

An exploratory study of the choice of unhealthy foods of young adults

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Health conscious nutrition has become a popular topic of discussion, but the awareness to pursue its inherent objectives has not followed suite. This is especially true for the younger generation. In our research, we wanted to understand why young people choose unhealthy foods rather than healthy ones. During the course of the study, we tried to cast light on the phenomenon and the underlying problems of self-control for the choice of unhealthy foods. The study presents three focus groups and five in-depth interviews with young people between the ages of 12 and 23. The research has uncovered five controversies in the nutrition of young people.

Keywords: healthy nutrition, young adults, self-control problems

1. Introduction

Nutrition affects our whole life from childhood. Our eating habits evolve early and affect our health. Incorrect nutrition can impair or even shorten our lives. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the development of proper nutrition habits in children (Huszka–Dernóczy 2015).

Healthy nutrition, if we ensure proper consumption of fruit and vegetables, helps to supply our bodies with enough nutrients and vitamins. Consumption of some types of vegetables and fruits may reduce the possibility of developing certain diseases (US Government Printing Office 2010). However, unfortunately the eating habits of all age groups differ markedly from what is recommended: to varying degrees, they all consume too little fruit and vegetables, but consume a lot of energy-rich, poor quality food (Black et al. 2017).

Inadequate nutrition can be a source of many illnesses, such as cancer or cardiovascular diseases, especially when it is combined with an unhealthy lifestyle. Children, who are poorly nourished at an early age, will be more likely to become susceptible to these diseases later on. Young people coming from low income households are inclined to eat food with low nutritional content. Parents are forced to put cheap and quickly-prepared meals on the table, which are often high in calories and fat. The growth of fast foods with low nutrition content contributes to today's growing rates of obesity - beginning in childhood - the treatment of which is becoming an increasing challenge worldwide (Khatoon et al. 2017, Vazquez–Torres 2012). Comparing the current and the data two decades ago, shows that the number of overweight children has doubled, while the number of obese adolescent teenagers has plummeted (Vazquez–Torres 2012). The first signs of many chronic diseases (such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity) can be detected in childhood (Black et al. 2017). In addition, psychological diseases such as depression are associated with obesity, which means even worse quality of life for the person (Vazquez–Torres 2012).

Looking at data on health spending, we can see that households spend more and more money on health, including medicines, medical aids and other therapeutic

goods (KSH 2017). Nutrition related consumer decisions would be rational actions if the individual's consumption decisions took the long-term health consequences of his decision into account, thereby avoiding illnesses caused by unhealthy eating, and with that, saving future medical expenses. Additionally, it is important to note that dropping out of work also entails significant costs both at the individual and social level, which may also be reduced by healthy eating. From a national economic point of view, the health of a society is also important as it affects social security and health expenditures.

Examining the healthy eating among young people is therefore of great importance, as they will be the workers and consumers of the future. Even though they are legally minors, they still make their own decisions about their daily nutrition and are even old enough to cook for themselves. In our research, we wanted to understand why young people choose unhealthy foods over healthy ones. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews have raised several controversies about the nutrition of young people. As a theoretical framework for studying this topic, a particular area of behavioral economics, namely intertemporal bias was chosen, including the effect of limited self-control consumption (Prelec–Loewenstein 1991).

2. The role of consumer self-control in nutrition

In order to examine the contradictions in the nutrition of young people, we should definitely address the concept of rationality. By assuming a rational consumer, everyone would choose healthy foods, as this decision largely determines their future health status. Classical economic models also assume rational consumers who try to maximize their benefits. This is true of homo oeconomicus, who satisfies only the means of sustenance, but the motives of a "well-to-do" man's actions are more from the realms of emotion (Székely 2003).

Behavioral economics examines the consumer phenomenon of rationality often being absent from real economic decisions. The reason for this is essentially in the decision process, which consists of many factors such as perception, influence, motivation and preference (McFadden 1999). Consumers often do not choose the optimum because they make mistakes, are uninformed or do not have sufficient self-control for rational decision-making (Mulvaney–Lee 2017). Herbert Simon, who won a Nobel Prize for proposing the theory of limited rationality, says that we do not have to deal with how the actors of the economy should behave, but how they actually act (Simon 1986). The theory of limited rationality does not want to abolish the models of rationality of neoclassicals but rather complement them (Simon 1986, Golovics 2015), since limited rationality also presupposes that people act rationally, but that their cognitive and emotional propensities influence their decisions (Jones 1999). *"We do not look at emotions and other unconventional attitudes against ration, but we try to prove that these additional motivations - which also have their role in economic processes and events - do not make impossible inquiry based on intellect, do not derange the basic relationships, only modify them, color them. These colors can, however, become very important in examining certain economic phenomena"* (Hámori 1998, p. 25).

In the case of nutrition, rational behavior would be the choice of healthy alternatives, but consumers rarely do so. As one can see from the discussions above,

they do not necessarily act irrationally, they only decide on the limits of their cognitive and emotional attributes. Such a limit may be by choosing unhealthy food as the problem of consumer self-control, as unhealthy food is often finer, more desirable, or even cheaper and easier to access. Thus, the benefits of eating unhealthy food are immediately realized by the consumer, while related expenditures (problems) occur only in later years. *“Intertemporal situations are often formulated in economic research as a choice between “attractive in short-term/ hurtful in long-term” and “hurtful in short-term/ useful in long-term” alternatives.”* (Lippai 2008, p. 6).

Many researchers have dealt with the relationship between nutrition and self-control, focusing mainly on obesity (Lakdawalla–Philipson 2002; Finkelstein et al. 2005). Looking at the past 50 years, we can see that, thanks to the development of technology, food prices have declined, while the intensity of physical activity has decreased due to the rise of office work. It is mainly these changes that have caused obesity (Lakdawalla–Philipson 2002). Thanks to the technology, work has also become more productive, with lower physical intensity and calorie burning, which also redounds obesity (Finkelstein et al. 2005). Although obesity can be a health-related problem, the main factor influencing obesity is the lifestyle of the individual. Consequently, *“the variable of self-control can play a very important role in the evolution of a behavior where consumers who are fully aware of the benefits of physical activity and the disadvantages of unhealthy eating, yet they have an unhealthy lifestyle”* (Lippai 2010, p. 77).

Examination of consumer self-control and consumer motivation can help to create a preventive health policy that enhances self-control in consumers about healthy eating. In this way healthcare spending along with the taxpayers’ burden could be reduced in the future.

In our study, we consider the choice of unhealthy foods as a special form of expression of the limited rational consumer choice among an especially vulnerable age group, young people.

3. Nutrition of young people

People generally know what the basic forms of preventive health are (good nutrition, regular exercise, avoiding smoking, avoiding stress, etc.) but many do not follow them. This is partly due to the fact that adverse effects do not occur immediately, prevention (behavior change) involves both material and time expenditure, and people do not know the techniques of changing behavior.

Preventive health behavior is *“any activity that an individual pursues to preserve his health ...”* (Kasl–Cobb 1966, p. 246). Health behavior can not be explained merely by referring to rational “objective” knowledge. Cognitive and health psychology and the behavioral sciences have long been looking for why (and why not) people perform health-preserving activities. Young people have a vision of health conscious lifestyles, but they are not aware of all the elements and have no motivation to implement it.

There are many factors influencing the nutrition of young people, one of which is the effect of the parents. There is a strong correlation between the parents’ and their children’s nutritional attitudes, as the children of parents who are eating

healthy are more health conscious and are more interested in this subject (Kiss–Szakály 2016). Kiss and Szakály (2016) found that the role of mothers is much stronger, they are seen as a person who supports healthy lifestyle, while the father's role is much weaker, yet positive. However, only 1/3 believe that their questions about healthy lifestyle and nutrition are answered reliably by their parents. For them, authorities and doctors are the authentic sources of information. In addition, the internet has become the third most important information channel for young people (Kiss–Szakály 2016).

According to some domestic research (Kotor et al. 2016), the appearance and taste of the food is important for youngsters between the ages of 14 and 18, while the others between 19 and 25-year-old are already interested in food health criteria such as low sugar, carbohydrate content and food additives. According to the study, healthcare professionals and doctors count for this age group as a credible source of information on a healthy lifestyle (Kotor et al. 2016). In addition, the information on food packaging and restaurant menus are an important factor in healthy choices, because people prefer the healthier alternatives, if they can see the ingredient list and nutrition ratios (Kozup et al. 2003).

It is an important question, how we can influence the eating behavior of young people in the early stages of their lives? Since the family is still at the center of life for young people at this time, convincing parents is a must for sustainable and healthy nutrition. According to research, family-focused nutrition programs, which provide nutrition information to parents, have proven to be much more successful than school-based programs. In the first case, fat intake was significantly reduced, and fruit and vegetable consumption increased, while in the latter, only a slight increase was observed in fruit and vegetable consumption (Black et al. 2017).

4. Primary research

In our research, we examined the main factors influencing the nutritional attitudes of young people and the basic norms and values related to eating habits and lifestyle. During the course of the study, we tried to highlight the phenomenon and the underlying explanation of self-control problems behind the choice of unhealthy foods.

The study presents three focus group discussions between 18 and 23-year-old university students and five in-depth interviews with primary and grammar school students between the ages of 12 and 16.

The three focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2016 at a university. Participants were recruited among university students. Each time, the focus groups consisted of 10 young people. During the focus groups, two age groups were formed. In two focus groups there were young people between the ages of 18 and 20, while the third focus group included between 21 and 23. Although these two age groups are not distinct from each other, we considered it preferable to treat BA and MA students separately for the sake of homogeneity. Students in the younger age group are at the beginning of their university years, they have just left grammar school, so most of them are still heavily dependent on their parents. On the other hand, between 21 and 23-year-olds are already working part-time beside attending university, so they have financial resources to make a completely independent decision about their nutrition.

The in-depth interviews were made with primary and grammar school students in December 2017. The guideline of the interviews was based on the examination of eating habits. Due to the exploratory nature of our research, we were looking for quality information about their image of healthy eating, so we did not pursue representativeness due to both the small sample size and the aim of the research.

5. The results

When analyzing the interviews and focus group studies, we identified five controversies related to limited rationality and self-control problems in the nutrition of young people. The first important motive that emerged during the research is that they emphasize the importance of healthy nutrition and lifestyle, which is in contrast to their own actions. According to the second contradiction, vegetables and fruits are considered to be very healthy, yet they do not consume enough of them. The third important motive is that, according to the young people surveyed, only unhealthy foods are delicious, so the question arises why should they not choose unhealthy but delicious food? The fourth controversy was related to parents who often say what they should eat but they do not set this example with their actions. The fifth motif is about sharing photos of food in social media. In this section we will present our results along these five opposing pairs.

5.1. *It is important to eat healthy, but they do not do it*

The young people interviewed were aware of the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and nutrition and the potential consequences of lacking it, but they do not follow it. According to Anna (16) "*so many diseases can be prevented by eating healthy, we can also pay attention to our bodies so we do not get fat.*" Matyi (16) also explained the effects of a healthy lifestyle on the general well-being, and referred to them as a "*health spiral*" for the components of a healthy lifestyle, which reinforce one another and follow the transition to a healthy lifestyle: "*And then you feel a lot better when you eat healthier. You feel like you live healthy. And this is one of those things, if you eat healthy, then you start to do more good things. So if you eat well, you do more things. For example you start to do sport... it might be such a turning point for you and then the rest will come along with it.*" (Matyi 16).

Intertemporal decisions requiring self-control also appeared during the conversations. Young people feel that they are "*immortal, invulnerable, and the consequence of unhealthy eating does not affect them*" (Viki, 20), and according to Eszter (21) "*as long as you do not experience it on your own skin, you will not believe it*". Additionally, sport came up as a factor in healthy lifestyle. However, sport often becomes a regular action only when the consequences of its absence have already appeared: "*People usually begin to move when they have a couple of pounds plus.*" (Ádám 23).

Respondents believe that they are healthier than the younger generation, who eat a lot at fast food restaurants, but also live better than their parents' age group who "*eat bacon and sausage. It is the most unhealthy thing*" (Gergő, 23). However, they do not eat healthily as well, and explain this with the high prices of quality meals: "*I do not have the money to buy healthy food forever, because let's see, it's very*

expensive. So I just have to take something and get ready. The other one is, as Simon also said, that we often have no time. There must be something to spur you on in the run." (Andor, 22).

They think that they are healthy, so they do not feel they need to change their way of life, though they are aware of the unhealthy lifestyle they are living. They reassure themselves that many old people live in their environment who do not live healthy and think that the diseases have a genetic background as well: *"My grandfather is 90 years old and eats bacon every day and has no problem at all. Every morning pálinka and bacon."* (Tamás, 22).

During their university years they indulge themselves in unhealthy eating characterized by the lack of daily, warm food cooked by parents and the stochastic lifestyle, while primary school students have no sense of the seriousness of the problem.

5.2. Vegetables and fruits are healthy (due to their vitamin content), but they do not consume enough

Their image of healthy foods and lifestyles is not yet mature, they are not fully aware of the elements of a healthy lifestyle, they think in extreme examples about healthy eating. Many of them think about home-made foods as a healthy option, because they know what is in it. Some people identify healthy nutrition with diet and slimming cure, but they all agree that vegetables and fruits are particularly healthy. According to Anna (16), vegetables and fruits are healthy, because there is *"a lot of vitamin in them."* According to Hédi (12) it does not matter if we eat vegetables raw or cooked.

Others can differentiate healthy foods from the unhealthy: *"We do not eat greasy foods in KFC, McDonald's, but salads and vegetables. If you have bread or pastry, you buy either half-brown or brown"* (Klarissza, 19).

Respondents stated that they only eat fruit occasionally, but have them always at home at their own discretion. They eat little vegetables, sandwiches, Fornetti and other pastries often. For them healthy lifestyle and nutrition are not important at all, they are not aware of their elements and can not completely separate diet from healthy eating.

5.3. They know that fast food is unhealthy, but they eat a lot at places like that

Every respondent finds fast food meals unhealthy, but they often eat in such places. Anna (16), for example, at the beginning of the conversation explains that *"McDonald's whole range of offer is unhealthy and similar fast-food restaurants too"*. Later she came up with fast food restaurants again as an example of the place they go with her friends, but they are aware of the unhealthiness of it: *"sometimes it comes into our mind, that maybe we should not go"*. Hédi (12) also points to this: she refers to McDonald's as an example of unhealthy food, and later explains that sometimes they go to this restaurant with the family, because she begs for it.

Fast food restaurants serve as a social place for young people beside meals. They sit there to talk to their friends. Anna thinks about fast foods restaurants as an easily accessible alternative, *"This is the nearest to us. And these normal restaurants, where they have more normal food, are far from school."* (Anna 16). The university

students did not identify with eating in fast food restaurants, which is more of a characteristic of the younger age group: *"Usually, I think it's cool for them to sit in KFC or McDonald's and then they'll have such fast food."* (Réka 21).

Fast food meals are considered unhealthy by all respondents, but they often eat in such places. Respondents explained this behaviour by the speed, comfort and the delicious flavors offered by these types of restaurants. The lack of consumer self-control and the problem of intertemporal decisions can also be observed in this case, because they choose the long-term harmful foods for the momentary pleasures.

5.4. Parents say they should eat healthily, but parents do not eat like that, so they are showing a bad example

The influence of parents on the diet of young people plays an important role (Kiss–Szakály 2016). It came up several times during the interviews and focus group discussions that parents are trying to draw young people's attention to healthy eating. The main patterns of their recommendations are eating more fruits and vegetables, as well as fewer sweets. However, in a number of cases, conversations have shown that parents do not set this example with their actions. Matyi (16), for example, said that it is important for parents to have a healthy diet, but they often do not have time to eat: *"They are trying to eat healthy meal as well. But they return home after a hard day and just want to give us something to eat, and then go to sleep. And the worst thing is that they can not pay attention because they have no energy to watch us for eating healthy."* (Matyi, 16)

Young people also drew attention to the opposite judgment of the two parents. *"...when the chocolates are tucked away and we search for them in the larder with dad and then we find some and eat them, and mom is angry because she bought it for Christmas"* (Réka 12).

As most of the young people interviewed still live at home, parents have a strong influence on their diet. However, it would be important to show an example of healthy eating, as they lose credibility in the eyes of young people without any implied conduct. This, in itself, does not refer to the limited rational nature of young people's consumer choices, but indicates in what a contradictory environment they are expected to make the right choices.

5.5. They share "fancy" dishes on Instagram, although this does not necessarily reflect their real (daily) meals

Young people share a wide spectrum of food on social media. This can be either self-made or restaurant meal, but the focus is always on the food itself in the picture. It is to be noted that the younger age group between 18 and 20 unanimously condemned the sharing of photos on social media. According to their own statements, they have never share content like this, at most 1 or 2 times. According to them, young people consciously choose what they share on social media, and only pictures that will receive a lot of positive feedback will be published. Matyi (16) said the purpose of posting food is exhibitionism: *"they share healthy food to show how healthy they are eating. And*

usually, if someone goes to some good restaurant, they usually share what they eat there to show other people that they can go to such a fancy restaurant" (Matyi, 16).

In contrast, older 21-23 year-olds have a negative attitude to social media sharing but assume that they often share such content, although these images are not for the outside world but for themselves: *"I do not necessarily share it because I think it's cool to eat that, but to keep it for myself. If I eat only a bit of that, I will kill that beautiful composition for which the chef fought, but in this case it can be an eternal memory with the help of social media" (Blanka, 22).*

The youngsters between 12 and 14 do not have Instagram yet, because their parents do not allow it. Social media is used consciously by young people, seeking to create a positive image of themselves and to collect positive feedback. They share photos of food from this motivation, be it their own cooked food or meals made at the restaurant.

6. Conclusions

In our research, we wanted to understand why young people choose unhealthy foods against healthy. Our results have shown that healthy eating is not important at all for young people. To research this, we conducted three focus group discussions between 18 and 23-year-old university students and five in-depth interviews with primary and grammar school students between the ages of 12 and 16.

For the young people we studied, healthy lifestyles and nutrition are not important at all, they are not aware of what constitutes the same, and can not completely separate diet from healthy eating. They feel they are still too young to experience the consequences of improper nutrition. Sport and regular exercise are considered more important than balanced nutrition, and in their opinion, it is a substitute for a healthy diet. Choosing unhealthy foods is explained by the lack of time and its convenience.

They think they are healthy today, so they do not have to deal with the possible negative future consequences. This result is related to the problem of intertemporal decisions and consumer self-control, as it requires self-control to choose healthy food from the many alternatives currently available on the market and the negative or positive effects of current decisions appear only later in time. However, our research cannot be considered closed. Further exploratory research to investigate the problem of self-control is needed to advance knowledge in the subject.

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