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McDonaldization without a McDonald's

GLOBALIZATION AND FOOD CULTURE AS SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH
IN URBAN BANGLADESH

Shahaduz Zaman

Newcastle University

Nasima Selim

Freie Universität Berlin and BRAC University

Taufique Joarder

Johns Hopkins University and BRAC University

Abstract

Bangladesh is one of the few developing countries where there is no McDonald's and yet the process of "McDonaldization" is in full progress. This paper explores the food consumption practices of a group of affluent university-educated urban youth in Bangladesh to illustrate this process of McDonaldization. Based on in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, document review, informal observation and content analysis of advertising materials, the authors show how globalization and youth food cultures interact with each other as social determinants of health with considerable impact on the health and wellbeing of the affluent urban youth of Bangladesh.

Keywords: globalization, social determinants of health, food culture, Bangladesh

Introduction

This article demonstrates how globalization and youth food cultures in Bangladesh interact with each other as social determinants of health. The article argues that although there is no branch of the fast-food chain McDonald's in Bangladesh, the process of "McDonaldization," described by Ritzer (2010) as a sensitive marker of globalization, is in full progress.

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Globalization has been defined as “a process of greater integration within the world economy through movements of goods and services, capital, technology and (to a lesser extent) labor, which lead increasingly to economic decisions being influenced by global conditions” (Labonté and Schreker 2007a: 1). The globalization process is a key context for the study of social determinants of health, broadly defined as “the conditions in which people live and work, and that affect their opportunities to lead healthy lives” (Jenkins 2004: 1), as the structures and processes of globalization affect access to social determinants of health via multiple pathways. At least five major inter-linkages between globalization and negative health outcomes have been described, namely social stratification, differential exposure, differential vulnerability, differential consequences and health system characteristics (Diderichsen, Evans and Whitehead 2001, cited in Labonté and Schreker 2007b).

Food is one of the major social determinants of health listed by the World Health Organization Regional Office of Europe (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). Developing countries are currently undergoing a “nutrition transition” characterized by the over-consumption of food that is high in sugars and fat concurrent with a decline in cereal, fruit and vegetable consumption (Popkin 1998), especially among the affluent class. For lower-income countries, the problem of over-nutrition coupled with under-nutrition among the poor represents a double burden (Misra 2002; Reddy 2002). Over-nutrition from excessive consumption (also a form of malnutrition) leads to a rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, degenerative eye diseases, obesity and dental caries. Eating fresh vegetables, fruits, pulses (legumes) and minimally processed starchy foods, but less animal fat, refined sugars and salt are the dietary goals for preventing chronic diseases (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). As more people in developing countries are failing to achieve these goals, they are at greater risk of developing these NCDs, also known as diet-related chronic diseases (DRCDs) (Hawkes 2007).

Food is also considered a “window on the political.” Exploration of food consumptions practices provide clues to how “global flows” and “new notions of identity” are implicated in everyday food consumption practices (Watson and Caldwell 2005: 1–2). Availability of healthy food and adoption of healthy food habits are political issues because food supply is controlled by market forces (Wilkinson and Marmot 2003). The food ideology of “cultural globalization” results in a surge of preference for fast food. This, in turn, is driven by the “economic globalization” enforced by the multinational mass media corporations that, along with the multinational industries offering sports, cultural and consumer products, dominate distribution as well as content provision (McChesney 2000; McChesney and Schiller 2003; Miller 2002).

Fast food is traditionally defined as food purchased from either self-service or take-out eating venues with minimal or no waiter service (NRA 1998; Jekanowski 1999). Studies conducted among youth have shown the frequent patronization of fast-food restaurants to be associated with high calorie intake, greater fat consumption, increased intake of soft drinks and lower intake of fruits and

vegetables (French *et al.* 2001). Thanks to the opportunities offered by neoliberal states in the name of free trade and economic globalization, globally promoted soft drinks (e.g. Coca-Cola) and fast food brands (e.g. KFC and McDonald's) are multimillion-dollar industries driven by market expansion and profit maximization. One of the results of this is "diet globalization" (Pingali and Khwaja 2004). The link between rising fast-food consumption and increasing obesity and other health consequences across many parts of the developing world has been discussed elsewhere (Chopra and Darnton-Hill 2004; Labonté and Schreker 2007b).

Economic and cultural globalization influence the values and lifestyles of young people globally and affect their health (Blum and Nelson-Mmari 2004). Today's youth (aged 15–24 years), especially those living in cities undergoing rapid urbanization, carry the burden of poor nutritional practices, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, anemia, eating disorders and other health conditions associated with affluence. This is part of an emerging trend among the youth population across the world and strains already overburdened health services, causing suffering for adolescents and their caregivers. Obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases are "lifestyle diseases" associated with inactivity or excessive consumption, particularly in developed countries and economies in transition (WHO 2005). Against the backdrop of a growing economy, the urban youth in developing countries are adopting an increasingly sedentary lifestyle combined with excessive consumption of fast food. Such adoption of global food culture has serious health consequences, especially in countries without concurrent development of strategies and policies to overcome the health effects of such food consumption habits (Adair and Popkin 2005).

In the context of the fast-food industry, researchers have investigated globalization and food politics since the 1990s. The first franchised McDonald's restaurant appeared in the United States in the early 1950s; by the mid-1990s, the franchise was global, with a new McDonald's restaurant opening every eight hours (Watson and Caldwell 2005: 2). The golden arches became the food "icon" of the late-twentieth century, and it was not until 2000 that brands such as Starbucks were truly contesting this position. Nonetheless, McDonald's reigns supreme as a symbol of the American dream multiplied across the world, an "optimistic vision of globalization" (Watson and Caldwell 2005: 2).

Bangladesh has undergone rapid urbanization since the 1960s and 1970s (Hossain 2006). The globalization process was spearheaded by the adoption of its trade liberalization policy in 1982 and intensified in the 1990s (Rahman and Wiest 2003). Trade-related restrictions were reduced significantly and tariffs fell from 58 per cent in 1992/93 to 22 per cent in 1990/2000 (WTO 2000). In terms of foreign direct investment (FDI), more than 150 firms have since moved to Bangladesh, with around US\$415 million invested by countries with advanced economies (Encyclopedia of the Nations 2009). Subsequently, the associated and often resultant changes in lifestyle (e.g. growth of nuclear families, both parents working outside the home, improved access to technology, income growth, etc.) have contributed to the mushrooming of the fast food and soft drinks industries in the country. Since the late 1990s, transnational fast-food chains have spread across the



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country. However, Bangladesh is yet to document the possible impact of globalization on the patterns of food consumption among young people, specifically the social and cultural influences.

We conducted the present study among affluent university students in Dhaka to understand how globalization can affect health by promoting risky health behaviors. This study specifically sought to identify the patterns of food consumption practices among informants and evaluate how globalization facilitates or constrains the food consumption practice patterns of this group.

Methodology

The study used multiple qualitative tools including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, document review, informal observations and content analysis of advertising materials. Students from a private university in the capital city of Dhaka were selected based on the educated assumption that students in such institutions would be more likely to have a high level of involvement with the structures and processes of globalization. Students with a global food consumption pattern with or without food-related health problems (DRCDs such as obesity, hypertension etc.) were selected. This study defines a young university student as a bachelor's degree student below 24 years of age. We conducted in-depth interviews with forty-one university students, of whom twenty-nine had food-related health problems operationalized as overweight and/or hypertension. As part of the in-depth interviews, we recorded lists of the respondents' favorite foods as well as a 24-hour food recall. No systematic observation of food consumption practice was recorded. However, informal observations in the student canteen, street shops and local fast-food venues near the university area provided clues to contextualize the study findings. We also conducted four focus group discussions, two with the students with health problems and two with those without health problems. There were six students in each focus group. To select our respondents, we conducted a mini-survey at the university canteen with a few questions (e.g. whether or not they regularly ate fast food) and took physical measurements, (e.g. height, weight and blood pressure). We calculated the students' BMI (weight in kg/height in meters) and selected from overweight students with a BMI \geq 25 according to the definition of overweight provided by WHO (1998). About half of the finally students selected were female.

In addition, we conducted eleven key informant interviews. The key informants included the pro-vice chancellor of the university, the campus superintendent in charge of student affairs, the university medical officer, the professor of the nutrition department, parents and local scholars including a globalization expert, public health professional and a religious scholar.

For document analysis, we collected advertising materials from roadside billboards along the localities most frequently attended by the university students; as well as from the two most widely read newspapers, *The Daily Star* (a daily English-language newspaper) and the *Prothom Alo* (a daily Bengali newspaper) over the month of February 2009.

The D-Juice Generation

A carefree, spontaneous, fun-loving, consumerist lifestyle seemed central to the lives of the affluent youth in Dhaka. One of our key informants, a public health professional, labeled these youth as the “D-Juice”¹ generation. The majority of the students we interviewed were tech-savvy, exposed to movies, music and branded items from the rest of the world, with a clear preference for Western products. Every student informant used computers for work or entertainment. They browsed the internet, either to chat or to look for information and entertainment for a couple of hours every day. Facebook was a popular social space for them. Almost all the students were big fans of Hollywood movies, while a few were also fond of Bollywood films. Female students liked to watch the soap operas and family dramas on satellite television channels aired from the neighboring country of India. Maria, a 20-year-old female student commented: “Whenever I am at home, I always sit in front of the TV. It does not matter what they are showing, I just sit with my eyes glued to the television, and I watch sports, music, drama whatever. I know it is a desperate habit but I can’t help it.” Reading for pleasure seemed to be a rare pastime enjoyed by only a few. Most students liked to dress casually and preferred Western clothes. Some boys preferred branded sports apparel and accessories, such as Nike, Adidas etc. One of them emphasized such brand preference and said, “Even if it costs more, it is worth it.” Some of the female students mentioned their desire for famous international brands, such as Gucci, Armani etc., and expressed their frustration that they could not afford to buy such branded items. A 19-year-old student said, “People may think I am materialistic. But I just like designer clothes. I love Gucci, Armani. I can’t always buy them. If I had the money I would buy only branded clothes.”

Food Consumption Practices of the D-Juice Generation

We investigated what this D-Juice generation preferred to eat. We found that they would mostly eat traditional foods like rice, roti (hand-made local flat bread), lentils, curry etc. for dinner and sometimes for breakfast, when at home with their parents. For the rest of the day, however, when in and around the university campus, they would almost exclusively eat fast food. Although they would sometimes eat local fast foods like *chotpoti* (spicy chickpeas), *phuchka* (round, fried, puffs stuffed with spicy chickpeas), *jhalmuri* (puffed rice with hot sauce and fried lentils) etc., they preferred global fast foods such as burgers, pizzas etc. Many students reported buying local fast food only when they had insufficient money to buy global fast food. The majority of the students reported their favorite pastime as socializing in fast-food restaurants. Indeed, students described spending time in fast-food venues as a way of passing time with their peers, whether to discuss classes and exams, plan events or simply pass time: “I go out a lot with my friends: school friends, university friends etc. We always meet at fast-food restaurants” (Sazia, 19-year-old female student). The students seldom ate at home. Instead they would eat at the various fast-food outlets around the campus. Occasionally they would eat out with their families, but on most workdays and sometimes during weekends they would eat



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with friends. Many reported skipping breakfast at home and eating only dinner with their respective families.

While on campus, most students ate in nearby fast-food venues and restaurants that also served fast-food items. They mentioned branded global food chains such as, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Pizza Hut, Helvetia etc. as well as roadside stalls selling cheap, locally made “glocal”² fast-food items. Almost all students had a liking for global brand soft drinks, such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Sprite etc. Most students reported having multiple snacks in between two heavy meals during the day (lunch and dinner). Most students reported eating different types of dessert containing chocolate, cakes, chocolate confectionery (Kit-Kat, Perk, Cadbury, etc.), processed yogurts and sweet pastries etc. from brands such as Hot Cake and King’s Kitchen. Ice cream was universally popular, especially the global brands such as Baskin Robbins, Mövenpick, Anderson’s and Club Gelato.

As discussed, aside from dinner, students would rarely eat at home on weekdays. Students from more affluent families, however, mentioned global food items like sausages, pancakes, sandwiches or noodles being part of their everyday food habit at home. We noticed that students with higher-income group parents seemed much less inclined to traditional food. A few also likened going to fast-food restaurants as a status symbol or a sign of prestige. During a focus group discussion, Maruf (20-year-old male student) said, “Taking someone to a fast-food restaurant means that boy has more money to spend. For some people, showing off is important.”

A high-ranking official from a trans-national food chain reported a similar opinion, describing the changing trend in food as a modern global phenomenon. He also pointed to the general lack of good entertainment in Dhaka and suggested that young and even older people had in recent years begun to see eating in fast-food restaurants as a form of entertainment—an enjoyable way to pass their leisure time.

The Absence of McDonald’s

The majority of the students expressed discontent about the absence of McDonald’s in their city. As viewers of various international television channels, seeing McDonald’s ads at least four or five times a day served only to heighten their disappointment that the country lacked a single McDonald’s restaurant: “McDonald’s should come to Bangladesh. We have KFC, BFC ... why not McDonald’s? They will do good business and we will have another new brand of food. Isn’t that great?” (male student in an in-depth interview). They also commented that they had heard via word-of-mouth that McDonald’s food was “yummy!” A few mentioned that a McDonald’s restaurant would be an essential destination were they to leave the country. In short, they missed McDonald’s food without ever having tasted it.

Transitional Food Habits of the Youth

Most key informants commented that fast-food culture was a new phenomenon. In the words of the religious scholar: “In our own times, we never knew what fast food

was.” Indeed, given that the phenomenon of fast food only began to grow in the 1990s, it is unsurprising that the elderly religious scholar did not experience it during his youth. The parents of the students complained that the young people did not like to eat vegetables nowadays. The university medical officer observed that today’s young generation had a preference for hot, fatty, spicy food, which she termed “junk food,” as well as soft drinks. An educationist felt that the increasingly sedentary lifestyle of munching away in front of the television or computer was a recent trend that was previously unheard of. A local scholar and public health professional added, “When we were young, we used to celebrate with *biriani* (a local special rice with meat). These days, young people celebrate at Pizza Hut or KFC.” The canteen supervisor observed that young students bought very little traditional food such as rice, lentils or vegetables. According to her, they would mostly eat “rich” food, such as fried rice, fried chicken, various fast-food items, soft drinks etc. She said, “I tried to include items with less oil, fat, more vegetables ... The students did not like it. We had to throw the food away. I would have to run the business, so I could not afford to take such chances again.”

Reasons for Fast Food Preference

The Perfect Meeting Place

Many students commented that they simply enjoyed socializing in fast-food outlets. These decorated, spacious, air-conditioned restaurants clearly offered them a space to hang out with friends, eat and have fun, whiling away their leisure hours. A male student said, “We like the environment ... we need space to rest and talk!”

Dating also seemed to popular among these youth, and fast-food restaurants were cited as an appropriate place to date because of the lack of alternative public meeting places for young people in Dhaka. A male student said, “Every time I look for a place to date with my girlfriend nowhere but a fast-food shop comes to mind. We have no other option but going to a fast-food shop for dating.”

Disliking Traditional Food

The majority of students reported disliking rice, traditionally the staple food of Bangladesh. A male student said, “Eating rice is a bother. You would have to wash your hands properly, do this do that.” The female students likewise rejected rice by for aesthetic reasons. Shyama, a 20-year-old student, said, “Rice makes me really fat. I lose a lot of weight if I simply skip rice.”

Transition in Family Structure and Values

Of all the key informants, the religious scholar placed particular focus on the influence of the family on the young generation. He said, “Everyone in the family is so busy these days! Family bond is just not there ... Young people are frustrated ... They don’t wish to stay at home ... they go out and they eat what they get.” He discussed how the traditional family structure and regular food habits at home had changed over the decades. Modern families in the city are busy with work and socialization outside home and away from each other. They no longer talk about



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their day-to-day life. According to him, this could be a reason why the young members of the urban families would disregard traditional family norms and a regular food habit at home. A few key informants focused on the fact that food was everybody's business in a traditional family structure in Bangladesh, where grandparents, uncles, aunts used to live together with a couple and their children. Within such large families, the women would ensure that the food is cooked properly, the men would be responsible for buying fresh items from the local market, and everyone would eat together. The student members of the family would carry a lunch box of home-cooked food and would rarely eat out. Among modern nuclear families, especially those with both parents working, traditional food preparation is no longer the norm. In the words of a high-ranking official working in the trans-national food chain: "They [the working parents] don't have time to cook. So fast food comes [into the picture] ... this is easily produced [with little hassle for the parents]." The canteen supervisor also opined that "Many women are now working outside the home and often prefer processed and packed food items that could be cooked in a short time." It was also found that in many families, it is presently popular to celebrate special occasions at global branded restaurants such as Pizza Hut, KFC etc.

Media Influence

Watching food in the movies ... umm ... Last night I was watching a movie, I was like ... ohhh ... ahhh ... I really would like that ... The food looked really attractive. (Shumi, a 19-year-old female student)

Most students spent a lot of time watching TV and movies, and observed the frequent display of food items not only during programs but also between them. A male student commented on the relationship between popular shows and a certain food item. He said, "In our country, the 'pizza culture' flourished due to the cartoon *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. It was shown that they eat pizza all the times and we became influenced to eat pizzas." He also added, "I myself am a cartoonist and am a fan of *Garfield*. I found they eat lasagna and I tried that food for the first time because of that."

The respondents observed that cooking shows that focused on "how to prepare delicious food" were becoming increasingly popular. Most students, especially female, had been exposed to this. They admitted that food items showcased, displayed, cooked and prepared in these programs influenced their choice and desire to eat certain kinds of food. Of all mass media influences, however, the majority of students reported advertising media as having the greatest influence.

This view was shared by many key informants. They felt that affluence, availability of multiple television channels, and the increased use of personal computers and the internet have improved the quality of life but at the same time influenced what people, especially the youth, do with their time and to their body and mind. The campus superintendent commented: "There are so many advertisements for ice creams! Is there any ad for guavas, or grapefruits? No!" This

comment highlights the lack of health promotion to counteract the potential harm caused by the aggressive marketing by fast-food chains and the soft-drink industries.

Peer Pressure

A few students blamed the regular consumption of fast foods on peer pressure. Some informants mentioned that even if someone were not so keen on fast food, their friends would influence their decision of where to eat. One student said, "Friend circles change our decisions. We often eat what everyone likes to eat."

"Love Happens at Pizza Hut": Marketing Strategies of Trans-national Food Chains in Bangladesh

Walking along the busy roads of Dhaka, one encounters a number of billboards and road signs, many of which are advertisements for trans-national food chains. The most widely-read newspapers publish expensive advertisements from these food companies several times a week. Our content analysis of these roadside advertisements and print ads found that these companies tend to correlate love with food. This was also evident from our in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the university students. In a city where open public space is shrinking every day, young couples wanting to date are finding themselves limited to chain fast-food outlets.

The food chains seemed to be aware of this fact and advertise to attract this group of people. Pizza Hut proudly claims: "Love happens at Pizza Hut," while KFC shows the communion of a burger and a piece of fried chicken with a "plus" sign (to symbolize love) made from two French fries, with the tagline: "We celebrate love." Such advertisements not only use alluring pictures of mouth-watering fast-food items but also showcase beautiful young couples sharing intimate moments together, sitting closely and eating fast food.

The fast-food industry often is coupled with the soft-drink industry, as well as with entertainment and technology companies, such as the rapidly expanding mobile phone companies. One advertisement shows fast food (i.e. a burger), spicy local food (*chanachur*), and promotional offers from a mobile phone company and an amusement park. The tagline reads: "*Bhinno shobai, tobu antore ak shur*" [Each of these items is different, but all of them have the same melody inside, let's share]. The image and the message are clear: profit-making multinational companies are joining hands to promote a consumerist youth culture that favors fast food.

Awareness of Food Production, Preparation and Distribution

Bangladesh is one of the six low-income net food importing countries with an agricultural trade deficit of more than 5 percent of its imports (Ng and Aksoy 2006; Bohle *et al.* 2009). Formal, informal and traditional actors and institutions play crucial roles in Dhaka's food systems. Food in Dhaka city is traded and consumed through an elaborate and diverse food system consisting of a wide range of food institutions. Dhaka's hinterland is perhaps the whole country and therefore food is



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a political issue (Bohle *et al.* 2009). This is not just in terms of under-nutrition among the poor and slum population. There is also an emerging pattern of overconsumption, likely related to the popularity of the globalized food production, processing, distribution and marketing system among the affluent sections of the city.

The fast food of trans-national companies was considered affordable. At the time of this study, one could buy fried chicken from KFC for a couple of US dollars in Dhaka. Nonetheless, “glocal” fast food restaurants mimicking the global chains (e.g. the local BFC resembling KFC) were cheaper (at less than a dollar). In spite of the rising cost of fast food, there were always less-expensive options available in “unhygienic” but affordable varieties. Similar trends can be found with soft drinks. Representatives of global brands such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi and 7-UP use local raw materials to produce non-premium soft drinks which are then sold using the global brand names. Local competitor brands try to imitate the global brands and offer similarly packaged and advertised soft drinks at prices as low as 25 cents a bottle, affordable even to low-income groups.

We wanted to explore whether the young people had paid any attention to the changes in food production and distribution over the years. The majority of the students had a limited knowledge about food production and distribution. Their chief interest in the food production system was whether it was “hygienic” or “unhygienic.” Home-cooked food was always considered to be hygienic, especially if the mother had cooked it. Outside the home, street food and cheap shops selling “glocal” foods were considered unhygienic, while many felt that the global fast-food chains were hygienic. The perceived global standard of food hygiene is an additional important reason for the youth’s preference for fast food.

Advances in communication have made food distribution easier over the years. The food distribution system in Bangladesh has also been transformed by the introduction of home delivery, the easy availability of good-quality foreign raw materials for the preparation of fast foods, attractive packaging, the establishment of brand names as status symbols, the penetration of international franchises in local markets and the use of technologies to present food commodities attractively. Most of the students professed unclear ideas about these changes in the food distribution system; however, they had noticed some of the business tricks of the fast-food companies. For example, one student pointed out the branches of one food brand in the premises of another to act as complement, “In the *Shad Tehari Ghar* you will see the franchise of *Mövenpick* so that if one customer finishes his lunch with *tehari* [a local rice-based food] he can satisfy his desire for an international ice cream brand.”

Informal observation around the university block revealed that surrounding the city campus, fast-food chains were mushrooming, with global and glocal brands available within a two-kilometer radius. Pizza Hut, KFC and Nando’s were the more widely known brands. The ubiquitous presence of Coca-Cola in every shop within a one-kilometer radius was clearly indicative of the global–local distribution chain of the soft-drink industry as an inseparable corollary to fast food.

Only a few respondents mentioned any preliminary ideas about food preservatives and processing. They felt that long-term storage with preservatives

(e.g. formalin, various chemicals, low-quality coloring agents etc.) was detrimental to health. They were therefore of the opinion that the bulk of food items sold in big departmental stores, shopping malls and supermarkets contained more preservatives, and that it might be better to buy food from the local *kaacha bazaar*, the roadside food markets that sold fresh food materials every day.

Some key informants mentioned that the availability of new technology had also had an impact in households' preparation of food. For example, microwave ovens instead of regular gas ovens or the old kerosene stoves had made processed and fast-food items more acceptable among consumers.

The public health nutritionist mentioned that the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides had made high-yield crops possible. She considered this to have had a positive effect on the food system in Bangladesh. However, she also mentioned that the availability of freezers among middle class households might increase the affinity for meat.

Discussion

This paper presented the food culture of a group of affluent young people in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Although the systematic observation of actual food consumption behavior was beyond the scope of the research, the respondents' food recall and their perception of food combined with informal observation indicate a preference for fast food among this segment of young people in Dhaka. Although the respondents reported eating traditional Bengali food at home, as well as sometimes local fast food outside home, the overwhelming majority favored global fast food. Indeed, according to the young respondents and the key informants, there is a growing tendency among youth to replace traditional food with fast food.

It is well established that the structures and processes of globalization influence the food consumption patterns of young people (Vepa 2004; Hawkes 2007). According to Holton (2000), globalization has three types of consequence: homogenization, polarization and hybridization.

The homogenization thesis proclaims that global culture is becoming standardized around a Western or American pattern. The term "McDonaldization" is commonly applied to such notions. The present study shows the widespread preference for fast food among affluent urban youth in Dhaka. As consumers and actors of the "D-Juice Generation," they perpetuate the homogenized McDonaldization of youth culture. Using fast-food eating habits as symbol and practice of their "D-Juice" identity, the urban youth unwittingly fall victim to the global flows of capital in promoting the fast-food industry. By contrast, the polarization thesis often proposes that in some sections of non-Western society, there is also resistance towards Western cultural norms. In our illustrative case study, although eating local or glocal food was still found to be prevalent, there is little evidence of resistance against global food among the special group of respondents. Among the elders and key informants, fast food was tied to a negative identity; the youth, however, considered it trendy, popular and their preferred lifestyle choice. As our study was not expanded to include a broader section of youth (e.g. the working youth or students coming from lower and middle-income



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families), there is space for exploring resistance. Whether the resistance comes from the inability to buy fast food and be part of the D-Juice generation or whether it comes from a more principled resistance to fast food remains to be understood. Finally, the hybridization thesis argues that cultures borrow and incorporate elements from each other to create a hybrid culture. Our study found hybridity in the form of “glocal” food items. However, respondents did not express a wholehearted preference for such items. In this regard, informal observations provided a valuable clue. During the research period, investigators observed groups of youth eating “glocal” food items in street shops, for example, local pizzas, burgers and various other items resembling the foodstuffs available from the branded fast-food chains around the block.

We would argue that there is a greater and growing tendency to homogenization in the youth food culture rather than polarization or hybridization. However, as mentioned earlier, the respondents in this study represent a highly affluent, educated segment of society. The contemporary trend in the food culture of poor villagers or urban slum dwellers is beyond the scope of this study. We therefore keep our arguments valid mainly for the upper middle class youth of Dhaka city. It could be an interesting future research project to investigate the food culture of the other social classes of Bangladesh.

The present study identified a number of factors influencing the food consumption patterns of the young people of Bangladesh, including youth lifestyle; the availability, accessibility and acceptability of energy-dense, high-calorie fast-food items; and the aggressive marketing strategies of trans-national food companies. Globalization in Bangladesh has directly affected trade liberalization and market expansion, as well as created opportunity for employment, high income growth, and the rise of a more affluent class—all of which may directly influence the availability, accessibility and acceptability of fast food among those young people who seem to prefer and consume fast food much more frequently than ever before. Globalization as a social determinant of health, influences the food consumption pattern of young people through such multiple, indirect pathways.

In recent decades, especially after the 1990s, globalization structures and processes were well established in Bangladesh. The fast-food industry began to mushroom during the late 1990s and continues to do so. The study shows that the trans-national food chains are currently established as the preferred venues for food and socialization for youth. The pattern of over-consumption seems to be evident among the segment of the affluent class that we interviewed (young people studying in a private university) and confirmed by the key informants.

The faster pace of student life had made these young university students hard-pressed for time; as a result, a preference for faster food had also developed. Structural factors such as availability and accessibility of a number of food options drove them towards foods which were cheap quickly produced, and often “unhealthy.”

The university students of this study are part of the affluent segment of youth in the country. Situated in a social context of affluence and increased exposure to a “global” lifestyle, they are also intensively exposed to the global marketing strategies of trans-national food companies. As such, their vulnerability is due to

an excess of access and a lack of adequate information and facilities. The “disease of affluence” is an issue for these students, and with it the associated problem of overweight.

In 2007, WHO commissioned a report on “Globalization, Food and Nutrition Transition” (Hawkes 2007) that reviewed existing evidence to conclude that the globalization process could partly contribute to the nutrition transition and the growth of DRCDs. Following the WHO framework, we have made an effort to chart the different pathways through which this could be made possible in Bangladesh.

Globalization has affected the supply-side determinants, as seen with the growth of trans-national food chains in Bangladesh, especially Dhaka city. This was made possible by other supply-side indicators of globalization, such as FDI and the liberalization of international food trade. Putting an exact figure on the proportional contribution of trans-national food companies to FDI is impossible, but given the current trend of growth it must be significantly high. Apart from affecting the growth of trans-national food companies, FDI has also contributed to income growth in the country, creating affluence among the business class and high salaries in the professional sectors. This is another pathway through which globalization structures and processes may have affected the demand-side drivers of over-nutrition and the growth of DRCDs.

Income growth, rising employment and rapid urbanization in the country have created an increased opportunity for people, especially the urban youth, to access and afford fast foods. These factors also may have created the optimum environment for adopting a different lifestyle where urban youth from high-income families desire and consume fast food.

Another pathway through which globalization may have affected the supply-side drivers of over-nutrition and DRCDs is the aggressive advertising and promotion conducted by global food companies. Hawkes (2006) has previously described how food advertising and promotion accelerates the flow of food products into the global marketplace. As evident from our study, the trans-national food chains are frequently present in major newspapers, television and roadside hoardings, often employing popular sentiments to promote their products. These processes create in Bangladesh a situation where the process of marketing and globalization facilitate each other (Hawkes 2007). Evidently, the liberalization of FDI has increased the availability of dense, high-calorie processed fast-food items, while reducing their price due to increased competition and the way they are packaged, distributed, sold and marketed. Cultural influences that have seeped through the psyche of Bangladesh via the mushrooming of trans-national food companies, and widespread exposure to media and the internet may have introduced and popularized new foods. A “global” lifestyle also means for these students a “global” food habit.

The Directorate General of Health Services in Bangladesh has acknowledged that globalization, urbanization and lifestyle all contribute to the significant burden of NCDs (DGHS MoHFW 2007). The present study highlights how the food consumption patterns of the youth in Dhaka are leading to an increase in food-related NCDs, arguing that DRCDs are indirectly influenced by the globalization process. The study draws our attention towards globalization and specifically



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McDonaldization as a macro-process affecting the more proximate micro-processes of risky health behavior, such as excessive fast food consumption. By doing so, this may add to our understanding of some of the broader causal factors influencing the more proximate risks of NCDs among the urban youth.

In the present study, globalization as a key social determinant of health is shown to be influencing the food consumption patterns of young people through multiple pathways. Other authors have also examined how globalization is affecting the food culture in different countries. For example, Matejowsky (2007) describes how global food products have been indigenized in the Philippines, and Karaosmanoğlu (2007) shows how Turkish cuisine has changed its taste and presentation to fit the global market. Bugge (2010) has discussed how young Norwegians eat considerably more fast food than the adult population, although the signs indicate that they are starting to express scepticism towards such food and adopting a more healthy lifestyle. The present study shows that young Bangladeshis, although seemingly aware of the alarming health consequences associated with excessive consumption of fast food, are yet to follow the example of the Norwegian youth and start moving to a pattern of healthier food consumption. The results of an ethnographic study of fast-food restaurants in Beijing by Yan (2005) are comparable with those of the present study. Chinese society, like Bangladesh, did not have fast food as an integral part of its indigenous culture. The process of McDonaldization started earlier than in Bangladesh, back in the 1980s, when KFC opened its first restaurant in up-town Beijing. Yan describes some specific elements of the thrill experienced by the customers: “the encounter with friendly employees, quick service, spotless floors, climate-controlled and brightly-lit dining areas, and, of course, smiling Colonel Sanders standing in front of the main gate” (Yan 2005: 82). The eating experience seemed to be more about the environment than the food itself. The initial “invasion” was followed by a “war of fried chickens” with hundreds of local fast-food chains opened between 1988 to 1990 and thousands in recent years (Yan 2005: 96). Yan interpreted such ongoing trends in terms of the rise of a new consumer group—the urban youth—and the construction of a new lifestyle. This lifestyle was initially manifest among the country’s affluent youth but soon spread to other social classes as well as to women and children.

Our study reveals that a D-Juice lifestyle is considered trendy among the affluent urban youth, for whom fast food is not just *food*, but a marker of modern identity. The youth are easily won over by exciting advertisements and the availability of cheap options. Their food choices are therefore made *for* them by the global flow of consumer capital in branded and local varieties of fast-food and soft-drink industries. This is the result of multiple factors emerging from the rapid economic and cultural globalization of local cultures and food systems: the marketing strategies of multinational companies; availability of fast-food options; change in familiar patterns of eating at home; increased wealth in urban families to afford eating out; and a growing consumerist youth culture. Not only is the transition in family structures encouraging youth to frequent fast-food restaurants; there is also a demand for social spaces among this demographic—a demand these restaurants are clearly keen to meet.

Following the Beijing study of Yan (2005), our Dhaka youth show similar trends of forming “new social groups,” demanding new space and new food. Globalization and food consumption practices interact in multiple pathways to facilitate choices that are not promoting health among the youth. That said, the youth have other contesting desires that drive them to the choices they make. Fast food is just one of them. Although the golden arches of McDonald’s are yet to arrive in Bangladesh, McDonaldization is already catering to the rising demand.

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Shahaduz Zaman is a medical anthropologist at Newcastle University. His areas of interest are global health, ethnography of health institutions and global health policy. He has worked on the health and healthcare issues of South Asian and Mediterranean countries. Newcastle University, Baddiley-Clark Building, Richardson Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 4AX, UK (shahaduz.zaman@ncl.ac.uk).

Nasima Selim is a senior lecturer at the James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Bangladesh. She is currently pursuing a PhD in medical anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin. Institut für Ethnologie (Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology), Freie Universität Berlin, Landoltweg 9-11, 14195 Berlin, Germany (nasimaselim@yahoo.com).

Taufique Joarder is a lecturer at the James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Bangladesh. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the Johns Hopkins University. Department of International Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 615 North Wolfe Street, Room E8011, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA (joardernddc@yahoo.com).

Notes

- 1 “D-Juice” was a package offered by the popular mobile phone company, Grameen Phone, specially catered for the youth with its options for making cheap calls. The D-Juice ads adopted a unique style of advertising, mixing Bengali with English in an unprecedented manner, collaborating with fast food and soft drinks and promoting a consumerist youth lifestyle. Many young people became a subscriber to the “D-Juice” lifestyle.
- 2 We use the term “glocal” to refer to locally-made food items that resemble the wares of the global fast-food brands.



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