Examine the relationship between the Promotion of Healthy Eating and the Food that is consumed

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Abstract

Healthy eating is a major concern of the public and has been under-researched for decades. A successful healthy eating campaign can help to raise awareness and in the long run, prevent and minimize long-term diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer. This can also reduce the burden on the National Health Service. For all of these reasons, this dissertation aims to determine what people eat, why they choose to eat the way they do and whether they feel the Government has done enough to promote healthy eating. Initially, this study examines the trends of contemporary food culture by sociologists and the marketing powers of promotion to increase student awareness on healthy eating. A discussion on Government policies indicates the efficacy of the Government to reach students with their healthy eating promotion in this country. This study uses qualitative research methods to determine the awareness of the students, on healthy eating and their opinions on the Government's attempt to promote a healthy nation. Based on the data gathered in this research, an evaluation was made on whether healthy eating promotion is effective in today's student society. In this study, student choices of food were shown to be primarily affected by price, taste and peer pressure. This is in contrast with the available literature which suggests that social class, culture, the food industries and Government campaigns are the main influences on people's eating habits.

Introduction

This dissertation aims to understand how food is promoted and consumed by the public. Our choices of food are affected by many factors such as our social class, our culture, and the media and Government campaigns. Over the past thirty years a surge of interest has arisen and an increase in the consumption of fast food. However, more recently health concerns regarding fast food consumption has surfaced. Sociologists often seek explanations for human behavior and try to link this with the environment in which they live in. Similarly, sociologists such as Alan Warde have examined contemporary food culture and suggested reasons that influence people's choice. Initially, changes in food consumption patterns and healthy eating promotions from different dimensions were examined. The

dissertation then describes the interviews that were conducted with regards to healthy eating. Some key findings were revealed to support the sociological theories. Finally, the discussion sums up and reflects the findings in relation to these theories and see if there is any correlation between the two.

This research was undertaken at a University and based on ten one-to-one interviews. It is important to examine whether we are eating healthily. Food is the basic necessity in life humans consume daily. In this dissertation I want to explore student's knowledge on healthy eating and whether the Government is doing enough to promote a healthier nation.

Sociological Perspectives on Food Consumption and Healthy Eating Promotion.

Current Trends in Food Consumption

Food consumption relates to the substances that are taken in to produce energy, stimulate growth and maintain life. It consists of essential body nutrients, such as carbohydrates, proteins, fats and vitamins or minerals. Healthy food is considered to be highly beneficial to health, especially a food grown organically or free of additives. Food consumption has tilted towards fast food culture over the past few decades due to its price, convenience and the shortage of eating time. In this section, general consumption trends will be studied and the change of consumer culture over time will be discussed.

Sociologists like Bourdieu and Bauman have written literature and devised their own theories on the consumption of food. Many of them believe that this is a structure-agency debate. In other words, how social structure shapes our actions and how we, in turn, shape the social structure (Germov, 1999:302). One of the examples given by Pierre Bourdieu is that the way we consume food reflected our social class and background (Warde, 1997:9). He argued that consumption is based upon cultural upbringing and is therefore socially embedded. Bauman, on the other hand, saw consumption as "less restricted" rather than another part of life (Warde, 1997:10). In reality, Bauman claimed that there is a small role for choices, for example, we cannot choose to be born into which family, but within consumption, we have more power to alter our choices. Bauman believed that individuals are thought to gradually detach themselves from the social regulations and create their own personal identity by making their own choices. These two theories differ in relation to social environment and habits, to freedom of choice on the consumption of food.

Bourdieu's theory is more commonly practiced in modern society as different social classes dominate our choice of food. The working class tends to eat food which has a "high amount of animal fat", compared with the middle and upper classes (Mennell, 1992:54). Besides, people from poorer backgrounds may understand that fresh food is healthier; however, they could not afford to travel further to purchase fresh food (Whelan, 2002: 2083). Therefore they tended to purchase cheap quality food with a high fat content, from nearby shops.

There have been rapid changes in food consumption over the past few decades. Alan Warde, in his book, C*onsumption, Food & Taste* suggested four theses for the changes in eating habits. Firstly, people have more freedom on the choice of food, but are uncertain of what to eat. In modern society, we have a wider range of food available to us. As technology is constantly improving, we are no longer restricted by the seasons and harvests, which had affected people previously (Beardworth, 2000:33). However, Claude Fischler saw this as an "omnivore's paradox" (Warde, 1997:30). Human beings want a variety to choose from; however, they feel anxious and unsure about trying new foodstuffs. This can be further explained by the changing concept of food poverty. In the past, food poverty was referred to as "lack of food, under- nutrition" (Adams, 2000:48). In the contemporary society, food poverty means "overabundance of processed foods, lack of balance diet" (Adams, 2000:48). Before, we experienced under nutrition, and now, we suffer from an unbalanced diet. Although we may have more food than before, we do not know what to choose. This reflects the lack of education in healthy eating.

The second thesis suggested that in a mass producing society, people would consume similar products and gradually lose their identities. Individual producers tend to dominate particular industrial markets, for example big brands like McDonald's and Coca-Cola target customers en mass. Mass food production can be explained by 'McDonaldisation', where customers experience the "same look, same service, same products and same taste" (Germov, 1999:12). This thesis is supported by a report by the Financial Times Exporter in 1995 (Adams, 2002:47). In the report, sixty-five percent of people in China recognized the brand name Coca Cola and nearly half of the people knew big brands like Pepsi. This concluded that large corporations 'mould' our taste and have great control over our choice of food. One may argue that supermarkets bring a wider selection to people. In fact, some of the varieties are created by developing alternative forms of packaging and storing methods, such as canned fish, frozen fish and fresh fish (Warde, 1997:167). Therefore, we will enjoy many versions of the same products. In a broader view of the food industry, the five largest supermarkets in the UK, dominates seventy percent of the grocery market. (Adams, 2002:47) This large market share led to the closure of many local stores. Single mothers or elderly people who live in rural areas will suffer a further limitation of food due to the restriction on mobility and financial support (Whelan, 2002:2083).

Since mass production has moulded our tastes and choices, consumers start losing their personal taste and identities. To react against this passive consuming pattern, people are driven towards the post-Fordist view on consumption, which is the main focus of the third thesis. In the post-Fordist world, all commodities are expected to be more consumer-orientated. As the consumer's expenditure increases, they expect the quality of food to be higher. People require greater differentiation of the commodities in different markets. For example, McDonalds serves a different menu across the world to accommodate differing cultures with distinct tastes. This is illustrated by McDonald franchises in Germany, whom also serve beer as refreshment. Customers hope to buy food that serves their interests and their local traditions. Businesses increase their profits and the consuming power; by produce the right products for the targeted consumers. A more suitable product for the customers, equates to more purchases which in turn equates to more income.

The final thesis describes the persistence of social differentiation. Warde uses Bourdieu's theory to prove that food consumption is a "means of expressing 'distinction'" and has social meanings behind it. For example, class differences play a role in dictating eating habits. In this way, food consumption has more social meanings than a consume-to-survive model. In comparing the eating behaviour of manual workers and white collar workers, Bourdieu observed that clerical staff paid more attention to body maintenance and slimness whilst manual workers, paid limited attention to their waistline. This observation is seen in France. In Britain, Warde suggested that class distinction in relation to food has been more obvious in recent decades. Finkelstein supports this idea by saying that "dinning out is an expression of individuality, choice, spontaneity and that we select restaurants for food and price in ways which demonstrate our discrimination and what we value and desire" (Beardsworth, 1997:119). The interest of the media, increasing eating-out habits and foreign cuisines are becoming more common, food consumption has made a significant distinction between classes. There is a clear line between the richer and the poorer, and who can afford to taste different types of food.

These theses have helped us to understand the reasons behind changes in food consumption. Fast food outlets are one of the popular choices for dinning out and have had a big impact on our food consumption. In the following paragraph, the significant effects that fast food has on our choices of diet will be examined.

A Fast Food Nation?

Fast food culture has penetrated into our lives and influenced our eating habits. The fast food industry grew fast in the 1990s. In 1991, fast food had reached nineteen percent of the global consumer catering market (Tansey, 1995: 133). From 1992 to 2003, expenditure spent on eating and drinking outside home has increased by 89.9 per cent. (Website 1) These food shops provide roast chicken, pizza, etc. However, there is a limited choice of food and most of them have a high fat content (Millstein, 1993: 220). Excessive consumption predisposes individuals to a great deal of health problems in later life. Foods high in fats can cause high blood pressures, cancer, atherosclerosis and heart disease. In recent years, the increase in consciousness of healthy eating has forced the fast food chains to change their menu in order to survive. For example, McDonalds now offers a new menu which includes green salad, carrot sticks and a fresh fruit pack. This was done in response to public concern about the nutritional values of its food, following the film "Supersize Me". This programme follows Morgan Spurlock who lived on nothing but McDonalds for an entire month. Spurlock risked his health the sake of this project and it resulted in numerous visits to the doctor. (Website 2) Increasingly, fast food chains have started to advertise with the concept of "light or low fat" meals. As a customer, we are often misled by these statements and believe that the "low fat" meal is a healthier option. The Times Newspaper compared the fat content and the price of a standard burger with a chicken caesar salad. (Website 3) With regards to the price, the salad costs twenty nine pence more than a Big Mac. Data shows that a chicken salad with dressing and croutons contains 21.4g of fat, whereas a standard burger only contains 7.7g of fat. Even adding a portion of chips to the burger will result in a smaller amount of fat (16.7g) than the salad. (Website 3) One may think that the salad dressing causes the high fat content of the salad; however, this is not true.

From the McDonalds website, a chicken caesar salad without a dressing still contains more fat than a burger. (Website 4) Another shocking data is the salt content of the crispy chicken ranch salad is more than half of the Government's recommended daily allowance of 6g. (Website 4) Therefore, the salad which seems like a healthier option to the consumer is in fact more expensive and less healthy than a burger.

Other than fast food chains, consumers can purchase fast food from the supermarkets. Ready meals, frozen or canned food can be categorized as fast food (Millstone, 2003: 94). With the invention of the microwave, ready meal culture has been further developed. There was a rapid increase in the sale of microwaves from five million in 1981 to seventy million in 2000 (Milldstone, 2003: 94). Microwaves enable food to be ready within minutes whereas it may take at least half an hour to cook a meal using the oven.

In 1997, an Australian newspaper demonstrated how different social classes chose different fast foods (Germov, 1999: 137). Wealthier and well educated people believed that choosing takeaway foods such as Thai and Japanese are higher in nutrition (Germov, 1999: 137). On the other hand, people in the lower socio-economic state tended to consume food with a high fat and salt content, for example, pizzas and burgers. Therefore, we could find "nutritional underclass" with distinct eating patterns (Germov, 1999: 137). Nutritional underclass refers to the difficulty of lower socioeconomic groups in making choices about food and diet. This is turn leads to a poor nutritional intake. By comparing different consumption patterns of takeaway food between people in different classes, two features have been developed. Firstly, fast food is consumed and well developed in all classes but wealthier people tend to have more choices available to them. Besides, most fast food does not provide the consumer with balanced nutritional values that we need from a meal. That is a reason why the public label fast food as unhealthy food.

Our food consumption patterns are affected by different media in our society. These are a powerful way of educating the public with the knowledge of what is healthy to eat and how to eat healthy. The following paragraphs examine the effectiveness of the healthy eating promotions.

Health Promotion (By Government, Media, Food Industries).

Different groups have tried to promote healthy eating in their own distinct ways. Several groups take control over our choices of food and actively promote healthy eating. These include: the Government departments, the food industries and the media. The progress and the effectiveness of the healthy eating promotion campaigns within these sectors will now be examined.

The Governments the dominant enforcement body has introduced many healthy eating promotion initiatives to push the nation to eat more healthily. Its aim is to enforce regulations on food production in a bid to prevent illness (Mennell, 1992:40), so as to reduce the costs and burden on National Health Service. The Government has come a long way on the healthy eating campaign. The emergence that some of

our diets are responsible for certain diseases such as cancer, new food policies were created to improve and promote healthy eating (Baggott 2000,168).

From the early 1970s onwards, the Government became more aware of the public's diet and set up several organizations such as the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food and Policy (COMA), the National Advisory Committee on Nutrition Education (NACNE) and the Joint Advisory Committee on Nutrition Education. (Baggott, 2000:136) Their mission was to provide nutritional advice to the public and promote healthy eating. (Beardsworth, 2000:136) However, the Government departments' interference with the work of these organisations resulted in little success being achieved (Baggott 2000:170).

With the increasing public interest in health and food safety in the 1990s, the Labour Government introduced tougher policies on food and health when they came to power in 1997 (Baggott, 2000:175). The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has been authorized a new set of powers to give nutrition guidelines and labelling advice. The FSA recommended six grams of salt per day and wanted to introduce the "colour-coded system" on ready-made foods, so customers could identify the fat, salt and sugar content of the food by the labels. The FSA believes that specific seasoning contained within the food, will determine whether it is healthy or not. Food with a low salt, fat and sugar content is considered to be healthy by the FSA. (Website 5) The colour-coded system will show consistency for all food packaging; therefore, it is easier for everyone, including children, to recognize the foods which are considered to be healthy and also reduces any confusion. In February 2004, the National Health Service (NHS) published a free booklet called "Five a Day Made Easy" to promote a healthier lifestyle. (Website 1) It believes that eating five portions of fruit or vegetable per day, is eating healthily. Therefore, the Government considers fruit and vegetables as the key element of healthy food.

In November 2004, the FSA put forward the 'traffic light labels' to the Public Health White Paper. (Website 7) However, there are a lot of pressures around this recommendation. The food and farming industries were worried that full labelling indicating the fat, sugar and salt content will increase their cost and cause restriction on their marketing strategies. (Baggott 2000:171) Moreover, the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) who is the largest representative of the food and drink manufacturing companies pointed out that the 'traffic light labels' are too "simplistic, subjective and potentially misleading". (Website 8) Rather than help consumers fit the labelled food into a balanced diet, it is likely that they will simply view the food as good or dismiss it as bad. There are pressures that prohibit the Government from implying more regulation on food labels. Since the closure of food industries do not simply lead to less food choices, but also a great deal of job losses and plunging of the economy, the Government is required to think carefully about the implications of new regulations and whether the new comprehensive food label would working on not.

The media also plays an important role in promoting healthy eating concepts. The term media refers to television, radio, poster advertisements, and newspaper and magazine articles. With the media's wide spread of power, the issues they brought up helped to give information on diets quickly. However, it is debatable whether all the media are impartial and helpful in improving our diets. Since most of the media

relied on the advertising revenues to survive, concerns are made to the effect of their advertisers (Tansey, 1995:183). In the advertising aspect, American children watch 20,000 commercials a year where at least 10,000 of them are food products. (Millstein 1993:219) In Britain, food industries have spent forty billion every year on advertising (Millstone, 2003: 98). Food advertisements are wide spread on television, magazines, radio, internet and posters on the street. Most of the advertised products are branded and processed. More importantly, compared with the perishable food, they are high in sugars, refined starches, fats and added salt (Millstone, 2003:98). These advertisements persuade consumers to buy more. Food products such as chocolates and crisps are promoted to the teenage market (Conner, 2002:120). Children consume the confectionaries between meal times which lead them to miss out their meals, consequently, not acquiring enough nutrition (Dobson, 1994:19). The effects of advertisements are powerful, but not always helping to promote healthy eating ideas.

Media can be a direct tool to help the public understand the scientific reports and learn about food safety and what is healthy to eat. However, sometimes the headlines of the news reports are misleading and exaggerated. One of examples is the headline from New York Times "Low fat diet does not cut health risks", where that heading is referring to a study of women aged fifty to seventy-nine years old with respect to breast cancer research (Newsweek, March 2006). People who do not read the details will presume that low fat diet is useless in maintaining health, whereas if you read the whole article one will find out that low fat diet does not reduce your risk of breast cancer. The media penetrates every household and although it might not always guide the public on healthy foods, they are definitely helping to shape the future food consumption patterns.

Food industries and the retailers produce and sell the food. Food industries promote their products in a healthy manner only because of the market's need. The major concern of a food business is to make profit. There is a limit on how much a person can eat and consume, therefore the overall demand for food will not increase much. However, the food industries can further expand their market and make more profit by adding value to fresh food and turning them into commodity goods such as canned food, frozen food etc (Warde, 1997:191). Food processors have a set of ingredients to 'add-value', they are sugar, starch, fat and flavourings (Tansey, 1995:111). Consequently, processed food is not as healthy as raw food.

In order to fulfil the customers' health desires, supermarkets use healthy eating as one of their promotional strategies. Tesco has improved their company image by initiating healthy eating and has launched food labels on its retail products (Murcott, 1998:119). Although its original aim was to increase profit, it did arouse people's attentions to eat healthier. On one hand, the supermarkets are promoting healthy eating; on the other hand, they develop all sort of processed food such as chilled and ready meals at the same time to exploit another market.

Most supermarkets have developed their own branded products. This is to enlarge their market share rather than providing customers with a wider choice. One of the examples is chilled ready-meals where this kind of product was completely new in 1980s (Murcott, 1998:119). Marks and Spencer, as a pioneer, developed this market. By the 1990s, this market was worth over three hundred million pounds per annum

(Murcott, 1998:119). These ready-meals are one of the processed foods with added salt and sugar. With confusing food labels on the packaging, consumers can hardly calculate how much salt they consume.

Since the central aim of food manufacturers and retailers are to make profit, their intention to promote healthy eating is not convincing enough. There is still a baffling question of what to eat is value for money and good for health (Jenkins, 1991: 54).

Do We Have a Choice to Eat Healthy?

Although we are responsible for looking after our own health, the public, private and voluntary sectors have directed our choice of food. Our choices of food are affected by social, cultural and political factors rather than individuals' preference. Social factors included class, age, family backgrounds considerations.

The direct social-economical restriction of our choice of food is the amount of money we have available to spend on food. Jenkins supports this idea by noting that "knowledge is a source of consumer power, but only when you have got money to spend" (Jenkins, 1991:72). Our choices of food are based on the amount of wealth. He pointed out that poorer people tended to pay more for food. This is not only due to the limitation of transport, but due to the amount of product they could afford to buy (Jenkins, 1991: 74). Small purchases are more expensive compare with bulk sales. Poor people suffer from the consequences of supermarket sale strategy. For example, the price for two packs of chicken thighs is 148 pence per pound, whilst the price for eight packs of chicken thighs is 135 pence per pound (Jenkins, 1991:73). Customers will get a better deal if they buy products in bulk. This illustrates that poor people know how to eat healthily, but they cannot afford to do so. Other than getting food that is not value for money, poor people suffer the fact that they know what is good for them but cannot afford to purchase it. For poor people, food expenditure is elastic and paying for other bills to maintain the living is more important (Murcott, 1998:177). Cutting the food budget is the most direct way to save money. Therefore, even though parents know that fresh juice is more nutritional than squash, they can do nothing about it. At the end of the day, even if the government has successfully promoted the healthy eating concept to the public, certain people still do not eat healthily due to the financial constraints.

Different age groups have various food consumption patterns. The elderly prefer to stick with the traditional food for instance roast meat, whereas young people adopt new things such as rice or curries easily (Murcott, 1998:175). There is a rapid development of convenience food, but it does not necessarily mean that people in all age groups enjoy more choices to eat healthy. The elderly is an example that demonstrates a negative perception on fast food and ready-meals and they believe that home-cooked food is healthier. Therefore, a larger range of processed products do not mean a greater choice of food for everyone.

Our eating habits are also constructed by the environment in which we grow up. Therefore, our families have a direct effect on our diet. A research was carried out in the early 1980s, on all major aspects of family food provision and consumption (Rodmell, 1986:73). This study found that the role of the housewife did not

automatically give you the power to make a decision of what to prepare for meals. Surprisingly, most housewives claimed that they would cook whatever their husbands liked, in order to please them. Some wives claimed that even though they did not like the unhealthy diets, they would still cook it for their husbands to reward them for a long working day. As a child, there was less choice; they had to eat what was given to them. As a result, our tastes of food are customized by the working men. Recently, with the increasing number of single parent households, where many of them are either unemployed or earn a small amount of money, the choice of food remains to the individuals who purchase food for the rest of the family.

Cultural differences affect our choices of food and whether we know how to eat healthily with our ethnicity backgrounds and traditions. There is a diversity of health implications and how people define healthy choices among different cultures. People have their own traditions in choosing and cooking food. 'One size fits all' health education programmes do not fit all the ethnics. One of the examples is that in Chinese traditions, food is divided in to 'yang' (hot) and 'yin' (cold), where eating yang food when our body is in yin's condition and vice versa (Germov, 1999:150). Therefore, the health professionals have to study the background of minority groups and teach them to eat healthily without spoiling their culture. To familiarise the ethnic minority groups with the nutrient value, specialists about particular cultures are required to educate the minority group with healthy eating knowledge.

There have been a few changes in food labelling policy, but these regulations have never requested manufacturers to provide a comprehensive nutrition label. As a customer, we have the right to know what kind of ingredients are in the processed food that we are consuming. However, food industries remain powerful and can keep the customers in ignorance. The Health Education Authority performed a survey with regards to food labels in the early 1990s (Hea, 1996:19). In this survey, twenty five percent of the informants have never read the nutritional information on food packages. This shows that the food label is important in directing food choices, as three quarters of those questioned follow guidance from the nutritional advice. Therefore, providing a comprehensive label on food packaging is essential.

In recent years, a great deal of new products has had dishonest slogans on them, such as "low fat", "freshly squeezed", and "no artificial additives" (Jenkins, 1991:43). For example, olestra is a type of oil used to produce 'low fat' products. However, it brings significant side effects such as abdominal cramps when we consume it in large amounts (Germov, 1999:303). As a customer, reading the food label is not sufficient to conclude whether a particular product is healthy or not, we have to under the meaning behind these "low fat" products. In a food market where food labels are not universal and some of the packaging is misleading, there is no way to ensure that the product we choose is healthy. Knowing what is healthy is not good enough for the contemporary food market, consumers also have to learn and understanding the meanings behind the food labels. Therefore, understanding how to eat healthily is important, but regulations on food labels are also essential.

Methodology.

Research Aim

There are a few aims for this research. This study aims to explore perceptions on the healthy eating concept and review the reasons behind people's choice of food. Furthermore, it seeks to examine awareness of Government policies on healthy eating promotion. It is also important to examine the reliability of food labels and the popularity of fast food culture.

Semi-structured Interviews.

It is important to see if there is a correlation between the literatures in chapter one and the research I do, therefore, selecting an appropriate way to carry out this research is essential. Semi-structured interviews were held on a one-to-one basis where interviewees were given a few topics to discuss. This interview consisted of three main parts. Part A is concerned about the interviewees' healthy eating concepts and their view of contemporary eating culture. By understanding how they defined a healthy diet, participants were asked to review their food consumption habits, restrictions on food shopping and their opinion on fast food culture. In the final of the interview, I enquired about their knowledge on Government policies and supermarket promotions on healthy eating.

This research aimed to understand people's view and opinion rather than to test their knowledge and numerical data. Therefore, it is more suitable to use a qualitative approach. Qualitative research helps to develop interviewees' personal opinions and experiences for this research. The research is based on one-to-one semi structured interviews, which allows me to have more freedom in developing the interview and pursue further questions in response to the replies received (Bryman, 2004:543). Each interview lasted approximately an hour in order to allow interviewees to express themselves fully. In order not to interfere with the interview, I did not express my opinions on the topics. I guided the discussions with the same topic questions for everyone. This enabled me the freedom to explore and learn more about the interviewees' attitudes and thoughts on a particular topic. Focus group discussions had been considered to be used as one of the research methods. However, although focus groups can simulate and develop more fresh ideas, I did not wish the group environment to affect personal opinion and for particular individuals to dominate the meetings (Bryman, 2004:360).

The venue of the interview was important as I did not want the interviews to be disturbed by phone calls or other people. Interviews took place at the University's Level One Café after lunchtime. The café is quiet and empty after lunchtimes and a safe public place to undertake interviews. Permission was given by the participants to tape record the sessions due to the limitation of my memories and it enabled me to focus on the discussion without having to take notes. Besides, it also allows the repeat examination of the interviewees' answers (Bryman, 2004:330). One cannot attain the full picture from listening to participants; one also has to examine the body language, body movement and facial expressions, in order to get an inclusive view the subjects. This enables one to observe whether the participants felt passionate or

uninterested about a particular topic. In order to prevent participants feeling uncomfortable and nervous about their looks, I did not inform them of the observations and the notes I was taking (Denscomb, 1999:151). Besides, only short notes were taken and this was further elaborated after the interview in order to minimise the chance of diverting the attention of the participants.

Analysis Model.

Discourse Analysis has been practiced in this research. It represents "a strong social constructivist view of social world" (Phillips, 2002:5), which enables us to understand how the concepts of healthy eating came about. This is particularly useful in this research as this study aimed to find out how healthy eating concepts have developed and how they are maintained over time. Discourse analysis precisely interprets the context of the interview, and includes factors such as communication, text, language talk and conversation.

Due to the nature of qualitative research, transcripts of the interviews were carried out in detail, as wording and phrases are a key part of this type of research Transcripts were written up after each interview which would then be read, and re-read thoroughly. This is to ensure that what was written down correlates with the participants' opinions. Language is a good tool to represent the interviewees themselves; however, it is important to recognize the context of the repertoires. For example, one must interpret their style of language and observe how they present themselves. One can then identify any patterns in the content of their interviews (Sarantakos, 2005:311). Therefore, a distinction was made between interviewees' similarities and differences in repertoires and examines the relationship between these repertoires.

Discourse analysis is more flexible than using conversation analysis, since it applies to both naturally occurring and contrived forms of talk and text (Bryman, 2004:370). This helps to bring the idea together and form a more realistic picture of the society. This point is supported by Nelson Philips who believed that "social reality is produced and made real through discourses" (Philips, 2002:3).

Tape recordings made in the interviews helped to transcribe all the information, as part of discourse analysis. It took about two hours to transcribe one interview. In order to reduce the data to a manageable size, the data was first categorised into different subjects. For example, the data was classified according to their views on fast food culture, their awareness on Government policies, the influence that supermarkets had on them and their own concept of healthy eating. This makes it easier to interpret and understand the data. Each piece of transcript was coded to identify the interviewees and enable significant pieces of data to be located (Denscombe, 1999:210). For example, the first interviewee's transcript was coded as 01. Transcripts have been read and revised twice to develop new interpretations and identify some key words in the transcripts. This makes it easier to analyse and easier to compare and contrast the results with the theories in chapter one. To ensure that the transcripts represented the participants' ideas and opinions, they were invited to read their own transcripts. Two copies were made for each transcript to ensure that all valuable data are backed up (Denscombe, 1999:210).

Sample Design.

Due to the time and financial limitations, a mixture of random and non-random sampling was adopted. Last year, I carried out a similar qualitative study on food culture. All students at the University received invitations to participate in the research via emails. However, the response was very low; there were only two replies expressing interest in the project. Therefore, for this project accidental sampling was adopted (Sarantakos, 2005:163) to recruit participants, hoping that face-to-face communication is more effective. The recruitment took place in the University's library foyer during lunchtimes for a particular week from Monday to Friday, aiming to catch students that were willing to participate in the research. The aim was to attract at least three people per day to participate in the study. At the end of the week, twelve students signed up who wanted to contribute to my research. However, only required ten people were required; therefore the participants were numbered one-to-twelve and lots were drawn. Although this method is not fair as it does not reach everyone in the university, a better response rate compared with last year. Accidental sampling is based on chance, whereby people that enter the library during lunchtime will have a high probability of being invited to and being offered a chance to take part in this research (Sarantakos, 2005:163). However, this approach has its limitations. There may be students who may have wanted to participate in my questionnaires but did not enter the library during the lunchtimes of that particular week, and therefore missed the chance to sign up.

The subject of my research is related to day-to-day life and people's eating habits, therefore, for those people whose have a religious observance, this might be a sensitive issue for them to talk about. Therefore, the aims of the research and the topic questions that would be asked in the interviews were clarified from the beginning. With clearly stated aims and topic questions, people would be more willing to discuss their views and opinions openly. Denscombe supports this view in saying that "if the investigation touches on intimate matters or embarrassing topics, there is every likelihood that the response rate will be low" (Denscombe, 1998:19). In this study I wanted participants to be as open and give them as much freedom as they desired and therefore tried to remove all pressures or embarrassment that was likely to occur.

Ethnical Considerations.

Although this research may not relate with any sensitive issues, confidentiality has also been taken into account. Pseudonyms are used in order to protect the interviewees' identity. With this data protection, participants were more willing to open up and say what they really think.

Consent was given by the participant at the beginning of the interviews and explanation was given as to why this research was being conducted and how long it would last. They were told a list of the topics that was going to be discussed for their reference, and asked if there are any potential risks that might affect them. Before beginning the interviews, participants were asked whether they were all happy to

continue participating in the interviews. Since this is voluntary based research, all participants were informed at the beginning of the interviews that they could withdraw from the interview at anytime. Although there were no gifts for their participation, light refreshments were provided during the interview. Each participant was offered a free drink at Level One Café prior to the beginning of the interview. After each interview, a copy of the content signed by both parties was given to the participants for their own record (Newton, 2001:272). This is to give participants a record of the research.

Limitation.

Since the interviewer chose the respondents, it could be argued that the sample is not representative. The interviewer may have judged people by her own perceptions. For example, if two people entered the library at the same time, one would automatically pick one to approach based on personal judgements on who one thinks is friendlier or more cooperative (Bryman, 2001:86). However, practically one could not approach two people at the same time. Another bias can arise due to the location of the recruitment. This took place in the library and therefore would omit those students that did not go to the library during lunchtimes. However, it is almost impossible to find a location which everyone visits at the same time. The library was chosen as it is a safe and public place and assembles a great deal of students during lunchtimes.

The sample size was relatively small as there was a limited amount of time and budget for this research. With more time, methods such as test retest could be undertaken to test the reliability of the study. (Bell 1999:104) Since all the participants were university students, people from other age group and social backgrounds were not interviewed. A bigger sample size would give more information in different dimensions and be more representative of student views. However, with a limited budget, one could only afford to tape record the interviews instead of video taping them. Video taping would give more details on participants' observations and body language.

Findings.

Concept of Healthy Diet.

I started the interview by asking participants to state what they believed a healthy diet is. All of them believed that a balanced diet' was the key element to staying healthy. Seven of them emphasised that a balanced diet should include a lot of vegetable portions. The other three participants claimed that not eating excessively can help them to maintain a balanced diet. Half those questioned, emphasised that we should reduce our fat and sugar intake, however, none of them were able to specify the amount. Interestingly, four out of six female participants believed that measuring calories intake is an important part to monitor their health, while none of the male interviewees mentioned the calories consideration. I further asked these female participants how they calculated their calories intake. The majority mentioned that they got the information from women magazine articles. They emphasised that

nearly all of the women's magazines taught them how to eat healthily in every issue. There is often a new formula for eating different combinations of food in order to stay healthy and keep fit. Although there is a lot of information from the media, participants were not sure which pieces of information is reliable and true. For those who did not mention about the calories intake, they claimed that they gained their healthy diet concepts from school or advertisements. While I was discussing the healthy diet concepts with them, they all individually claimed that they did not eat healthily. One of the participants said:

> *"I try to eat healthily, but you know, it is hard. I just cannot resist the temptation of junk food and once I start, I cannot stop, and that's why I lost my appetite for main meals."*

By understanding their concept of a healthy diet and how they have developed their knowledge in this aspect, they were then asked to comment on today's food consumption market as a whole.

Contemporary Eating Culture.

The growth of fast food and ready meals are the central features of the participants' view on contemporary eating culture. Ready Meals refer to both frozen meals from a supermarket and take-away food from a fast food establishment. Participant Jane (False name) told me:

> *"It is the century of the Fast Food industries where we are all under these big cooperates' control. We all eat fast food. It is affordable and reachable where you can find Burger King in most of the train stations, but not a proper restaurant, right? "*

> *"There are many types of frozen food in most of the British people's home. I am sure that I am not the only one who often eat those "ding ding" food. That's the reason why the microwave was invented!"*

One participant showed worries about the wide choices of food. Since there are more choices, it is getting harder to judge what is good for our bodies. All products are labelled and promoted in a way to say that they are the "best" for our bodies.

Although some participants come from different ethnical backgrounds, none of them complained of difficulties in adapting to the British eating culture. Fast food is one of the important elements that represents today's eating culture, I am particular interested in this section. I specifically guide participants to this topic so as to examine the way fast food developed in the participant's life.

Opinion on Fast Food Culture.

All subjects said that they would eat fast food as one of their main meals. However, most of them will only visit a fast food establishment three times or less per month. Some expressed that they would feel guilty if they ate unhealthy food too often. I

pursued further and asked about their opinions on this type of restaurant and the reasons behind the temptation. Two participants have worked in a fast food restaurant before, and their opinions are quite different from those who had not. They knew how chips are "soaked" in oil and how much salt is added to give them the flavour, therefore both of them do not buy chips from fast food chains anymore. They will limit their choice of food to a burger or a salad, where there is less of the deep frying process involved. The others believe that fast food chains could provide more choices for them when they do not want to cook. Some of them even pointed out that since fast food is cheap and providing energy for the body, it is value for money.

One of the interesting points is that four participants mentioned "junk" food in the topic of fast food culture. They believed that some food in the fast food chains belonged to the "junk" food category. For example, they classed chicken nuggets as "junk" food. They went on to define "junk" food as something that had no nutritional value which we do not need. They think all Fast Food chains serve some kind of "junk". Therefore, they will think carefully when they eat at a fast food restaurant.

After studying several dimensions of food consumption, it is time to investigate if there are any links between the contemporary eating culture and their consumption patterns. Moreover, participants will be asked to comment on their restriction on food consumption.

Food Consumption Pattern and Restrictions.

In this section, participants referred to and considered both meals and snacks. All of them visited the local supermarkets weekly to stock up on groceries, such as bread, meat and vegetables. They explained that supermarkets could provide a wider range of groceries than the local stores, whom cannot compete with them. One of them stated that he would only go to the local store when they only needed a small number of things, such as a loaf of bread. When the participants talked about their food shopping habits, two of them pointed out that since there was no food market in the town centre, they were forced to spend their money and shop in the supermarkets instead. One of the participants who lived in Twerton said that she enjoyed going to the market which was held every Thursday in Twerton. She compared the price of vegetable in the market with the supermarket and claimed that the food from the market was considerably cheaper and the food was fresher in market.

Three of the participants stated that sometimes they would go food shopping at Marks and Spencers or Waitrose, which they considered as "posh" supermarkets. However, these trips were reserved for times when they wanted to treat themselves. They explained that these two supermarkets tended to sell higher quality food of good valued for money. One of them compared this shopping habit with dining out behaviour where one will only spend more on special occasions.

Concerning the healthiness of their food, all participants said that they have vegetables and meat everyday. However, the portions of vegetables do not meet the requirements set out by the Government, which are five fruits or vegetables per day.

Some participants said they preferred the texture of meat and supposed that having "some" fruits or vegetable everyday would be enough.

When we talked about snacks, eight out of ten participants said that they are used to buying confectionary when there is an offer. Price is an important reason determining their choices of food. Since all interviewees are students, they complained that with a limited budget for food, they could only do their best to fulfil their wants and tried to have a balance diet.

> "The stores used to have 4 chocolate bars for 99 p. It is something that I can afford and is tempting. Compared with fresh fruit, you can find offers on snack everyday, but not on fresh fruits."

Participants found that there was an agreement between price and taste. Although all of them are living on a limited food budget, however, not everyone will buy food that is on sale. One participant said that she would not buy something that was not on offer as there were many products on sale. Therefore, although price is an important consideration in food choice, most of the participants make choices based on their personal preferences.

Other than price and taste, five participants said that peer pressure was another key element to determine their choice of food. Contemporary dining is not just feeding us; it also includes socialising with family and friends. The subjects believed that eating with people was a manner to communicate with others. Therefore, the choices of food and venue would be influenced by others as well.

> "My badminton team used to go and have dinner together after practices. We are all students so not everyone can afford going to a restaurant. We used to go to Fast Food chains or pubs."

From this, I can presume that the major factors that affect our consumption are taste, price and peer pressures. Health concerns have rarely been mentioned in the interviews.

At this point, data which reflected the participants' view on healthy eating and food consumption had been collected. Participants were then asked their opinions on the work of different organisations that affected their eating habits. The first one was about the government policies and guidelines.

Government Policy Awareness.

We moved on and talked about food regulations and healthy eating policies. When asked which organisations or departments were responsible for healthy eating advice, three of them could not give me an answer. The rest of them believed that the National Health Service (NHS) is responsible for this area's promotion. None of the participants could mention any campaign that promotes healthy eating. Then I asked them the awareness of the "Five Vegetables and Fruits a Day" campaign and "Six Grams of Salt per day" campaign, all participants could recall the promotion of the "Five vegetables and Fruits a Day" campaign but none of them knew anything

about the "Six Grams of Salt per day" campaign. Half of them expressed that they were aware of the "Five vegetables and Fruits a Day" campaign because there were a lot of promotion in the supermarkets and advertisements on the television. However, not all of them were able to measure one portion. Besides, they hesitated in choosing the right kind of fruits and vegetable that they needed, whether frozen or processed food counted or not. When I told them what "Six Grams of Salt per day" campaign is about, all of them expressed that it was hard to measure and not practical enough. One of them said:

> "This campaign is not down to earth. How can you measure six grams of salt when you are cooking? Moreover, some of the food, for example bread, has added salt before we spread any butter on it! Six gram of salt is not enough to make any taste for my meals."

Three of them mentioned that they noticed the "colour coded system" for food from the newspaper recently. Although they are not sure what the differences between the new system and the old nutritional table is, they think that the new system is more comprehensive and easier to comprehend. They clarified that they could not distinguish the information on the old nutritional tables since every company and brand had different patterns from one and other. These participants believed that they would make a healthier choice with the guide of this new system.

When I asked them to comment on Government effort on healthy eating promotion, they said that they seldom received information about healthy eating from the Government. The resources on measuring healthy eating are limited. The only place they can think of getting this type of information is the NHS walk-in centres. However, they argued that they would not go to the Walk-In Centre unless they were sick. The information is not widespread. They all have the basic knowledge of healthy eating from their parents or schools. However, one said that the Government should keep us informed on dietary advices.

Other than Government's legislations and recommendations, participants also talked about supermarkets policies and how their promotions affect a student's life and their spending.

Supermarket Healthy Eating Promotion Effects.

Most of the participants are aware of supermarket promotion on healthy eating. They said that although the information is sometimes confusing, they will try the "healthier" option if it is on offer. An example is that, foods labelled with "Good for you' or "Healthy Living" will be more appealing than those without the label. Participants tended to trust what supermarkets said.

Four participants believed that supermarkets had put an effort to guide us to eat healthily. One of the examples quoted by a participant is the "Active Kids, 5 a day" advert promoted by Sainsbury's Supermarket, where the supermarket will give the customer a coupon when consumers buy particular kinds of vegetables or fruits. With these coupons, children can give to their schools and get some funding.

One participant compared the advertisement of supermarket healthy diet schemes with the government promotions on healthy eating. She thought that supermarkets were more powerful and faster in promoting healthy eating concepts, than the Government. She believed that this was related to the amount of resources, i.e. money, available to be spent on healthy eating. Food industries can make more profits and remain competitive when they promote healthy eating. However, for the government, the long term benefits for promoting healthy eating is improving the health of the nation by reducing the number of patients, which will in turn, reduce the burden on the NHS services.

Discussion.

The aim of this discussion is to link the sociological theories with the findings and provide further analysis of this research. Participants have mentioned some key sociological theories, and this is a summary of specific findings that represent the ideas in the literature.

Is Fast Food Part of Our Life?

During discussions on contemporary food culture, participants noted that fast food culture had been a part of their lives for a very long time. This was especially true when these students moved away from home to come to University. This is reflected by the argument that the expansion of fast food chains have taken over the food market. Participants claimed that they would have fast food once in a while even though they knew that it was not a healthy opinion. This strongly reflects the social-economic factor where price comes first. With a limited budget, participants had to consume food that they knew was unhealthy, in order to save money. Fast food chains have the capability to attract the public to spend their money at this establishment, because for a low price one can go away with a very full stomach. This supports that not only do sociologists such as Alan Beardsworth and Alan Warde, but also the general public notice the embeddedness of fast food culture. The health conscious is largely ignored in the fast food culture. Fast food chains only respond to health considerations when there is media and public pressures, for example, the introduction of green salad at McDonalds. However, the numerical figures shown in chapter one proves that without the salad dressing and croutons given with the salad, it's salt and fat content still remains high. This shows that the healthier option can often be deceptive

Although fast food is widespread in young people's culture, not everyone eats fast food. As the sociologists point out in chapter one, there is an age difference on the views on fast food. Senior citizens do not eat fast food as often as the young ones as they believe that it is not a healthy opinion. From the findings, participants who had been working in fast food chains refused to eat fast food. Their experiences of working in a fast food outlet, have taught them that you never know what the restaurant really puts into your hamburger. Therefore, though the price for fast food is bargaining, there are still some groups of people refuse to eat fast food due to the health consideration.

The results of the findings show that participants' eating habits were not affected by their cultural background. Therefore, cultural differences in the described in chapter one do not cover people from all age group.

Restriction in Food Choice under Supermarkets' Power.

When questioned on what they chose to buy in supermarkets, some participants showed a sign of stress. When I pursued them for a longer answer, they informed me of the difficulties they had in deciding what to buy, due to the varieties available. This support Alan Warde's theory that we enjoy more freedom in food consumption and at the same time feels uncertain what to buy. However, they did not hesitate to tell me where they did their food shopping.

The places for food shopping are limited to the supermarkets. As mentioned in the literature review of chapter one, they not only have a big market share, but also extensive control over the customers' choices. As a customer, we might think that we are enjoying more variety of choice than people a decade ago, however, behind the curtain; it is the supermarkets that make the decisions of what to sell, and therefore what consumers can purchase. This is supported by Warde's second thesis where he suggests that food industries mould our taste by mass production of their food. One might argue that supermarkets choose which foods to sell, based on customers' tastes and preferences. However, from a sociological perspective, Warde suggested that we might experience different forms or packaging of the same type of food. For example, the public can buy different brands of food rather than different types. Supermarkets can put on a lot of promotions or offers to mesmerize the public that the products are good for customers. The interviewees expressed that they are more willing to try different foods if they were on offer. Price is always the most important concern. For example, poorer people will not buy wholemeal bread if it is more expensive than white bread. Students are also influenced by prices. The majority of the participants would opt for the supermarket's basic version of a branded food, as it would only cost them a fraction of the price of a well known manufacturer. Regarding the choices in the supermarket,

Besides, choice analysis declared that individuals who went for food shopping decided what the rest of the household ate, as described by the sociologists in chapter one. The supermarket is a place where most households visit to do their food shopping; therefore it should be a good and direct way to penetrate the idea of healthy eating to the public. When supermarkets make decisions on what kinds of food they should sell, they should provide more healthy food and allow people to choose.

Government Weakness in Healthy Eating Promotion.

Literature has reported some past and recent regulations on healthy eating such as 'Five a Day', however, participants showed little knowledge of these campaigns. This indicated that the promotion of healthy eating was not powerful enough, as it had not penetrated the student population. Without a right guideline, participants' eating habits are most likely to be determined by their taste, price and peer pressures. This

could be supported by the cultural factors mentioned in chapter one in relation to the choice of food. Students coming from different ethnic backgrounds will eat food according to their traditions and beliefs rather than following the Government's suggestions. This again proves that the healthy eating promotion is not suitable and strong enough for everyone in the country. The Government dismissed NACNE and the inconsistency of thee Joint Advisory Committee on Nutrition Education as one of the problems causing the failure. The essential task of the Government is to emerge a wider promotion on healthy eating. Being able to educate and penetrate students with the healthy eating promotion is a major step forward, as they are tomorrow's parents. With a strong background, they will have the knowledge of what to feed their children, which is best for them.

In this study, participants gave up reading nutrition label as they did not understand the meaning behind the numbers. They were not clear on what amounts of which parameters were good for them. For example, they did not know whether x grams of salt or y grams of unsaturated fats is good for them. This proves that the Government has failed to pay attention to the food labelling regulations and has allowed food industries to have their own styles of nutritional table. The Food Standards Agency is responsible for legislating compulsory food labelling. However, the Government reacts slowly on these suggestions and the law has not yet been passed. The public await a comprehensive food label that is easy to read and understand. With every manufacturer being free to produce their own nutritional labels, it is not surprising that people will find it confusing and subsequently give up on trying to understanding it. Although the FSA is promoting its 'traffic light' labels, it does not have the legal power to force all manufactures to follow its new suggestions. The Government cannot solely rely on food manufactures to provide nutrition information. Since food labels are a tool of communication between food industries and customers. Manufacturers can make the labels appealing in order to attract more customers. In chapter one, the food industries complained that the 'traffic light' label distinguishes food as either good or bad. However, if we look at it from another point of view, with a good education on healthy eating, customers would be able to understand that there is no such thing as 'junk' food, but that there are some food that should be consumed in moderation and others that we need more of. Therefore, the introduction of legislation for a universal label will be of benefit to all, as everyone would understand what it means and then base their choices on the nutritional figures.

Are Healthier Choices Restricted by Price?

Although not all the students are under the working class, they do have a limited budget on food. Therefore price does play a major role in decisions on food. Bauman suggested that we enjoy wider choices of food, yet we are still restricted by our social-economic backgrounds. McDonalds' chicken salad proves that a 'healthier' choice is pricy. With a limited budget to eat and travel, we could choose different fast food brands rather than different types of food. An example is that we can choose from different fast food chains of similar prices, rather than choosing between a fast food chain and a restaurant where there are considerable price differences. In conclusion, the public do have a choice to eat different food, but it does not necessarily mean a healthier choice.

One could argue that individuals can purchase frozen, canned or dried fruit and vegetables when there is an offer and stock up for future use, therefore the five-a-day theory is affordable and easy to achieve. However, convenience food is high in sugar, salt or fat content. They are recommended to be eaten in moderation. Pre-packed vegetable is a fast and easy option to add value to ones' diets, but it is costly.

Can We Trust the 'Healthy' Food?

Some participants claimed that they learned healthy eating concepts from the magazines and television programs. However, the sociological theories suggested that the media did not always remaining neutral. Without Government regulations on the media, the nation will be misled. The public should be more aware of what kind of message the media is projecting and understand thoroughly what they acquire from the media.

An example of misleading food products was studied in chapter one. However, most of the participants believed the labels on the food packets and they believed that the Government would regulate it. Living in a country with such stringent regulations on every part of life, people automatically believe that what is printed would have been checked by the regulating authorities and therefore safe for the public. However, there are traps that people fall into, by placing so much faith in the food industry. A low-fat product is thought to be a healthier option, but these can be misleading statements and will increase the risk of ones' health. Therefore, even though we are aware of healthy eating, we might fall into traps that would lead us to increase the risk of our health.

Conclusion.

Alternatives to fast, unhealthy foods is becoming increasingly popular, however, there are still many factors that prevent people from choosing the healthier option. The sample of students demonstrated that their choices are limited by costs, taste, variety of grocery stores and peer pressure. This is supported by common theories that our choices are affected directly by the external environment, including financially, socially and politically. A study into the promotion of healthy food has shown that the Government has failed to educate our sample of students with the 5-a-day campaign. Most participants had revealed that they get more information on the topic of healthy eating from magazines than Government initiatives. Within the review of the literature, sociologists are pushing for the Government to take a stand and be forceful in passing legislation on food labels. However, the Government has taken a very lax approach and therefore lags behind in the education and promotion of the new food labeling system. From this study, students admitted a lack of understanding on the new labeling system and suggest that there is not enough information or access to this type of information. Consumption patterns are shown to be directly affected by social classes, as seen from a sociologists' perspective and the findings. With this in mind, the Government should regulate a comprehensive food labeling policy and incorporate within it, education of the nation accounting for people of all social backgrounds.

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Appendix 1.

List of Participants

S01 – (Mary) Female, Pharmacy student, 22
S02 – (Jane) Female, Electronic and Electrical Engineering student, 20
S03 – (Sasa) Female, Pharmacy student, 21
S04 – (Jo) Female, Electronic and Electrical Engineering student, 19
S05 – (Marky) Male, Architecture and Civil Engineering student, 20
S06 – (Wing) Female, Business Management student, 21
S07 – (Sam) Male, Business student, 20
S08 – (Sarah) Female, Business student, 22
S09 – (John) Male, Chemistry student, 21
S10 – (Charles) Male, Pharmacy student, 22