily, participant #5 does not consider herself very interested in fast food, but because her spouse is even pickier and more resistant toward fast food, they both characterize her as the one who likes it more and is the less discriminating consumer. Many of these identifiers are also used as a way to characterize a more generalized other such as individual others, American society and American people (#1, #2, #17, #20), white people (#17), Southern Californians (#13, #14), Midwesterners (#8), and so on. For example, participant #11 noted that he would have negative views of people who use fast food for family dinners, and participant #18 said she read that people outside of California were less critical about fast food and smoking, which suggested a less informed public in those places.

Oftentimes, participants challenge or reject fast food cultural meanings during their identity-making processes. Participant #8, for example, is concerned that because he defends fast food, he may be miscategorized as someone poor and less educated. Another example is how participant #1 feels that conservative politicians use fast food consumption as a way to negatively stereotype low-income people. Many participants in general note that although there are certain associations with fast food—such as being poor or less educated—in general, fast food is something "everyone" eats and that trying to surmise an "average" fast food customer is difficult (#13, #15, #21).

B) As an Evaluation Tool

The second way fast food culture is a part of participants' identity practices is as a tool for evaluating their progress in attaining their desired identities. For the study's young adult participants, a major goal of their identity projects is attaining adult identities. The data suggests they are using fast food consumption as a lens through which to consider their more general consumption patterns and as a gauge of their progress in acquiring adult identities through that consumption. Whereas in the prior section this work discussed how fast food culture supplies "meanings" as a way to interpret identities as social cues and to communicate identities with others, this section will focus on how consumers can further use fast food culture's meanings as an interpretive tool. There are three ways this research finds fast food is used to evaluate identity projects. First, fast food consumption can be used to measure the extent of consumers' knowledge; second it can be used to examine their consumption activities across time; and third, it can be used to provide them consumption opportunities that allow them to see how they are putting knowledge to practice through enacting taste. The following are covered in further detail below.

1) Evaluating Extent of Knowledge

The first major way participants use fast food consumption is as a way to measure how much they know. Participants talk about many things they know or are still in the process of learning, including knowing how to compare foods for healthiness or cost (#8, #14, #23), how to cook and what ingredients to buy (#18, #20), about different business models (#1, #2, #21), how to properly evaluate an advertisement (#8), where to go for food (#17), how to abide by a diet (#2, #13, #14), how to eat at different restaurants (#13), how to anticipate firm actions or find

coupons and other deals (#8, #9, #10, #11, #22), about secret menus (#13), where certain people or classes are likely to go (#19), and so on. Knowing how to order a meal or about the existence of certain restaurants is taken for granted. More useful to participants for categorizing their or others' knowledge is the "knowledge" that represents a major change in their perspective and abilities. For example, participants were particularly pleased with having more knowledge that factored into the major criteria they used when making food choices like price or nutritional value (#6, #13). Yet, participants also seemed to expect knowledge about nutrition or advertising to be common. For example, participants sometimes express puzzlement when discussing people who they feel should already have certain knowledge such as how everything "looks better in the advertisements" (#8) or that there are "so many warnings on everything" now, that people should know that fast food is unhealthy (#18). Even if American consumers are expected to have this knowledge, participants sometimes express strong cynicism that Americans will stop being "lazy" (#5, #6, #22).

2) Evaluating Actions Across Time

The second way participants can use their fast food consumption as a tool to evaluate adult identity acquisition is by seeing how they are enacting consumer actions across time, like selecting a menu item or ordering food. For many participants, fast food's low cost and appeal to their younger selves meant fast food was often a part of their past consumer socialization experiences. Socialization refers to the way participants begin to learn what can be consumed and different ways to consume through roles and scripts (John 1999; Peracchio 1992), such as the existence of businesses, how to order food, how to pay, the differences between full-service and self-service restaurants, when to bus one's own tray, the extent to which one can customize

an order, and so on. Parents and other caregivers frequently aided socialization when the participants were children by giving participants more opportunities to consume independently with time (Littlefield and Ozanne 2011). For example, many consumers discuss how parents and other guardians would increasingly ask them what they wanted (#9, #17) or give them unaccompanied time or money to spend which participants could use to make their own purchasing decisions (#8, #13, #18). Participant #13 fondly remembers the first time he ordered food for himself, at a Taco Bell during a visit to his grandmother, where she gave him money and told him to play with the neighborhood kids. Another example is participant #8, who explains that when he began driving, he moved into a new stage of consumption because his parents no longer had to drive him and were now directly giving him money in a lump sum. Here he explains why he began to favor fast food and ordering less premium fast food items:

> "I have this amount of money for like a week or something. I wouldn't want to spend a ton on a Monday. I would feel uncomfortable asking for more money. It would seem wasteful so I would be like okay, Monday, Tuesday I want to go out…I'm like, yeah it would be weird to order more than, I don't know, X amount of dollars. I'll be like, okay, I'll just get two cheap sandwiches and that would be fine. I think that's, I think once, when you start driving, I think it's more of an issue because you have to carry more money with you."

As the above example suggests, participants began their socialization as children but continued it throughout their younger lives and into young adulthood. Even if they understood the act of ordering food, it was only more recently, during high school and beyond, that many had greater

autonomy to put what they had learned into practice. As participant #13 explains of his situation as a working college graduate living away from home:

> "I'm learning what it means to be myself. Not have to deal with the stuff that was just told to me. Like my parents brought me to fast food. They showed me how to eat fast food. They taught me to be more efficient with my time. They only eat things that were easy. Now it's switching completely. So um, that's how I feel like [eating/in] everything. I have to find out how to do everything myself and food, especially since food is one of the things we do all the time."

This does not always mean making a break away from prior socialization. Some realize that with autonomy they can more fully embrace lessons learned from their parents and past experiences. Participants #11 and #23 both feel more attached as adults to the consumption values their immigrant parents had taught them and through distance are able to reaffirm those values' importance to their identities as consumers.

New conditions can also lead to acquiring new meanings, and therefore shifts in fast food consumption and consumer identities. There are many individual-level sources of change, such as seeing how other people, like friends or family members, consume fast food (#2, #13, #23). Another example of additional socialization is during role transitions, such as when participant #18 became pregnant and proceeded to learn all she could through parenting resources. There are also more societal-level changes that participants described. Many participants feel that there is increasingly more health information and different fast food options, which allows them a different choice set than they had in the past (#14, #17, #18, #19, #20, #21).

In sum, when participants use their socialization to evaluate their adult identity acquisition it is not merely about what they know, but more importantly the extent to which they can enact agency. As noted earlier, fast food was often one of the earliest ways they were allowed to make consumer choices (#8, #13, #17). At present, participants often associate fast food with less agency, whether because they feel it is the only viable option (#2, #5) or whether they consume fast food to accommodate other people (#1, #7). However, they can use fast food to examine their agency by considering how they might refrain from eating fast food, go to healthier fast food places, look for fast food with fancier ingredients, and engage in other self-imposed constraints (#14, #17, #20, #18). For example, #22 feels empowered eating fast food alone as a woman despite societal norms. Participant #17 describes his feelings of transcendence by explaining how his fast food consumption habits now mirror his feelings "as a kid I used to go to, like, Carl's Jr., McDonalds a lot more. It kinda felt as though as I grew older I moved beyond those places." Being able to match their behavior to their feelings towards fast food is another way they feel mastery. Another example is participant #1: "I don't eat too much fast food anymore…. Um, just in case you were thinking of asking me about that, it's just more of a personal choice, don't really care for fast food as much."

As participant #13 explains:

> "Now that I'm living by myself, I don't care about it as much, so I kinda, I've got to get upset when it's not as good as it could be, so maybe I need to start doing things like that. Asking for fresh fries or asking for things to be done specially

> because some- because when it's done nice, it's good, but it's kind of like a treat because not everybody does it the same."

Consumers also use their fast food consumption as a way to see how well they can continue to meet their goals in terms of adapting to change or remaining resilient for a good cause. Participant #2, for example, is conflicted over his fast food use. He feels eating fast food is a "necessary sacrifice" to achieve his study goals, but he also worries that he too easily allowed fast food to become a habit. Participant #13 also expresses concern over how quickly he shifted to eating fast food. Others described their concern over what they feel is weak resilience toward advertisements such as craving pizza all day after seeing an advertisement for it (#18) or pondering whether he is not placing sufficient restrictions on his consumption (#12).

3) Evaluating Their Ability to Enact Taste

The third way participants used fast food as a measurement tool put both knowledge and practice together by thinking in terms of enacting taste. "Taste" refers to the ways what one should like or dislike is socially constructed and not just about pure biological interests (Bourdieu 1984). Fast food's association with being an accessible, easy-to-know food allows participants to use their acceptance of fast food as a way to understand their overall consumer self.

Some use their dismissal or disdain of fast food as indicative of a more cultured and discriminating taste and therefore of greater maturity. Participant #22 explains it is not just giving into her desire for fast food but also the desire itself that makes her feel less like an adult. On the other hand, participant #17 feels great pride that he desires higher-quality food and that

the “stereotypical” fast food is something he is “beyond.” Sometimes these more discriminating tastes are cast as natural, a matter of “growing up” (#11, #19, #20). Others explain with pride the actions they took to actively cultivate their tastes and embrace their “pickiness” (#1, #2, #23).

Others characterize their acceptance of fast food as a way to show a more adult mindset. Similar to the literature on omnivores, they describe their desire of fast food as in line with liking many types of food and as indicative of a more mature and refined palette (Johnston and Baumann 2007). As participant #12 explains, “I have big interest in food. That’s why I'm open to any types of food. That’s why I respect fast food as well. I like all kinds of food.” Participant #13 further traces his pickiness as something that is more indicative of his closed minded childhood, explaining how he used to be “fairly biased” about everything, including food.

Ultimately, the three ways participants can use fast food as a tool to evaluate their identity acquisition are strongly influenced by how fast food is frequently a part of their early lives. Unlike other everyday foods that are associated with their past, like bread and rice or water, fast food is not considered a staple, but instead, its connection with their history and early consumption experiences is associated with their less knowledgeable and therefore less mature and less adult identities.

C) As a Means to Arrange Life Circumstances

The third way fast food culture is a part of participants’ identity practices is as a means to arrange their lives, which helps to manage identities. The research data suggests many ways fast food culture is used to both materially and meaningfully arrange consumers’ social relations,

time, needs, and so forth. Fast food culture, therefore, is not just the meanings, but the way its culture encompasses many different norms, institutions, and other more structural forces that consumers can seek to access through fast food consumption. Fast food culture can thus allow consumers to physically facilitate certain types of lives, and therefore certain types of identities. For a very extreme example, participant #19 is part of a household with a nonfunctioning kitchen and many disabled family members who need his help securing daily meals. He explains that fast food is essential to his ability to both go to school and care for his family because it is one of the few products that was sufficiently fast, inexpensive, and desired by his family members. As participant #19 explains, "If every fast food place closed tomorrow, I don't know how I would restructure my life to have to cook every meal for every person in my house. Umm…I…I'd have to find part time work instead of going to college. It would be really, really hard." He uses fast food to arrange his time and his family's needs so that he can go to school and thus work toward attaining his desired identity of employed teacher.

Participants in general speak of how fast food can be used to arrange their lives and therefore maintain or build certain identities. Participant #17, for example, notes that he and his medical resident coworkers eat at Subway because it allows them to simultaneously build their bonds as a team and maintain their professional identities as doctors because the location is close enough for them to return to the hospital if called. Other examples include being inexpensive so diverting more income toward student loans (#9), being still open to fuel a late night creative programming session (#10), allowing a space to bond with friends or coworkers (#1, #2, #6, #1, #13, #21), freeing up time to relax with family (#12, #14, #18), or even simply continuing a quiet afternoon watching a movie (#8). Many participants in general note with fondness that it was heavily used

as a way to hang out with friends during high school (#21, #20, #17, #12, #15, #14, #16). However, discussions about fast food's ability to provide an informal space continued post high school.

> "I played capture the flag with a large group of people, um, and afterwards we would go to say, In-N-Out because we were all hungry obviously because of, well, all that exercise. So we would go to In-N-Out because it was just a place we could all agree on. It's fairly inexpensive for the most part, and it can accommodate all of us without, with no notice basically." (#1)

Participants range in the extent they perceive fast food as useful to maintaining certain identities. Some note that fast food is very important to how they run their lives (#19, #9) and that finding a substitute would be very difficult. Participant #9, for example, noted "food is food" for her and that she hopes fast food "never dies" so that she can continue on with her life, getting "anything I can just in my stomach for as little money as possible and keep me satisfied" (#9). Many participants consider fast food to be a high facilitator for their lives, but diminish its importance. Often, fast food's ability to help their lives is situational. As participant #18 explains, fast food is "not important at all but it does come in like a little lifesaver at those times I need just to get something quickly for dinner." Other examples showing perceptions that fast food's ability to facilitate desired actions is very situational include participant #20, who notes, "sometimes it's necessary to have quick food," and participant #1, who says, "it's always an option kinda like if you can't think of anything else."

There is a strong undercurrent of categorizing fast food as “optional”. Participants frequently use terms like “convenience” (#13, #14, #19) or “treat” (#18, #22), which suggests at least one probable substitute. Even when discussing fast food as an essential part of life, participants can still consider other substitutes, albeit very undesirable choices such as skipping meals or eating ramen. When participants expressed desire for fast food there are always limitations and a mind for drawbacks. Others are more adamant that fast food is not very important to their lives and even to their thoughts. A frequent way to convey this is supposing “all” fast food went away and expressing its impact such as “I’d survive” (#5), “I wouldn’t cry” (#6), or “we would just find the next best thing” (#21). In fact, participant #8 feels fast food is useful to his life but explains his lack of attachment is likely because fast food can be substituted with other quick-service restaurants forms in terms of taste and function “I don't think, I think the majority of people would not miss fast food unless there was, like, *nothing* close.”

The way fast food is frequently conceptualized as desirable stresses its place as low impact and peripheral as a desire and in managing their identities. When they discuss its use as an object of desire, participants frequently use many qualifiers and mention its drawbacks. For example, participant #20 says, “it’s tasty, but it’s really not good for you. It’s almost a vice of culture.” As an object of desire, it evokes their inclination to maintain proper limits to their hedonism. However, this preoccupation to the drawbacks whenever discussing fast food influences how consumers approached their consumption. In addition, unlike a high moral threat, high-reward vice, fast food is considered a low moral threat, low-reward vice. Therefore, it is considered a poor option to fulfill their sense of fun or happiness and thus relevant identities that are based in these.

This sense that fast food has low use in reaching their identity goals is also reflected in how participants cast it as a peripheral option. Unlike many works on brand communities and consumption that focuses on how consumption is frequently, actively pursued to build identities, fast food is not considered such. Instead, fast food is cast in terms of a more temporary "treat" or "craving," which suggests that its desirability is temporary and usually an aberration to their normal lives (#9, #20, #22). They express how sometimes one just feels like a particular item or brand (#2, #18, #20); as participant #9 put it, "sometimes I just crave a really gross-looking burger, so I go to McDonalds or Burger King." Some participants feel embarrassment over their desires, noting that they feel they are childish (#22) or that they are too preoccupied with them (#18).

When participants do convey a desire for fast food that has fewer qualms attached, it is usually for a specific product, brand, or restaurant. For these, they feel they have justifiable pride in certain regional or specific fast food places, which they cast as standouts among the larger category. Smaller especially regional brands like In-N-Out, Five Guys, or Chipotle are especially commonly highlighted by participants. For these and other restaurants, they are aware that they desire rich decadent and decidedly unhealthy food (#1, #2, #10). However, fast food is not seen as appropriate even when they note that food at restaurants or more gourmet and upscale places is frequently fatty or rich as well. This next quote shows the struggle wherein participant #1 may like In-N-Out, but its low ranking means she would prefer to eat and be known for her other food preferences:

> "…I mean, there's a lot of food I like to eat, do I love In-N-Out? Yeah! I love In-N-Out as well, but, maybe not love but I like In-N-Out as well…In-N-Out is convenient, it's open right now, it's easy to get and bring home, it's, everyone can agree on it, I mean, yeah, like I said, there's a lot of food I would love to eat I think. Ramen, I really like Chinese food, Japanese food, sushi."

Participants frequently note that their fast food consumption may help manage their lives and thus certain identities in one way, but that this will conflict with other identity goals. For example, fast food often reflects undesired circumstances and therefore undesired interests and identities. Many participants say fast food is something they "have" to eat because they lack income or time. They would prefer to be eating something else, like home-cooked food (#2, #5, #6, #23), or eating somewhere more "upscale" (#1, #17, #20). Participant #2, for example, abhors the fast food industry but explains his new job means he is frequently eating more fast food, which he casts as a "necessary sacrifice." Therefore, instead of stressing how it serves as a means to attain an identity, the greater focus was on repelling undesired identities with which they could become associated due to the level of their fast food consumption.

Making food decisions with others is a further complication, as participants seek to balance the management of their lives and identities. Deciding what to eat is often a choice made with another person and is an especially potent case where participants explain their inner desires do not match their behavior. Participants often have to accommodate and negotiate with one or more people and their respective desires. Family is a prominent site of group decision making. An example of this is how certain fast food choices represent times when they had less choice,

such as for participants #2 and #17 who both associate McDonalds with the option their parents thought they would want. Even as adults, participants still engage in group decision making with family members and often feel a great deal of pressure. Participants #1 and #7, for example, both describe situations wherein they felt they have less input than they would like. As participant #1 explains, her dad frequently suggests In-N-Out because he likes it, and the swiftness and habitual nature of the choice makes it almost feel like "an executive decision was made."

Many participants express hopes that their desired self and intended goals may align better in the future. Their fast food consumption practices are only based on their present situation and they anticipate change. For example, many comments that their financial situation should improve. As participant #21 explains, "I just want to not have to worry about being out of money kind of thing," and participant #11 considers that the different fast food preferences between his generation and his parents' generation may be as much about time and money as it is about actual desire.

Mechanisms: Agency and Constraint Orientation as Cultural Forces

This section will talk about two primary cultural concepts, agency and constraint orientation, that seem to be at work driving participant use of fast food culture with their identity processes. These cultural forces create and reinforce the contemporary culture from which they originate. By knowing these, we can better understand how fast food culture and other consumption cultures like it tend to perpetuate and enforce certain meanings and practices. These give fast food consumption a different type of cultural category than other types of food and loved, hated, or habitual consumption.

A) Agency

The first major cultural driver is the assumption of agency that underlies participants' consumer choice and consumer sovereignty beliefs. "Agency" refers to the way participants may interpret their world and their actions in terms of an individual self who decides and governs one's own life and can influence outside forces (Kozinets et al 2004). As a cultural driver, agency appears to influence consumers' use of fast food culture because it resonates with the ways one should be both an adult and a consumer. For both adulthood and consumer identities, there is a strong emphasis that the person should be able to enact agency by making choices. Evident in the participants' discussions is a sense of individualism and framing their evaluations in terms of the individual and rational sovereign consumer (Markus and Schwartz 2010). In other words, the focus is on the individual person versus a person who is part of social groups. In addition, consumers are expected to not only use rational principles to make choices, but to acknowledge that the very act of making choices is key and that the market system seeks to satisfy their desires. Although they frequently discuss how important it is to accommodate other people and that the market does not always offer what they want, they still feel the responsibility of the choice is ultimately theirs. Even comments like "what can you do" to suggest inability to act come with language that describes that choice for fast food is still a choice, that the participant had examined many other possibilities and had made that choice (#2, #5). Even declining to propose a food choice is cast as a strategic decision (#9). Indecision while selecting a food is discussed, but usually in terms of no one wanting to be forward (#13). Their desire for self-determination is evident in their emphasis both on enacting agency and through making choices.

They feel their lives are theirs to make and discuss different goals they would like to achieve, such as moving to the city (#22), starting a business (#21), and so on.

As young adults, participants aim to acquire and maintain adult consumer identities. “Full” adulthood and consumer society are both strongly premised on the ways the participant acts as an individual and the power he or she wields through the market system. Fast food’s framing as an increasingly optional and low-suitability source of identity value is what seems to make participants treat it differently for their identity needs than they would other types of food or other everyday consumption that is loved, hated, or completely ignored. Affirming what past work on young adulthood discussed (Shanahan 2000), there is a strong emphasis that consumers are to determine their own life histories and that consumption, not just work, is an avenue to do so. This did not mean participants only concentrate on their own needs or that they neglect others. Rather, it suggests how fast food culture can be such a part of young adult’s transition to adulthood because of its connection to their assumptions of the place of consumer choice and consumer sovereignty. Enacting agency and making choices as an individual is very important to fast food culture and to the general culture of which these young adults are a part. In sum, we see that agency is a major cultural driver because it makes participants more likely to incorporate fast food consumption into their young adult identity practices because it connects more broadly to their quest of taking not only the role of a consumer, but a person who can enact agency as a consumer as well as in other “adult” fields.

B) Constraint Orientation

The second major cultural driver is participants' orientation toward constraints. Specifically, the relationship between fast food culture and the identity practices of young adult consumers is driven by how participants frame and manage the constraints they face while making consumer decisions. The participants frequently explain that constraints are a part of life and that being able to manage those constraints is a mark of how one acts increasingly as an adult consumer. There are two major ways consumers tend to approach fast food consumption: 1) working within constraints or 2) constraints as boundaries to surpass. Each tends to lead to a different way to conceptualize life as an adult consumer.

Working Within Constraints

Participants who primarily use the first way— "working within constraints" —understand "constraints" as boundary conditions that must be managed. Limitations are constructed as challenges, things to work around and see how best you can find something that fits all the conditions. Participants who tend to emphasize a constraint model emphasize fast food as helpful to optimizing. Those who have a kinder perspective on fast food are more likely to describe constraints in terms of working within them. Fast food is good at balancing many competing desires and so is considered a good choice. Participant #8, for example, prides himself on not letting sentimentality or a desire for signaling wealth or prestige keep him from being "super objective" by using fast food in his life. As he explains:

> "There's a bunch of, like, elitist people, and they're like, you should just, like, get the best possible food you can, all the time. And I'm like that's just not reasonable for the majority of people. Like, they're not going to be able to afford these crazy

> ingredients or these crazy sort of restaurants. So I think I try to be as objective as possible based on…a bunch of different factors."

Participant #13 feels he was focused on more boundary conditions than his girlfriend and her family when evaluating fast food

> "And I think that's half the reason why her and her family don't appreciate it as much. Because um, you can get better ingredients yourself all the time. And make it better. And it will taste better. And I get that. It's true. But my other bounds are convenience and money most of the time. Well, I guess money doesn't make that much sense but convenience and time are the biggest issues. So. You know. I could…and I know it's not as good, but it doesn't matter, because I'm just trying to get something really fast."

Participants #21, #19, and #9 are also kinder to fast food and seem to focus more on constraints as a web to try to work within. Even if participants like fast food, they also like other types of food and are interested in seeking new, more fertile food grounds. For many, fast food is something good for now and for the situation. Participant #13 puts it best, after discussing how fast food is a strong part of his life but that he wants to open his palette toward other choices: "it's not like I'm abandoning fast food, and I don't think I ever will, but it's definitely taking a backseat now to the other things."

Maximizing Beyond Thresholds

The second way participants characterize constraints in ways that influence their adult consumer identity construction is one that emphasizes "constraints" as a threshold to surpass as much as possible. Therefore, a food like fast food, which is considered merely adequate at best, is much less desired. Emphasis is not on a satisfactory match but instead on settling for the option. Consumers often are still handling a major boundary constraint, such as limited time to eat lunch (#5) or the need to save money (#11), but the focus is still that fast food only barely goes past their baseline food desires. Participants look at fast food in terms of how fast food can do what they need, but not well. They can usually afford it, and fast food is accessible, sufficiently filling, has an adequate taste, and can accommodate a shared meal, but their focus is on how it could have better ingredients, a more comfortable atmosphere, and so on.

As participant #10 explains:

> "And what I like about eating is that atmosphere as well. So it's kinda like entertaining, like a meal that's entertaining. Whereas fast food you just eat, do work, eat some more, watch TV, eat. So you don't really have an engaging conversation or enjoy other people's company, which is what I like to do when I have dinner."

Participant #19 alludes to this difference in managing versus aiming to surpass constraints when he discusses his fiancé: "But for her, because she's never had to worry about money like that, she's always looking to eat at, you know, a place where meals are 10, 12 dollars." While he

prefers fast food in order to work within many boundaries, he explains, he feels she focuses more on just maximizing certain tastes by going to those more expensive places.

Treating constraints as thresholds to surpass means fast food is perceived mostly in terms of being close to participants' baseline for desirable food. This is likely why it goes hand in hand with the perceptions that desire should shift away from fast food. As beginning consumers during high school and early adulthood fast food is acceptable, but just as they are gaining more and more capital, they likely feel that they should also be further surpassing those constraint thresholds. This is likely why we also see a lot of discussion about moving away from "stereotypical" fast food or the category in general couched in terms of progress, "evolving" even (#17). They may have fond memories, but they explain it was time for them to move on to healthier or better forms of fast food (#6, #14, #17). It is something best left in the past.

Ultimately, the two ways participants tend to characterize constraints both influence how they characterize fast food as part of their lives. Namely, the way they think they are able to handle these constraints reflects their ability to act according to their desires and wishes. While those who see it as managing constraints tend to focus on how fast food allows them a good solution, those who think of their constraints in terms of a baseline they have only barely crossed are reminded of consumer power they cannot yet wield.

As members of a modern western culture, the young adult participants are tasked with finding their own place, and path, and to go forward and acquire identities that will allow them to be recognized as adults. Moreover, modern Western society encourages the use of consumption and

privileges the act of choice in order to enact identity. This includes making an active choice, even if it means picking a more extreme and less ideal product. Fast food is something that has been accessible to these consumers since they were very young. If adulthood represents greater ability to navigate time, financial, social, and other constraints, then whether they use fast food can act as a way for them to gauge their progress toward attaining and enacting adult identities. In summary, participants can use fast food consumption as a way to examine how they are becoming adult consumers by mediating on their increasing access to some forms of consumption but not others.

Conclusion

Participants frequently discuss the ways they are learning to navigate adulthood by talking about their personal identity projects and how fast food is a part of them. This comes in the form of talking about not only the skills or mindsets they are cultivating but also the types of life paths they hope to enter. For example, participant #19 describes adulthood as a matter of a person or industry learning to take greater responsibility, participant #6 talks about it in terms of becoming "old and cranky," and participant #22 describes it in terms of navigating institutions as a separate legal entity. Many conceptions of adulthood are food related. Participants frequently talk about how they are learning how to find new types of restaurants or cultivating more expansive palettes (#10, #13, #17), trying new foods (#1, #10, #13, #14), or learning how to cook (#14, #18, #20). Conceptualizing fast food as a cultural phenomenon therefore allows us not only to understand how fast food acts as sustenance with biological and material properties, but also the ways it influences consumers and their identity goals. Using the ethnoconsumerist framework, the findings suggests different types of experiences are used in consumers' identity processes due to

its status as subtly disfavored consumption. Certain experiences and practices such as eating fast food for the first time or its use in everyday life are given differential importance compared with consumption they favor or are neutral toward. Furthermore, the primary categories that emerged during coding suggest how everyday subtly disfavored consumption does not act as a less intense version of traditional hedonic consumption in consumers' identity practices. Instead, while traditional hedonic consumption suggests a way forward toward certain identities, consumers characterize fast food more according to its place as a way to maintain a less desirable status quo. As a choice, fast food often suggests compromise and therefore both the promise and limits of their consumer agency. Key to this is that they often look to advance toward desired identities. Therefore, fast food may still be useful to maintain their lives yet it is still evaluated as part of any plan to inhabit desired adult identities. Second, we find this subtle disfavor is a response to negative associations with identities associated with certain types of fast food use. However, this effect is dampened by fast food's everyday nature and familiarity to both its consumers and their culture at large. In essence, they experience paradox and therefore mixed sentiments that both encourage them to reduce their use, but fast food's usage and familiarity to everyday American life means the way they express this paradox is more subdued and the ensuing means they use to describe their consumption and the larger consumption culture are affected.

CHAPTER 5: SECOND RESULTS CHAPTER

CULTURAL CAPITAL, CONSUMER IDENTITY, AND FAST FOOD CULTURE

Introduction

This chapter will examine how the changes in cultural capital that is available to consumers influence their identity practices within the context of fast food culture. "Cultural capital" specifically refers to knowledge, skills, and other forms of advantage a person can use to gain standing and advantages as a member of a culture (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). It represents one of the many forms of capital that young adults can possess. Capital more generally refers to any assets people can use to influence their environment and exhibit status within a system (Bourdieu 1984). For example, other forms of capital that young adults can possess include economic capital, which refers to having control over financial resources such as through money or assets, and social capital, which is having greater ability or status through one's social network.

This research will focus on cultural capital because it can influence consumers' identity practices and the relative status of those identities to each other. Participants aim to take on adult consumer identities, but not all identities have equal worth as defined by the individual and their larger culture (Bourdieu 1984; Coskuner-Balli and Thompson 2013). Cultural capital helps participants select and maintain certain identities (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). Therefore, by studying cultural capital's association with fast food, we can better understand how participants engage in identity construction. Research findings suggest how understanding fast food as a cultural phenomenon lets us better understand how cultural capital may change for participants because of its history with them and the larger contemporary culture. This section will first

describe how fast food is a part of consumers' cultural capital processes. Next, it will explain how consumers' expectations of capital accumulation acts as a key mechanism for how fast food is part of consumers' cultural capital processes. Finally, this section will discuss two major ways that cultural capital may change for consumers.

Fast Food and Capital

In the interviews, participants frequently discuss how they and the larger culture associate fast food with different levels of capital, namely, economic capital and cultural capital. Participants describe the ways fast food can be ranked in relation to other consumption in terms of the consumer's economic capital and cultural capital.

Economic Capital

Participants associate fast food with having lower economic capital. They explain that this connection is likely because of how fast food is relatively low cost and therefore food that even low-income people can eat (#1, #7, #8, #12, #17, #19). This association makes fast food lower in rank and can be a source of discomfort for participants. For example, participant #9 expresses that she felt embarrassed that her "higher class friends" seem to feel fast food is "low class" and that she is happy her boyfriend does not look down on her for eating fast food. Participant #8 notes that even those who are high status cannot avoid the stigma of fast food:

> "…it doesn't help the media makes it a point to mention if like a celebrity goes to a McDonalds at some point. They're like, 'My God, he's eating at McDonalds. Why is he eating at McDonalds?' It gives that idea that why should rich people eat at fast food? Even though, hey, they're normal people, there's a reason people

> eat it, like, it's not like it's bad-tasting food, but the idea that there's something weird about rich people eating that food gives the idea that rich people shouldn't eat that food or they're going to be judged for it."

For participants, economic capital is often intermixed with cultural capital concerns. They cared not only about whether something might be financially prudent to buy but also what they should buy.

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is also found to be important to participants in regard to fast food culture. Cultural capital is described in terms of "knowledge" by the participants such as knowing what to eat (#13, #17); skills such as knowing how to cook or to interpret an advertisement (#8, #20); and actions, such as making use of their skills or following through with their knowledge (#18, #22). Prominent themes which emerged during coding stress the ways that not only is "knowledge" something to be acquired but also something that must be put into practice and which can change to match changing circumstances. Such codes include "knowledge", "knowing better" than others, "acknowledged" to stress their perception that a larger social body holds consensus on a fact, "growing knowledge" among an envisioned "average" consumer, and "stricter boundaries" to express their disposition toward fluidity of meaning for certain "knowledge". For participants, fast food is associated with low cultural capital acquisition. Participants heavily privilege the acquisition of knowledge and the exercise of skills. Therefore, fast food's association with being something you wanted "as a kid" when you presumably had less knowledge does not reflect well on fast food. As participant #19 recalls, he felt his girlfriend's family treated the lower-status fast food places as somewhere they go only because

the “young one wants to go to” in lieu of nicer and healthier places that one grows into liking better. However, the connection between fast food and low knowledge is not ironclad. Many stories from participants suggest they feel this knowledge is widespread and that they take only limited pride in knowing it. Participant #10, for example, expresses that people know of fast food’s unhealthiness and that they are “lying to themselves” when they suggest otherwise. Others feel the desire for healthier food is a growing trend for the general society (#11, #14).

The data suggests fast food’s association with low cultural capital affects how participants integrate it into their consumption when eating with others. For many, the food selected for a social meal can reflect the depth of a social relationship. Participants feel going to fast food with others could be interpreted as expressing either very strong or very weak relationship ties with someone (#9). In particular, fast food is seen as insufficiently special (#7, # 9, #19), and therefore increasingly unsuitable, for meeting with friends because they are meeting with those friends less frequently and therefore want to have better food to reflects the specialness of the occasion (#8, #17, #19). For example, participant #9 reflects on how she evaluates the type of food she would suggest when eating with others:

> “So to satisfy that one person, we all go to, like, a place that we’re secure with…It’s kinda like if, if [#9’s boyfriend] and I weren’t dating, and I knew that he liked really fine dining. Then I would either tell him to pick the place or I would, like, I would not feel comfortable suggesting a place kind of thing.”

Participants vary how much they feel fast food’s low cultural capital associations influence them or others, particularly in regard to their identities. Some participants are fearful or feel more vulnerable to fast food’s negative effects on their identities. For example, there are participants

who express concern that significant others will think less of them (#9) or who feel embarrassed when recognizing or being recognized by fast food employees (#14, #6). Many use distancing practices to defray the negative impact or at least the feelings of negative self-worth, such as by emphasizing that they like but do not love fast food (#1), that they set and follow consumption boundaries (#6), or that they are following higher goals, such as being objective (#8), saving money (#9), and avoiding even worse choices (#19).

Others are more confident toward fast food consumption and their identity. For example, participant #17 explains that he looks down on “the burgers, fries, sodas, as kind of food that I’m beyond”. Participant #19 feels wealthier people seem to have more to lose and so is almost amused at the growth of more upscale fast food. A major part to this is how consumers who are confident own their fast food consumption, noting that it is simply a part of them and that they either reject the negative label (#12) or consider it unimportant because they have larger identity projects at work as they grow into eating more types of foods (#10, #13). Finally, there are those who do not quite match these strong feelings of either fear or confidence. Participant #14, for example, has a quiet fondness of some of his prior fast food practices but feels little present pressure, participant #18 is accepting that the tension between liking fast food and wanting to be healthy for her son is just a part of life, and further others maintained that fast food consumption is not a cause for social concern (#15, #20).

Ultimately, fast food consumption is closely associated with cultural beliefs about how the rate people collect capital and how much capital a person may have.

Mechanism: Expectations of Capital Accumulation

The key mechanism this chapter examines is the way participants' expectations of capital accumulation influences their identity practices. This includes both the rate at which they accumulate capital and the amount of capital they possess. This study focuses on capital accumulation during young adulthood which is a transition period wherein consumers not only seek to take on new identities but also to navigate changes in their material conditions, such as getting a full-time job, seeing friends move away, or learning new skills. Understanding how cultural capital is acquired and associated with different practices and respective identities helps us better understand this additional way fast food culture is a part of participants' lives.

Many of the participants assume that economic and cultural capital increase with time. Both forms of capital are considered to aid identity construction by allowing them to select and maintain desired identities. For them, greater capital, and thus greater ability to foster identities, comes with time.

Participants expect to acquire greater economic capital over time through getting jobs, earning a higher income, or having more control over their personal finances (#8, #9, #19, #21). Many participants report having more money and more control over their money than they used to (#8, #19, #20, #22). For example, many participants note they now have jobs which means they can afford to spend more money on leisure such as buying higher-quality ingredients or going to more expensive restaurants when eating with friends (#8, #19, #20). While many did have money to spend as high school students or younger, they express that their current situation is different because making their own decisions or making decisions for others is now the default

(#8, #12, #18). However, many participants are not acquiring capital as quickly or reliably as they would like. Many participants are concerned about not having steady income or steady work. For example, participant #20 expresses how, "when you're in high school and college, you're broke. You're still kind of broke in grad school, but it's a different kind of broke, I guess," and participant #22 describes her desire to end her unemployment streak, "…whenever I can get my next temp job. Or who knows! Career job! …it'll feel so much nicer when I, you know, actually have an income and I don't have to worry so much about, you know, spending an extra two dollars." Economic capital can also be expressed in terms of ability to spend, such as how participant #9 describes how much of her income is directed at her student loans or how participant #6 explains how his new line of work allows him more flexibility to arrange his time and relax during his lunch break. Economic capital is very important to participants because it gives them the means to make certain identities possible. Many participants explains they would prefer to use their food consumption to cultivate identities wherein they are healthier (#19, #20) or more socially conscious (#22), but lack sufficient funds to do so.

Participants also expect to acquire greater cultural capital with time such as through increased knowledge, skills, and other forms of advantage that will aid their choices and ability to be adult consumers according to their culture's rankings (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). Participants expect that with time they will learn different and better ways to be adults and consumers, such as knowing the different restaurants available, who to spend money with, and especially what to spend money on. Consumers cast this acquisition of cultural capital as "learning" (#13, #14, #18) and knowing "better" (#6, #11, #18). The data suggests that participants are not only acquiring more meanings to use, but most see themselves as growing their "knowledge" as well.

Many felt that the more cultural capital they acquire, the more accurate their beliefs would become. However, how they rank their cultural capital often changes over time. During analysis, a prominent theme which emerged is that more cultural capital "knowledge" is better but that the value of both present and previously acquired knowledge can fluctuate as they or external conditions change.

When ranking cultural capital, the process can be very linear, where having more and newer capital is desired. An example of this is how participants conceptualize their changing tastes. This is frequently linked with "growing up" or with the emphasis that children are "stupid" or less able to taste things than they are (#1, #11, #19). Participants believe their knowledge acquisition leads to "growing tastes" and a more "adult" palette. For some, this means a more discriminating palette (#1, #11, #17). Participant #17, for example, explains "So as a kid I remember going to McDonalds and feeling their fish fillet sandwich and thinking at the time that it was one of the most delicious things in the world," but also explains that now he has "moved beyond" the "stereotypical" fast food places. Growing tastes can also be cast as having a more expansive palette (#12, #13, #15). For these participants, learning new cuisines and nutrition has made them more open to new forms of food consumption. As participant #13 explains, he learned to love vegetables through eating with his girlfriend and her family.

However, prior capital can start with a low rank but then be elevated depending on the participant's situation or more recent knowledge. For example, many male participants talk about responding to their changing physical bodies by paying greater attention to health knowledge.

This includes both new information and information they may already have known but previously ignored. Many male participants explain that normally any health-related knowledge about obesity seemed less important until their bodies began to mature and they became aware they had to make use of that knowledge. As participant #14 explains this new found responsibility, "I liked McDonalds too. Umm yeah the really unhealthy stuff when I was young. When I was young I didn't have to worry about it. My metabolism was so fast. Umm, but yeah. I'm sure it wasn't best for growing, a growing boy. But it's not like we ate it that much" These male participants refer to their bodies in terms of "slowing down" (#6), a slowing metabolism (#8, #20), a previously fast-running metabolism (#14), or witnessing bodies that are less able to "handle" fatty or sugary forms of junk food (#2, #13, #14, #20). Only one female participant refers to a changing awareness of her body, when she expresses surprise that she used to get away with drinking sugary drinks in the morning. However, her turning point was in response to becoming pregnant and only then acquiring health knowledge through parenting resources (#18). The other American-born female participants who talk about their bodies usually refer to always having that knowledge and largely always paying at least some attention to it (#1, #7, #22).

A second example of how participants' can reconsider the rank of previously acquired cultural capital using a non-linear process is reported among those who immigrated to the United States or whose parents have strong ties to a different food culture. These participants explain they did not experience food desires in a linear fashion, where they moved away from a set of desires and never turned back. Many instead cast it as a returning to prior lessons (#23) or parental culture (#11). They feel they always seem to think about food and their bodies because their immigrant

experience means they are already aware of the dilemma of what different types of food consumption mean for their bodies such as contrasting Korean food (#12, #15), Chinese food (#9), Taiwanese food (#23), or Bulgarian restaurant practices (#11) to American fast food culture.

Expected to Learn, Expected to have Desires Change

What we see is that participants' changing views on fast food culture become associated with the young adulthood transition because age signals capital accumulation. For these consumers, their middle-class upbringing leads them to expect their economic and cultural capital to naturally grow. The participants in my study were all largely raised in or amongst middle- or upper-class households. Even those who are currently doing blue-collar work or have limited income were raised or were recently part of relatively affluent households (#5, #6, #22). There was only one exception, participant #19, who identifies as lower middle class. He feels he was relatively poor compared to other county residents but he notes his family still had enough money to have a home to live in and the ability to afford fast food—no need to live on food stamps nor make even "pasta stretch." Nearly all the participants have a sense that their financial situation and knowledge will grow for the better. Even those who have stagnated are more or less optimistic that things will be all right and that they will with time be consuming as they should (#19, #22). There is still an anticipated endpoint to this stalled capital accumulation period. Participant #19 for example, who is struggling to meet many different financial and family obligations, says, "fast food is necessary. For me. At this stage of my life." More common are comments about whether they feel they are well on their way on the path to knowledge or whether they thought they had further to go, but were definitely on the right path. Participants #10 and #13 for

example both feel that they are new to the more upscale food cultures they wish to be a part of but that they are confident that with more time, they will be able to acquire the knowledge they seek. As participant #13 explains, "I'm also trying to get into it and make it a big part of life so that way I can focus on that. And once it becomes a habit, you know, then I'll be good and delve into everything when I need to get there and not feel so weird about it."

Participants therefore have a sense that they should expect to or have experienced a shift in their fast food desires with age. This includes desires for new and better types of food, to eat in more upscale spaces, or to make one's own food. For example, participants #8 and #20 both explain that with age tends to come more opportunities to cook and therefore greater skill and ability to cook one's own meals. Thus, by this point in their lives, the default shifts toward assuming any food choice includes the option to cook a meal at home.

Some participants feel social pressure and are more critical of expectations to shift desires. For example, participant #9 states she knew preferring to eat fast food over other foods meant she could suffer social consequences because of fast food's association with "low class" and unhealthiness. However, she rejects those ways to evaluate herself in favor of identifying herself as a good money manager. Meanwhile, participant #19 agrees that a more upscale space is desirable. However, he is concerned that the emergence of more upscale fast food will lead to inaction on the current food systems which give incentives for lower-status fast food to sell unhealthy fast food.

The data suggests that the participants assume that their capital accumulation will increase, which leads to the sense that fast food's decline in their lives should be treated as an expected transition. As these consumers acquire adult identities and accumulate associated capital, it is expected that their preferences will shift from fast food to more appropriate choices. They expect that, with time, they will have the cultural capital necessary to make the right choices and the economic capital to ensure they can carry out those choices.

This fits with how participants explain their desire for fast food consumption changes. For these participants in their present circumstances, fast food culture is relatively low ranking compared to other consumption choices. In the literature, a suboptimal reputation for a food like fast food is often attributed to the food's association with mass consumption and low cost (Guthman 2003; Holt 1998; Parker 1998). However, past literature and the data from this research suggest fast food is seen as desirable food for "children" and by children even though fast food continues to be used into adulthood (Schlosser 2002; Wills et al 2009). In the United States and many other Western countries, fast food is generally considered a typical food for children and adolescents to like. It may not be seen as a healthy choice, but children are expected and assumed to have little knowledge of health, proper adult tastes, or other concerns (Grier et al 2007; Schlosser 2002; Wills et al 2009). Many participants share this belief that younger persons by default will prefer fast food and also will be less likely to have knowledge or skills to be competent consumers. For example, participants frequently discuss younger persons' developing consumer literacy and thus that these younger persons are more likely to be "drawn in" (#21) by marketing such as advertisements, kids meal toys, or cool packaging (#15, #18, #21). A key characteristic of the study's participants is that they are relatively affluent or are raised in relatively affluent

households and so do not question this sentiment. Participant #9 and #19 are exceptions. Participant #19 especially feels his upbringing was solidly lower middle class. He observes it seems that it is more common among the middle or upper classes to cast lower quality fast food as something only the "young one" wants. Participant #9 also feels the sentiment is one that wealthier people hold. While some consider a desire for fast food in terms of other unknown children many also draw upon their own childhood experiences. The common phrase used by participants is "as a kid," and this phrase reflects a general ignorant past self. They use phrases expressing this disconnect such as saying that "you're too stupid when you're a kid" to realize a certain product is of low quality (#19), "you think you're invincible" (#6), or "I was guilty" when talking about wanting kids meal toys in the past (#2). This disconnect from a past self and past desire is best said by participant #6: "But as a kid, you're like, 'Oh, this is great. This is the most awesome thing ever.' And, but, as an adult, you're like 'that's the grossest thing ever.'"

Fast food therefore appears to be associated with not only younger-aged selves, but selves who have less cultural capital and less financial capital. The data suggests a mixed reception to fast food culture from young adult consumers because of changes in how fast food is used according to the life course. Specifically, fast food use is evaluated differently depending on the inferred maturity of the consumer. This is likely why we may see an intensification of disdain toward fast food among young adults in contrast to their past acceptance of it as adolescents. What we see is that young adult consumers initially accept fast food but increasingly expect their fast food desires and behavior to change with time.

Fast food culture's lower standing compared with other consumption is not adequately addressed with a static consumption taste model. Instead, the criteria by which they evaluate fast food shifts with time as the participants are presumed to acquire capital. Therefore, fast food does not perfectly match the definition of an "inferior good" where the demand curve and resulting preference to switch to a better option is a function of income that remains stable over time (Kim and Leigh 2011). This data suggests we see fast food's devaluation over time for a consumer because the criteria used to evaluate a fast food consumer changes with time. Fast food's devaluation appears to be tied to a time component that assumes capital accumulation. This means it is more useful to think of fast food as a particular type of lower-ranked consumption. One of the closest terms that seems to suggest this relationship is found in the real estate literature and lay terms: the concept of a "starter" product, such as a "starter" home or a "starter" marriage (Ortalo-Magné and Rady 2004). The idea is that, initially, the focal object is desired but that with greater economic or cultural capital the consumer is assumed to have desires that shift away from the original "starter" object in favor of better, more appropriate consumption. A starter product therefore inhabits a particular cultural category that encourages its use initially with the expectation that it will later be given up in favor of different "better" consumption habits. Further research can look into this and better understand the ways different products are stigmatized and therefore the different ways marketers can handle their products' relative rankings in their marketing activities.

Because fast food consumption is expected to decrease in a particular way, extensive continued use of the product after a person has "too much" capital accumulation may be considered socially unacceptable. This will have implications for consumers' identity processes. This issue

is addressed particularly by participants who feel the means to maintain identities conflict. For example, one could desire to make the “adult” choice to eat healthier, but in doing so would sacrifice the “adult” choice to make financially balanced decisions (#18, #19). Gauging the appropriateness of fast food is even more difficult because participants often make food decisions with other young adults. Many participants feel fast food is increasingly less desirable for social gatherings (#7, #9, #20). It is still appropriate for a quick meal alone or to bring back to eat with very close people or family, but not with friends. Instead, many participants express that they, and more often their social group, have a desire for more “upscale” dining, such as places with nicer ingredients (#21), ambience (#10, 21), and service (#6). Many young adults found after high school and college it became harder to meet with friends, as everyone started moving away or having busier, more conflicting schedules (#8, #13, #22). Eating less frequently and having more income means that for many, it is easier to afford going to more upscale spaces where the food is considered better and the atmosphere more conducive to conversation (#8, #11, #19). As participant #8 explains:

> “In high school, yeah, we ate KFC, we ate fast food all the time, we’d go pick it up and just eat it because that’s what we could afford, and it was easy for us, and we hung out all the time. We’d see each other all the time. Now at this point in life, when you don’t actually see each other very often there’s no reason seeing each other and then going to something you can both eat anytime. You’d go to someplace that you both like, that you don’t, you haven’t gone to in a long time or wouldn’t go to unless you were eating with someone else.” (#8)

However, this is not always an easy decision. Participants and their social network are often uncertain about how much financial and cultural capital any one other person has. At first, fast

food can represent the easiest choice that “everyone” can agree on and is the “safe” choice for both financial and cultural capital reasons (#1). However, as time goes on, there is greater pressure to shift toward defaulting to spaces appropriate for someone with higher capital reserves due to the presumption that the group is acquiring greater capital. Many participants are in financial situations that mean they have to balance their desire to be part of their social group with maintaining their own financial selves (#9, #22). Even if they want to appease the “pickiest” person by going to a more upscale restaurant, they also have to protect their own financial interests (#9). Data analysis suggests consumers face a paradox because fast food’s high accessibility and associations with their younger selves conflicts with its everyday nature and its continuing potential to help them manage their present lives. The conflict and their ensuing hedonic responses remain subdued due to fast food’s integration into everyday life and the greater ambiguity as to the extent they should be making changes to their consumption.

Cultural Capital Changes

The cultural capital that participants can access can change in two ways: 1) through micro-level individual changes; and 2) through macro-level structural changes. The types of changes likewise influence how participants come to reassess previously acquired parts of their cultural capital.

Micro-Level Change

Micro changes are usually at the level of the individual person and are easily accommodated by existing cultural beliefs and systems. For example, physical maturation or graduating high school are changes that have existing cultural meanings, norms, and especially identities participants

can use. These types of changes may even come to be anticipated. Participants discuss the ways they anticipate their material conditions will change and changes they have already experienced. For example, they discuss increasing education and new jobs (#9, #10, #17), new household living arrangements (#9, #10, #13, #14), and greater experience with different ways of life or enacting certain skills such as cooking (#6, #10, #13, #18, #20). The participants often anticipate that changes in their material conditions will lead to knowing increasingly "better" ways of living and having the means to do so. Again, they anticipate their desires will shift to more proper consumption that matches their more learned state (#6, #17, #20, #23) and feel discomfort when there is a gap between the two (#8, #9, #19, #23). There are some exceptions to this where participants feel past knowledge serves them better. Additionally, there are the situations where participants look at information they had previously seen as unimportant, such as young men reevaluating health information in response to slowing metabolisms (#14, #20) or a few of the participants explaining that the lessons learned from their families fell by the wayside but that then they returned to these teachings in adulthood (#11, #23).

The cultural system not only accommodates but expects cultural capital changes for its cultural members. These changes are ongoing and a part of the framework they live by. Any changes to the hierarchy they use to evaluate consumption or a consumption category are relatively stable. In the case of fast food culture, participants expect to shift to new criteria with age when evaluating whether fast food is appropriate. The hierarchies are available even before they make the transition.

Macro Changes

The second way cultural capital may change for participants is at a more structural and transformational level. For example, new technology, ideologies, or market offerings can radically alter the way participants live their life or make decisions. This would be along the lines of how the use of cars altered how we could find alternative foods if something was banned or a restaurant was closed (#8, #19) or how the internet and email allows consumers to access coupons in new ways (#8, #9, #22). There are also more macro shifts when we see forces that influence the larger hierarchical structure.

One prominent macro change that participants discuss is when the market presents a new type of offering such as the emergence of new foods or restaurant types. Fast-casual is one such restaurant concept that has experienced rapid growth since the 2000s and has found great popularity among young adults (Consumer Reports 2014; George 2011). It represents a type of foodservice that offers higher-quality foods and higher prices that are more similar to casual restaurants but with fewer table services like other quick-service restaurants (Ryu, Han, and Jang 2010). Fast-casual is exemplified by restaurants such as Panera, Chipotle, and Five Guys Burgers. Participants feel fast-casual is similar to gourmet fast food, food truck food, or more upscale casual restaurants that can serve similar foods like burgers or burritos (#10, #11, #17, #23). Yet, unlike these other restaurant forms, fast-casual is more frequently categorized by participants as a form of fast food (#11, #14, #20). Some participants do stress the gap between fast-casual and fast food, such as by attaching a new label—for example, participant #1 calls it "quasi fast food"—or stressing the differences between the two, such as participant #6, who explains that places like Wahoo's, where the employees' smiles are genuine and the food is

fresh, are “not really fast food in my book”. Even then, fast-casual appears to be a strong point of comparison where it is never completely different from fast food. Others more clearly define fast-casual as just another variant of fast food. For example, participant #10 explicitly says, “I don’t know if you consider that [Chipotle] as fast food. I think it’s fast food.” Others simply discuss it such as participant #20 explaining that when he and his fiancée opt for Chipotle over Taco Bell, “We try and go a little bit healthier if we’re going to have to eat out. But it’s still fast food either way, I think.” Participant #11 explains that the industry “is capable of having high quality fast food as well. See Chipotle. I actually think Which Wich is pretty high-quality fast food,” and participant #14 defines fast-casual as “fast food restaurants where you can see the food being cooked and prepared in front of you.” Participant #18 even ponders how fast-casual is different, but concludes that there are other places that are even more different from traditional fast food places, like pizza, that she feels are firmly fast food” “I would think pizza would count because it is fast food. And then also the...like Flame Broiler or what is it…? Even…Chipotle, those restaurants? Anything that can just make it quickly and they just have to scoop it into something for you I guess would be fast food?”

By looking at how participants incorporate fast-casual into fast food culture, we can see how they are assessing their previous cultural capital potential through their interpretations and evaluations of fast food culture. Many of those people who focus on fast-casual as an extension of fast food also discuss how fast food is a changing, dynamic industry. Similar to how their own past knowledge is growing, participants seem to characterize the fast food industry and its consumer society as also “evolving.” Again, we see the emphasis that participants have on a world where growth and newer cultural capital goes hand in hand with consumer sovereignty.

Like their past selves, many participants seem to see fast food as an industry also in need of growth and development. To accommodate this uncertainty toward categorizing fast-casual in terms of fast food, participants often explain the concept as being “not quite” fast food by adding extra adjectives to the previously known forms of fast food like McDonalds or Taco Bell. Some examples of ways they use further descriptions of fast food include “not the big chains” (#6), “the typical fast food” (#14), “your stereotypical place” (#17), “traditional fast food” (#8), and “big burger places,” “familiar names,” and “old standbys” (#1). This is not so different from what they already seem to do when they create or respond to self-described “tiers” amongst older forms of fast food (#1, #2, #9, #19).

Conclusion

By studying how consumers interpret the meanings and capital that result from different types of changes, whether more customary, such as getting a job, or more radical like fast-casual’s introduction, we have begun to explore a different way participants interpret their prior knowledge and cultural capital. Often times we discuss information gaps wherein the knowledge exists even if consumers are ignorant. For example, consumers had the potential to know fast food was unhealthy or more processed as children and usually acquired this knowledge and associated practices with time. They often look upon their prior ignorance with horror (#2, #6), acceptance (#1), and even amusement (#14, #18). On the other hand, the knowledge that comes from not knowing a market offering is an involuntary ignorance. There is, of course, no way to make a choice or exercise knowledge that does not yet exist. In that regard, we see different responses to those types of changes to the industry. It is a lot easier to not hold it against their identity when something like fast-casual did not exist for them as teenagers, but the onus remains

on participants to change and maintain the current cultural capital status hierarchy. Some are even reluctant to accept this change. Participant #10 for example feels places like Chipotle and Pieology are effectively fast food and is resistant for fast food to reposition as healthy and premium. Participant #8 also challenges the claims made by fast-casual proponents, noting that only a few years ago Chipotle would have simply been another fast food place and that he is suspicious of its attempts to signal it was always healthier than traditional fast food.

What we see is that consumers account for changes to the meanings and capital available to them and that they tend to categorize their prior knowledge accordingly. Participants feel time and change leads to greater maturity and development because they presume that with it comes greater cultural capital and the means to enact that capital. Change therefore leads to greater potential to find better truths and to make better decisions. On the other hand, there are participants who focus instead on how practices are getting worse. While the past section focused on how participants largely welcome their greater capital or the emergence of market offerings like fast-casual, many participants stress change as a destructive force, such as its potential for drawing people further away from a family-oriented home dinner or from smaller businesses. Some also feel that any changes to the cultural capital are too insignificant to change the larger status quo for fast food. Even if there are changes, they expect fast food and the populations' respective desires to remain stable.

Ultimately, this research finds diversity in how participants believe cultural capital can change and how that impacts their lives and identities. Key practices for these participants are consumption evaluation and selection, which are based on constructing hierarchies within fast

food and amongst fast food and other food consumption. They then use these distinctions in their identity construction practices.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Part I: Discussion

This study sheds greater light on contemporary consumer identity and cultural capital practices by studying fast food as a cultural phenomenon and the ways it is integrated with contemporary culture and its consumers' lives. In particular, this study's data suggests fast food often inhabits a unique category for its consumers because it is widely and frequently consumed but at the same time is associated with subtle, understated social devaluation. The data further suggests there are different processes at work than what we usually see in the consumer research literature, which previously focused on consumption that studies consumer relations as strong instances of hate, love, ambivalence, or disinterest. This chapter will discuss three main points about consumer identity and cultural capital processes. First, it will discuss the importance of understanding the processes that originate from micro, individual forces. Next, it will discuss the importance of understanding the processes that originate from macro, group-, or institutional-level forces. Finally, it will discuss how the basis of fast food consumption's status hierarchy is largely premised on socioeconomic class. Furthermore, this chapter will discuss implications for further bases we can use to understand more consumption forms that are characterized by greater use and subtle devaluation.

Micro Forces

A major point to discuss is the importance of understanding the processes that originate at the level of the individual in order to understand how fast food influences consumers as a form of

consumption that is both part of everyday life and disfavored. These micro-level processes include how choice, taste, and selection criteria can shift according to changes that operate at the level of individual consumers. For example, consumers may change tastes or habits based on individual factors, such as their own individual growth or conditions that are local to them. The cultural elements—such as structures, institutions, actors, norms, and so on—that can influence consumers' decisions are present and are largely unchanged by these types of micro processes. Instead, the way the individual consumer interacts with these systems changes. An example of a similar process where cultural elements are present for the consumer is for "inferior goods" (Kim and Leigh 2011). For inferior goods, there are two separate demand curves that exist, and a consumer shifts between them based on income fluctuations. For fast food and other consumption, by contrast, there are learned cultural points to when a participant is expected to shift to a new set of criteria; it is not just a switch between two curves. The fast food transitions studied among participants in this research do not quite match the inferior goods concept where participants can freely experience a rise and fall in income. Instead, participants tend to think about their capital acquisition as a more permanent change and something that only increases. Learning about the ways consumption can be both everyday and subtly disfavored lets us better understand additional cultural meanings, norms, and institutions that may encourage or discourage certain types of consumer changes at the level of the individual consumer. Knowing the different ways consumption cultures are a part of consumers' lives will therefore allow us to better study their identity and cultural capital practices. In the case of fast food culture and certain young adult consumers, we have consumption that comes to be associated with capital acquisition and maturation. There are perceived social consequences related to one's identity and cultural capital enactment when consuming fast food. The consequences increase as the criteria

continues to shift with the cultural assumption that they are acquiring capital. However, for fast food there are also no formal transitions to consumption change, as opposed to consumption like alcohol or driving a car where there are age and licensing restrictions that can formally signal consumption changes and relevant identity changes. In sum, fast food and other such consumption may act less like an inferior good and more like a "starter good" (Ortalo-Magne and Rady 2004) with the idea that criteria shifts with time via the presumption that what was once acceptable and even desirable at an earlier time is no longer considered commensurate and acceptable to consume due to a change in the characteristics of the individual consumer.

Besides permitting us to learn more about consumers, these individual-level processes are important because we can study how market actors adapt to them. For example, toy companies that market to successive populations of children and their parents can always expect new children or companies that sell training wheels for bicycles can always anticipate a new influx of beginner consumers. The way individuals may change may aggregate in such a way that these companies are less concerned if individual consumers eventually transitions away from their products. However, these companies still need to take into consideration their marketing mixes to respond to the way their market fluctuates.

Macro Forces

The second major point of this research is the importance of understanding the processes that originate at the group and institutional level. This research found that these processes can have a major impact on cultural elements such as structures, institutions, actors, and norms. The introduction of a new product category or way of consumption (like the introduction of digital

applications that let you order food from a mobile device) are two such changes. These changes can bring new cultural meanings and relations which result in participants having new decision sets and new calculations for how to assign cultural capital to different consumption. As participants explain, before they would not have had the ability to get salad or apple slices at a fast food restaurant, to select a more upscale fast food place, or even to assume that everyone has eaten fast food at some point. Furthermore, the very fact that the fast food industry does change is meaningful to them as well. These processes therefore impact the ways participants as a group negotiate everyday life by affecting more structural forces, such as what choice sets can exist, how the decision is structured, and what types of hierarchy they use to make evaluations. Participants now interpret both individually and as a group these new meanings and the ways they can both assign new forms of cultural capital to consumption and evaluate previously held meanings and capital. This is different than when a cultural decision has been historically present in some form prior to the individual. As this study's exploration of fast-casual's introduction to fast food culture shows, while some older fast food meanings may be rejected, they are not necessarily fully discarded and instead accumulate as "former now amended" or rejected knowledge. Some forms of "old" knowledge are even renewed.

In the case of fast food culture and young adults' identity and cultural capital practices, we can see how consumers navigate everyday life due to these larger changes and the way we can better understand everyday but subtly devalued consumption as a result. As noted above, fast food differs from previous work on identity and cultural capital because fast food is not as easily categorized as something with strong identity value; for many participants, it is not purely loved or hated consumption. Unlike much of the prior consumer culture work, fast food consumers

themselves circulate, and to an extent buy into, devaluing myths as opposed to them coming from outsiders (Arsel and Bean 2013; Luedicke et al 2010; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006; Üstüner and Holt 2010). This research ties in well with recent reports of consumers leaving behind certain consumption, such as in the case when they "trade up." Silverstein and Fiske describe the process of "trading up," wherein participants opt for a better-quality product. They argue that the contemporary culture is witnessing a change to this process with the emergence of the "masstige" product category (2003). Normally, "traditional luxury goods" are marketed for their exclusivity as opposed to accessible "middle market" goods such as in the case of Rolls Royce versus Ford or Morton's Steakhouse versus Burger King (Silverstein and Fiske 2003, 3). "Masstige" are instead new luxury goods that are marketed as luxurious but to a mass audience and include brands such as BMW and Panera Bread (2003, 3). These authors describe how the introduction of masstige brands mean people interpret places like McDonald's or Burger King differently now that they are not the only alternate option to traditional luxury products. The emergence of this new luxury product category acts as a macro process because where before the consumer could consider products along a single dimension which contrasts low quality and mass appeal versus high quality and exclusivity, now they may consider this new third category. Silverstein and Fiske in fact argue these middle market brands like Burger King may experience "death in the middle" (2003, 3). On the one hand, traditional fast food brands are insufficiently specialized for certain qualities compared with traditional luxury or masstige products to attract those interested in spending a lot of money in that category, but on the other hand, they may still have too much quality and corresponding price to catch the consumers who only desire the lowest levels of quality for that product category. This research echoes Silverstein and Fiske's findings about the prevalence of trading up processes among the participants (2003).

Interestingly, while the participants do agree with their work that fast-casual places like Panera are distinct from "traditional" fast food like Burger King, they also tend to perceive fast-casual types of restaurants as just a nicer, more evolved form of fast food. This evolution mirrors the way these participants imagine their own personal trajectory. My work suggests we need to continue looking into how macro changes like new product forms and so on are actually integrated into consumers' identity and their cultural capital practices.

Maturation Bases

The final major point to discuss is the importance of understanding different ways consumers can associate maturation with different identities and capital accumulation. Not all adult identities are acquired the same way nor are they all equally desired.

Focusing on fast food culture means this research can focus on when consumers associate certain identities and cultural capital situations with adult identities. For participants, an adult identity is not simply acquired by physically living a certain period of time. Past work suggests how different factors like marriage, financial independence, parenthood, and subjective assessment are as much a way to claim adult identities as age alone. This concept can also be applied to adult identities as they pertain to consumption. There are many different adult consumer identities and therefore different ways to show maturity. With fast food, we know changes to its industry and to its consumers can influence the ways consumers enact cultural capital. When participants are younger and presumably have lower capital accumulation, fast food is suitable and desire for fast food is even expected. With age comes a decrease in the number of ways to consume fast food that are openly acceptable, yet participants feel most people still eat it. The data suggests these

fast food consumers specifically tie "maturation" with cultural capital like knowledge, skills, and taste. This cultural capital is described in terms of class and socioeconomic status, where fast food is associated with immaturity, low class, and socioeconomic status acquisition by these participants, such that with age and capital accumulation, fast food consumption should decrease.

There are other types of status hierarchies—such as gender, race, and acculturation—that exist, where for a certain consumption form it is expected that consumption patterns will shift with capital accumulation. Furthermore, the emphasis is also that there is strong consensus on this shift. For an example that is more based on age, one could consider training wheels on bicycles and the fact that with a sufficient skill set, there is pressure to remove them. An example where a certain gender may be associated with greater maturity is the males' ability to "handle" stronger alcohol, such that greater masculinity is associated with drinking more spirits and beer versus champagne or mixed drinks (De Visser and McDonnell 2012; Social Issues Research Centre 1998). This suggests gender maturation where a male is expected to start handling "more mature" drinks with time as he gains greater ability and knowledge for enacting masculinity. By knowing more about the ways identity is associated with not only capital but also how consumers feel consumers ought to accumulate that capital we can better understand how consumers feel they and other consumers acquire identities as well as the way marketers and consumers interact with each other.

Additionally, previous literature on deviance has shown examples where high status people can more freely deviate from social norms such as the king of the playground playing girls' games (McGuffey and Rich 1999) or a corporate executive wearing casual clothes in the boardroom

(Bellezza, Gino and Keinan 2014). However, a key characteristic in fast food culture is that its consumption is classified as something one would nearly always prefer less even if one had the choice. The product in question seems to have a vertical differentiation component, where the desire for better quality consumption is naturalized by participants. As participant #8 explains, he feels society frames the status as something so low that the wealthy or anyone else with the choice would not opt for fast food and that we are expected to not see fast food desire as individual taste. This contrasts with consumption characterized as "guilty pleasures," like eating chocolate or wearing comfortable clothes, where people may find it understandable why a person may prefer to consume if they have the chance.

In sum, these three major points suggest the importance of understanding consumption not only when it evokes strong passion and attachment but also when it is not characterized by a simple hedonic characteristic; we should not assume unthinking or uncaring consumers in such a case. Fast food consumption and other consumption like it is both part of everyday life and more subtly disfavored. The research suggests such consumption cannot be treated as a less-intense version of passion consumption and relations. This unique category that consumptions like fast food consumption inhabit can have different processes at micro and macro level. These processes further can incorporate multiple status hierarchies. All of these influence the ways consumers negotiate everyday life through their identities and cultural capital.

Part II: Contributions and Limitations and Future Directions

Theoretical Contribution

This research primarily contributes to the consumer culture literature by studying a form of muted hedonic consumption – everyday subtly disfavored consumption. Previous work on cultural consumption often studied consumption where consumers exhibit strong passionate responses and the ways it influences consumer processes such as identity or cultural capital. This interpretive study explored fast food as an instance of subtly disfavored consumption and its influence on young adult consumers' identity and cultural capital processes as they sought to take on adult identities. The first part of this contribution is that this study explores how subtly disfavored consumption influences consumer identity. The second part of this contribution is how it influences their cultural capital processes. Often, the focal consumption of consumer identity studies represents a desired self or group identity, such as is the case with Harley Davidson or Star Trek fans (Kozinets 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), or represents a contrast to a desired self or group identity, such as is the case where Hummer and Prius fans depict each other as villains (Luedicke et al 2010). Even when consumers show ambivalence, it is still marked by strongly felt, contradictory emotions and paradoxes (Otnes et al 1997). In contrast, consumption like fast food produces a more subdued negative response, which the consumers themselves normalize. This study shows when consumers treat consumption as subtly disfavored, it may impact consumers' identity and cultural capital processes differently than consumption that evokes strong passionate responses like love and hate. In lieu of a "the more I use the better" sentiment," the subdued disfavor is associated with maturation and more subdued devaluation commensurate with its more subdued threat. This work suggests that there is identity

value that can arise from consumption even if it is not strongly symbolic of certain desired or undesired identities and boundaries. This study further explores the prominent cultural forces which underlie how subtly disfavored consumption influences fast food consumers – agency and constraint orientation for identity and expectations of capital accumulation for cultural capital. These forces help to explain how consumption may come to inhabit that particular category of subtly disfavored consumption. Fast food is not adequately described by general hedonic consumption nor other simple love and hate continuums. This study theorizes "subtly disfavored" as a consumption cultural category and its associated sentiment to address this gap. A third related part of the primary contribution is how we explore how identity transitions and the way subtly disfavored consumption can be used in identity transitions. This research's study on young adults in transition is able to capture the way desire transitions may take place and finds adulthood often comes to be associated with capital acquisition and, thus, socioeconomic status.

Empirical Contribution

This research contributes empirically to food culture studies. Much of the literature on fast food does not discuss it as a cultural phenomenon from the perspective of contemporary American consumers. Most of the present fast food literature focuses on how consumers from other contexts integrate fast food as a new and often foreign consumption into their "own culture's practices" (Fantasia 1995; Ram 2004; Watson 1997). Work on American fast food culture either is based on author perspective (Ritzer 1996), focuses on past American consumption (Jakle and Sculle 1999), or uses fast food as merely a counterpoint to other food consumption (Guthman 2003). This is not the case for these participants, who grew up with fast food being ubiquitous in

the dining landscape. Many of their parents may have been able to experience fast food in their own adolescence. This research addresses this empirical issue by studying contemporary fast food culture using an ethnoconsumerist framework from the perspectives of consumers who are currently young adults. This allows us to better understand how fast food as a product of contemporary culture continues to change and influence the lives of consumers.

Ultimately, this study aimed to understand how a particular form of muted hedonic consumption can be tied to consumers' identity and cultural capital processes. The research findings suggest the need to better understand a particular everyday consumption category wherein consumption may be neither loved, nor hated, nor necessarily ignored. This is often represented by consumption that is "left behind" in favor of other forms of consumption. This study examines how consumptions that inhabit these categories have implications for consumers' identity and cultural capital processes. This work found that there are changes at both the micro (individual, within a structure) and macro (structural) level. Furthermore, this study found that fast food specifically operates based on consumers' assumptions of capital acquisition. The following section will discuss four potential extensions to this study.

Limitations and Future Directions

The first major way to further this study's findings is by looking at different populations. This study samples consumers of a particular time and place: young adults living in Southern California. These young adults tend to be financially comfortable, come from mid- to higher-end socioeconomic backgrounds, and are predominantly white or Asian. The researcher interpreted the two major drivers for the participants in this study to be 1) their expectation that their

financial and cultural capital will increase; and 2) the way fast food was a part of their personal and cultural history. A next step should be studying how the different participant characteristics contribute to their expectations and therefore identity and cultural capital processes. Later work can vary the sample both by participants' present conditions and by their histories. For example, the research sample includes two participants working in blue-collar jobs but who come from families who are white collar (#5, #6). A third participant also explains that he is lower income but feels it would be unfounded to define himself as such because his family is only poor relative to the region. Therefore, a first next step should be to study populations with different degrees of present socioeconomic status, such as being low income, coming from a lower-income background, and doing blue-collar work. Next, it would help to find histories of socioeconomic status. This can be personal, such that the participants' family has been of lower socioeconomic status for some time. This can also be more of a group characteristic. For example, it may help to find populations whose racial, regional, or ancestral history stresses greater socioeconomic disadvantage. An additional way to vary histories is based on participants' relationship with American history. Ethnicity is one such way. Those of different ethnic groups may have a different orientation to what would be considered "one's" culture and may have home food cultures that are characterized differently from a mainstream American culture. For example, many Asian participants, regardless of birthplace, allude to their families making different national cuisine that they contrast with white American food. Further work can suggest how these different histories may influence consumers' relationship to fast food and other such consumption. An additional way to vary history is by region. These participants are from a small part of Southern California that is predominantly suburban and socioeconomically separated. Other regions that are more rural or urban, rely less on cars, possess different senses of state

identity, and so on will also extend our knowledge. Past literature has shown fast food is often associated with both America and Southern California (Schlosser 2002). This research focuses on a particular part of Southern California; further research can understand other regions of California and the United States.

An additional way to study how identity and cultural capital processes may change over time is by studying participants who are parents of a child who is in primary school or older. A major premise of this study was examining how fast food culture has increasingly been present for current young adults and for the generations that came before. Each of these consumer groups experienced fast food in a different way because fast food culture itself changes over time. Participants with young children now have not only their own fast food experiences as children and young adults, and the experiences from past generations like their parents but they are interacting with fast food culture in a different way as they raise their own children. This research has three participants with children, two of whom are in preschool or primary school and beginning to experience life beyond their household. Focusing more on these processes will expand the depth of how participants interpret and use past instances of adult identities with their own acquisition and interaction with that identity, in this case, the identity of parent.

A third way to elaborate on this study is to incorporate additional research methods. This study uses long interviews. Further work could study how participants incorporate fast food culture by using ethnographic methods such as additional interviews and observations while at fast food restaurants to examine who engages with fast food culture and how they do so. Likewise, observations can be used to study how fast food is constructing market spaces. For example, not

only can observations be made and the types of advertising be recorded at different fast food sites, they can also be studied over time, such as during different seasons, like the holidays versus summer. Furthermore, studying how fast food culture has transitioned to online mediums will help us better understand fast food culture; for example, studying how fast food is part of online memes or the way advertisers craft materials for online media.

A final major extension to this work is to elaborate more on consumption that is part of everyday life but subtly disfavored. This work recounts different ways consumption may decline in popularity and acceptability without necessarily producing strong passionate hate, dislike, or disapproval. This decline can happen at the group level such as in the case that middle-market products are devalued relative to masstige, or at the individual level, as in the case of a starter good where a starter product is no longer acceptable for that person to consume. Additional work can study other situations where we see this. An extension is studying the popularity of the term "meh" and how it is applied to different consumption, such as in the case of the *New York Times Magazine's* list. The New York Times Magazine list describes "meh" as "Not Hot, Not Not, Just Meh" (Henig 2014). Studying these other forms will give us a fuller conception of how consumption can be part of everyday life but be evaluated differently than through a simple loved and used versus hated and not used continuum.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: Participant Profiles

ID#	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation
1	DrH	F	21	Chinese American	Student on hiatus, software engineering
2	CtC	M	22-24	Korean American	Student, physics
5	CC	F	24	Caucasian American	Construction - family business misc
6	NTR	M	21-23	Caucasian American	Construction - roofing management
7	Glo	F	27-28	Chinese American	White-collar work
8	Obj	M	27	Asian American	Law
9	Hai	F	21-26	Asian American	Accounting
10	Des	M	21-26	Asian American	Student and design intern, design
11	MTD	M	18-25	Bulgarian American	Student and fast food work study, engineering
12	IB	M	22-35	Korean national	PhD student
13	Keto	M	26	African American	Account administrator
14	TD	M	27	Lebanese American	Software engineer
15	JR	M	40	Korean national	PhD student
17	MP	M	28	Chinese American	Medical resident
18	MA	F	26	Caucasian American	White collar work and undergraduate student, social work

19	Acc	M	27	Caucasian American	Student, training to be a teacher through online courses
20	DLR	M	29	Caucasian American	Student, master's program, training to be a pastor
21	RC	M	18-27	Caucasian American	Student, undergraduate business program
22	Mag	F	26	Caucasian American	Temp work
23	Dri	F	21-27	Taiwanese American	Intern, master's program studying rhetoric

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Long Interview Topic Guide

As a topic guide, this is not an exhaustive list of questions (i.e., it does not include follow-up questions such as "How so?" and "How did [the experience] make you feel?"), nor are the questions in the exact order in which they will be asked.

Cluster 1: What are your experiences with fast food?

- Please tell me about a recent experience with fast food.
- Do you ever go to get fast food with others? Who? When?
  - Can you tell me more about how you make a decision, when you agree/disagree?
- Tell me about your fast food preferences. Tell me about your favorite fast food. Tell me about fast food you avoid. How does it compare with other favorite foods? Other disliked foods?
  - Food then brand? Brand then food? Certain items but not the whole place?
- Are there restaurants that you hate but you like the food? Or a restaurant where you normally don't like the food but for one item?
- What comes to mind when I say "fast food" and [aesthetics/its appearance, emotions, taste/flavor, senses, speed, health, price, value, convenience]
  - When talking about "fast food" what is the first thing you feel?
  - When I say "fast food," what are some images or symbols that come to mind?
  - What do you think of the appearance of fast food? How important do you think image or appearance is for fast food?
- Do you remember the first time you had fast food?
- Did you ever have fast food at school?
- Do you ever take pictures when consuming fast food? Other types of food?
- Do you ever post about food? Fast food?

Cluster 2: How is fast food a part of your (daily) life?

- When does fast food tend to come to your mind?
- When do you tend to have fast food?
- When do you normally go to a fast food restaurant?
- Are there special times that you go to a fast food restaurant? Promotions…?
- How important is fast food to you?

Cluster 3: What is fast food (to you)?

- What do you think of when someone says "fast food"?
- What is fast food? How does it compare with other types of food?
- What is a fast food restaurant to you?
- How would you describe an average fast food consumer?
- How is it important to your family? Your significant other/spouse? Your roommates? Others who you have to tune your own food choices around?
- Is there something you eat that your spouse/family doesn't? Vice versa?

- Do you ever go for…[meals, snacks, breakfast, lunch, dinner, with friends, to pick up food for a party, get a box, get a combo…]
- Do you ever go with [people, people who are younger, who are older, with family, with friends, with coworkers…]

Cluster 4: Has fast food changed? How has it changed?

- Has your own fast food use changed? How so?
- Do you think fast food has changed? What types of changes have you noticed?
- What do you think of its advertisements? Its mascots? [a particular advertisement?, an ad that tries to appeal to families, through sex appeal, to kids, its history…]

Cluster 5: What is fast food as a social and cultural entity?

- How do you think fast food is a part of the lives of your peers? Your family? Your parents? Other members of [applicable group]?
- How do you think fast food is a part of the lives of Americans?
- How do you think society views fast food?
- How do you think it is important to the lives of other people? How would you describe these people?
- How do you think is fast food portrayed in the media? Society? The news?
- Would you say fast food is considered acceptable to society? Normal?

Cluster 6: About the person

- How would you characterize your interest in food?
- How do you usually go about doing food?
- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
- Can you tell me a little about what you are interested in?