

An international study of fast-food dining perceptions: millennial parents, non-millennial parents, and peer judgement during fast-food family dining

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An International Study of Fast-Food Dining Perceptions

Millennial parents, Non-millennial parents, and peer judgement during fast-food family dining

Purpose -This study examines peer perceptions of a parent dining in a fast-food restaurant with their child.

Design/methodology/approach - A vignette approach was used to explore consumer assumptions and normative data using a four-country online survey of parents, with 1,200 respondents (300 from each of Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US). The study included qualitative and quantitative thematic analyses of the responses.

Findings - Family dining in fast-food restaurants was most often associated with an opportunity for family time together (25%), a treat (25%), and an unhealthy food decision (19%). For some, this is a normal meal that should not be judged (11%), for others, this is merely a meal of easy convenience (9%). Fathers, when depicted as the parent in the vignette, were more likely to be praised for spending time with their children, while mothers were more likely to be critiqued for making poor nutritional choices. Respondents from the US viewed fast-food family dining more favourably than respondents from Australia, Canada, or the UK.

Social implications - Despite rising obesity in these four countries, only 19% of respondents focused on the unhealthy element of the food choice, suggesting that perhaps this element is not on the forefront of consumer decision considerations.

Originality - This paper confirms parental peer perception differences, based on gender and country, regarding opinions on a child dining with a parent in a fast-food restaurant.

Keywords Child, Consumer Attitude, Family, Fast Food, Parent, Restaurant, Vignette

Paper Type – Research paper

Introduction

Millennials (defined as age 18-34 as of 2015) are a demographic that make up the largest population in the US today (and in Australia, Canada, and the UK) (United Nations Dataset, 2019). They are entering their prime consumer years as well as becoming parents, with one in four already parents (Fromm and Vidler, 2015).

Millennial parents have a unique set of psychographic characteristics that differentiate them from previous generations of parents (Barkley, 2013). They put high value on the importance of being a good parent, weighing this as a higher priority than a successful marriage (Wang and Taylor, 2011), with 52% reporting that being a good parent is one of the most important things in their lives.

Putting high value on being a good parent, in an environment with rising occasions of meals consumed outside of the home, with a strong emphasis on what their peers think, has led to a generation of parents hyper-tuned into how other parents view their parenting skills (Pew Research Centre, 2015).

More so than in past generations, Millennials place high importance on the opinions of their social circle (Barkley, 2016). They rank their social circle above paediatricians, their fathers, and over other family members (except for their mothers whose advice is still first), as important sources of parenting advice.

With nearly 90% of Millennials actively using social media, millennial parents are a generation that is quick to share images and anecdotes about their children, online, with their social circle (81% Millennials vs 70% of Gen X). However, they are also more likely to find that social media posts make them feel inadequate as parents. Twice as many Millennials as Gen X survey respondents stated this in a 2015 Time's survey (8% Millennials vs 4% Gen X) (Time, 2015). With the focus on social circle, this has led to millennial parents having a heightened belief that other parents are judging what they allow their children to eat.

Pulley *et al.* (2014) examined perceptions on overall family child feeding practices but focused on within family perceptions, while Vollmer *et al.* (2015) focused on paternal perceptions. There has been a lack of literature and only a limited focus on the role of fathers vs mothers in terms of overall influence on what children eat (Khandpur *et al.*, 2014, Khandpur *et al.*, 2016; Fielding-Singh, 2017). However, the importance of engaging fathers in promoting healthy lifestyles is emerging as an important area of study (Arlinghaus and Johnston, 2017; Jansen *et al.*, 2020; Harris *et al.*, 2020).

Over the past 20 years (Pew Research Centre, 2016) consumers have changed where and how they eat their meals and consumption of fast food has been on the rise. Globally, the proportion of meals eaten outside of the home has grown exponentially and particularly in the markets focused on in this study (Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US) with consumers shifting meal consumption away from the home, and increasing visits to fast-food restaurants (Janssen *et al.*, 2017).

To date, outside perceptions (i.e., peer perceptions) is an area that has had little attention, especially in terms of how fathers and mothers feeding their child in fast-food restaurants are perceived and if there are differences in peer perceptions based on the gender of the parent. This study's goal was to add knowledge to this under-researched area.

Methods

Background to vignette usage

Vignettes are short stories that describe hypothetical characters in a specific set of circumstances, which can be used to elicit normative data and attitudes towards a set of social circumstances (Finch, 1987; Barter and Renold, 1999; Aguinis and Bradley, 2014; Lydecker *et al.*, 2019). Alexander and Becker (1978) suggested that the use of vignettes produces more valid and reliable feedback than surveying respondents using 'simpler abstract questions'. The vignette is a cost-effective and practical method, useful in both evaluative and explanatory studies, and can be considered a middle of the ground epistemology, combining a systematic structured approach with the expression of 'emic' or 'personal meanings' (Miles, 1990). Grønhøj and Bech-Larsen (2010) suggested the use of vignettes as a means to access family topics for examining preconceptions. Vignette have been used in a wide variety of studies looking at parental perceptions, parental attribute predictions and perceived parental competence (Beckerman, 2020; Kranz, 2020; Lydecker, 2020) Using a vignette approach, this study qualitatively explored if parents were in fact being judged when dining with their child in a fast-food restaurant, and how their parenting peers perceived fast-food family meals.

The vignette

In this study, two vignettes were used to illustrate a family in a fast-food restaurant. Wording in the two vignettes was identical, with the exception of the gender of the depicted parent. Respondents were presented with the vignette scenario and asked one open-ended question and then to evaluate 20 closed-ended statements. Respondents were randomly assigned to only one of the two vignettes.

Internal validity of the vignette was established by pre-testing it with a small convenience sample of peers from the researchers. The vignette study was a part of a larger programme of research focused on family dining in fast-food restaurants. The closed-ended statements were informed from research conducted in other elements of the larger research study. This survey was first fielded in Canada with 200 respondents to confirm there was no ambiguity in the scenario. Then the fielding was expanded to include Australia, the UK, and the US (with 300 respondents per country). An additional 100 respondents were subsequently surveyed in Canada producing 1,200 respondents in total.

Vignette description

Respondents were asked to imagine themselves dining at a large national fast-food restaurant and to imagine that a parent with their child was having a meal at the table beside them. They were asked to qualitatively describe the parent/child pair. A thematic analysis was performed on this qualitative data. A grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1994) was used to identify emerging themes from the verbatim transcripts. Participant quotes, to describe each major theme, were selected across a range of participants to ensure representation from the sampled populations. The goal was to examine preconceptions about the profile of a parent who takes their child to eat at a fast-food restaurant, and to explore stereotypes potentially associated with that parent.

Scenario description A [mother] and scenario description B [father]

Imagine you are at a typical McDonald's restaurant. It's a Tuesday evening around 6 pm and you observe a [mother] with a 5-year old child enter the restaurant. The [mother] and child approach the counter and together they order a meal. The server at the counter places the meal on the tray and you can see that the child's meal consists of chicken nuggets, french fries, and a small pop. The [mother] and child

carry their tray of food into the restaurant and they sit at the table beside you. Since they are sitting so close to you, it is easy for you to observe what their evening meal looks like. Using your own words, describe the [mother's] appearance, behaviour, and interaction with the child.

The 1,200 qualitative descriptions were manually coded and analysed. Codes were developed based on overarching themes, such as cost and time constraints, as well as through the use of data queries. Sub-themes were identified and interpreted, and the common themes formed the basis of the qualitative findings.

The Questionnaire

After reading the vignette, and qualitatively describing in their own words how they visualized this typical experience would appear to them, respondents were asked to rate 20 statements using a 5-point scale about the parent in the vignette, where '1 = Does not describe the situation at all' to '5 = Describes the situation to a large extent'. This data was used to examine preconceptions (defined in this context as an idea or opinion formed beforehand, i.e., an assumption), specifically of the parent, of the child, of the parenting style, and of the body weights of the parent and of the child. The detailed questions can be seen in the questionnaire response tables in the Results Section.

For both sets of analyses, subgroups were tested using *t*-tests to compare means and one-way ANOVAs with statistical significance defined as a *p* value <0.05.

Respondents

The 1,200 respondents were parents of at least one child under the age of 18 and were a diverse mix of geographic origins (four countries), education level, and income level. The sample was 50/50 male/female, as well as a mix of both millennial parents (age 18-35) and Gen X parents (age 35-54). Respondents were recruited from a paid Toluna survey panel. Toluna (www.toluna-group.com) is an established online market research company, which provides paid access to consumer panels in over 41 countries.

Results

The five major themes identified from the respondents' open-ended comments from the qualitative data included: spending time together, fast food as a treat, unhealthy choices, judgement free zone, and convenience.

Independent sample *t*-tests were performed to identify if there were differences in the frequency of each major theme (the five themes are expanded below) comparing gender of the parent depicted in the vignette, gender of the respondent, and millennial vs non-millennial parents. A one-way ANOVA with a Bonferroni post hoc test was performed for each theme, to identify if there were between country differences.

Theme 1: Spending time together

For 25% of respondents, the time spent in a fast-food restaurant was seen as an opportunity for family time (Table I). Seeing a child and parent eating a meal together, outside of their home, was often described as a special moment for them to bond. The parent was positively acknowledged for making an effort to take time with their child, and this bonding time was thought to build happy memories for the child. Fathers, more so than mothers, were praised for taking time to create these moments with their children.

<insert Table I>

Gender of parent in the vignette: Vignettes depicting fathers elicited more comments on the role of ‘time together’ as an element of fast-food dining. Vignettes with fathers had higher levels of mentioning, ‘time together’ (28%) compared to vignettes with mothers (12%), $p < 0.001$.

Country of respondents: Of the four countries, Canadian respondents most often referenced the value of spending ‘time together’ and were statistically more likely to reference ‘time together’ than respondents from the UK or the US. The UK had the lowest mentions of ‘time together’ and was statistically lower on this aspect compared to respondents from Australia or Canada. No other group differences were found to be statistically significant (Table I).

Gender of respondents: Female respondents were more likely to mention ‘time together’ (26%) compared to male respondents (14%), $p < 0.001$.

Generation of respondents: No statistical differences were observed between generations of parents (Millennials vs Non-Millennials).

Below are some participant quotes of the ‘spending time together’ theme selected to illustrate typical comments (Box 1 and 2).

Box 1 Spending time together: Mother vignette.

Mother Vignette

‘That’s it’s nice to see a mother taking time to sit down inside of a restaurant with her child instead of eating while driving.’ Male, US, 29 years old.

‘Maybe not the best choice for quality of nutrition, but the mother could be on the go and needing a quick/cheap meal. At least she is spending time with her child while they’re eating which is important. No judgment here! 😊.’ Female, Canada, 27 years old.

‘A mother who spends some of her time with the child, is great these days.’ Female, UK, 32 years old.

‘I would assume she is treating her child and spending time with her child creating a beautiful memory.’ Female, Australia, 38 years old.

Box 2 Spending time together: Father vignette.

Father Vignette

‘Good that the dad is spending time with the child.’ Female, US, 43 years old.

‘He is spending quality time with his child and should be applauded. He is a very good father. He is kind. He is loving.’ Male, Canada, 50 years old.

‘Spending time with his child. Knows his eating habits what he likes and dislikes.’ Male, UK, 24 years old.

‘Considering today’s society is technology based in everything we say and do to see family members sitting eating together is a wonderful thing.... The man taking time to create beautiful memories that his son will remember for a lifetime.... these days is a very rare find.’ Female, Australia, 38 years old.

Theme 2: Fast food as a treat

For 25% of respondents, fast food was seen as a 'treat' occasion (Table I). The assumption amongst many respondents was that if a parent and a child were seen together in a fast-food restaurant, that this was a 'treat' or special occasion, and not part of a regular occurrence. Respondents speculated that it may be a 'treat' for the child, to reward them for an accomplishment, or an opportunity to spend some extra time with their parent. Perhaps it was a 'treat' for the parent as well, to give them a break from cooking meals, or to help them balance their busy life.

Gender of parent in the vignette: No statistical difference was seen based on the gender of the parent depicted in the vignette. There were 24% 'treat' comments with the father scenario and 26% 'treat' comments with the mother scenario, $p = 0.384$.

Country of respondents: The theme of 'treats' was common across all four countries and mentioned in 25% of all comments. However, the frequency varied by country. Respondents from Australia were most likely to use the concept of a 'treat' to describe the meal, while respondents from the US were the least likely to include the idea of 'treat' in their descriptions (Table I).

Gender of respondents: Female respondents were more likely to mention 'treat' (29%) compared to male respondents (20%), $p < 0.001$.

Generation of respondents: Millennial parents were statistically less likely to describe the occasion as a 'treat' than older (non-millennial) parents (20% vs 28%, $p = 0.004$).

Below are some participant quotes of the 'treat' theme selected to illustrate typical comments (Box 3 and 4).

Box 3 Fast food as a treat: Mother vignette.

Mother vignette

'She is out and wanted to treat her daughter.' Female, US, 32 years old.

'This mom treats her child to a meal out. It is nice to see a mom taking time for her child. Mom deserves a day out too.' Female, Canada, 47 years old.

'She's taking her kid out for an occasional treat, probably as a reward like my mum used to do. She's probably eating one of the more healthier options on the menu. I think she's a good mum but it's not up to me to judge other's parenting style as long as the children are doing well.' Female, UK, 19 years old.

'The child could simply be having a treat, so innocent until proven guilty.' Male, Australia, 36 years old.

Box 4 Fast food as a treat: Father vignette.

Father vignette

'Father spending some quality time with his son, and part of that time is stopping for lunch. Not the lunch the boy should eat every day, but as a treat while out with his father, this is fine.' Male, US, 46 years old.

'They are having a nice lunch together. He is treating his child to a meal. It brings back memories of when my parents would treat their kids to the same meal for special occasions.' Female, Canada 37 years old.

'He is treating his child to a fast-food meal. It does not make him a bad parent. Combined with a healthy diet, we can allow for treats from time to time. Nobody is perfect!' Male, UK, 35 years old.

'He is providing his child a treat and enjoying spending time together. I would hope that this is an occasional treat for both of them. The parent seems loving and caring towards his child.' Female, Australia, 36 years old.

Theme 3: Unhealthy choices

For 19% of respondents, there were interpretations that the parent was feeding the child 'unhealthy' food and that they should make more of an effort to take care of their child's health (Table I). For some, the 'unhealthy' food was justified as long as it was a rare visit, while for others, the parent was setting a poor example and potentially setting up their child for a lifetime of bad-eating habits.

Gender of parent in the vignette: Vignettes depicting mothers elicited more comments on the role of 'unhealthy' as an element of fast-food dining. Vignettes with fathers had lower levels of mentioning, 'unhealthy' (17%) compared to vignettes with mothers (21%), $p = 0.039$.

Country of respondents: The theme of 'unhealthy' choices was common across all four countries and mentioned in 19% of all comments. Respondents from Australia were most likely to use the concept of 'unhealthy' when describing the vignette (Table I).

Gender of respondents: There was no statistical difference observed based on gender, in how often respondents mentioned 'unhealthy'.

Generation of respondents: There was no statistical difference observed between generations of parents (Millennials vs Non-Millennials) as to whether they described the occasion as 'unhealthy'.

Below are some participant quotes of the 'unhealthy' theme selected to illustrate typical comments (Box 5 and 6).

Box 5 Unhealthy choices: Mother vignette.

Mother Vignette

'The mom is not teaching the child to be healthy. The mom does not care what the child eats. The mom thinks fast food is okay for her child.' Female, US, 25 years old.

'Personally, I think that a 5-year-old should be eating a home cooked meal. These are important growing years for a child. I think that the mother should get help at home if she is too tired.' Female, Canada, 49 years old.

'Food restaurants tend to be outlets for products that are the result of mass murder....and I would hope that any sensible parent would open their child's eyes to the horrors of such places... let's face it, the standard of 'food' is disgraceful and very unhealthy.' Male, UK, 49 years old.

'Gives me the sensation of irresponsibility like in a way that she does not care or does not feel responsible for the well-being of the children.' Male, Australia, 18 years old.

Box 6 Unhealthy choices: Father vignette.

Father Vignette

'I might think that parent is lazy or even uncaring. I would see a child eating food that's not very good for his developing body and I may associate the parent with being lazy or uncaring for not providing the proper nutrition.' Female, US, 20 years old.

'He brought his child for a treat. He did not think about selecting a healthy meal for his child. The child will develop bad eating habits and will most probably pass it on to his children or friends.' Male, Canada, 43 years old.

'Lazy parent giving their child junk, food with no nutritional value and tons of sugar, fat and additives.' Female, UK, 35 years old.

'Irresponsible parent feeding the child poor quality food. Setting the child up for a life of poor health and higher risk of obesity. A sad but common sight today.' Female, Australia, 36 years old.

Theme 4: Judgement-free zone

For 11% of respondents, there was hesitation to pass any judgement on the parent and child dining beside them in the scenario. Respondents even emphasized that if they themselves were sitting in the restaurant, they would not be in a position to pass judgment on those around them. However, for some respondents, they mentioned both 'not judging' while passing a degree of judgement at the same time.

Gender of parent in the vignette: Vignettes with mothers had higher levels of mentioning, 'no judgement' (14%) compared to vignettes with fathers (9%), $p = 0.003$.

Country of respondents: The theme of 'judgment free' was common across all four countries and mentioned in 11% of all comments (Table I). There was no statistical difference observed between countries.

Gender of respondents: There was no statistical difference based on gender, in how often respondents mentioned 'judgment-free'.

Generation of respondents: There was no statistical difference between generations of parents (Millennials vs Non-Millennials) as to whether they described the occasion as 'judgement-free'.

Below are some participant quotes of the 'judgement-free' theme selected to illustrate typical comments (Box 7 and 8).

Box 7 Judgement-free zone: Mother vignette.

Mother vignette

'Her food choices for her and her child are her business.' Female, US, 27 years old.

'This could be a treat for the child. Don't judge because if you are there too then that means you are eating the same food too.' Male, Canada, 41 years old.

'It's not my place to judge somebody I don't know... Fast food is obviously unhealthy for the child, but it might be a one-off treat... It's none of my business.' Female, UK, 22 years old.

'Fed is best, as long as it isn't a regular meal I don't see the issue. I wouldn't even bother judging her parenting. Feeding kids is hard sometimes and there's nothing wrong with a treat.' Female, Australia, 25 years old.

Box 8 Judgement-free zone: Father vignette.

Father vignette

'I would think it is nice that a parent and child are having one on one connection time. With such busy lives, it's nice to stop and enjoy the people we love. Beyond that, it's not my place to judge. However, I would probably think it would be better if the child had a healthier meal to enjoy during that shared time and that hopefully that was just a special indulgence.'
Female, US, 38 years old.

'This is how I grew up, so I would not judge the man negatively. Whatever someone wants to feed their kids is their prerogative and I have no place to judge.' Female, Canada, 31 years old.

'I am not going to judge him over his food choices. At least the father is feeding and looking after the child.' Male, UK, 38 years old.

'Out treating his son...spending time with his son.... not a very healthy choice but I don't judge people.' Female, Australia, 41 years old.

Theme 5: Convenience (or laziness?)

Affordability, convenience, or speed were mentioned by 9% of the respondents. Family dining in fast-food restaurants was described as 'moments of convenience', suggesting there was a busy lifestyle, or potentially no time (or ability) to cook.

Gender of parent in the vignette: There was no statistical difference based on the gender of the parent depicted in the vignette, with 8% 'convenience' comments with the father scenario and 10% 'convenience' comments with the mother scenario, $p = 0.234$.

Country of respondents: There was no statistical difference between country on the frequency of the 'convenience' comment, averaging 9% of total comments.

Gender of respondents: Based on gender of the respondent, there was no statistical difference in how often respondents mentioned 'convenience'.

Generation of respondents: There was no statistical difference between generations of parents (Millennials vs Non-Millennials) as to whether they described the occasion as one of 'convenience'.

Below are some participant quotes of the 'convenience' theme selected to illustrate typical comments (Box 9 and 10).

Box 9 Convenience: Mother vignette.

Mother vignette

'She is probably a single mother, getting her child a small bite to eat. She is most likely running errands around town and didn't have enough time to make her child lunch. She just stopped at a fast-food restaurant so they could get a quick bite to eat, nothing too expensive.' Female, US, 19 years old.

'The meal they are currently enjoying seems to be out of convenience as they take a break from shopping.' Male, Canada, 43 years old.

'Probably overworked, underpaid and took her child for a quick cheap meal at a fast-food restaurant. I have done the same and it is a massive load off parent's shoulders when they are stressed just need a break from being the 'perfect' parent.' Male, UK, 39 years old.

'The mother must be a working woman and can't find time to cook a healthy, freshly prepared meal for her 5-year-old child. So, she took him to a restaurant... probably McDonald's to feed the boy, and hopefully the drink is not fizzy.' Female, Australia, 27 years old.

Box 10 Convenience: Father vignette.

Father vignette

'That man must be in a hurry and chose to take his child to a place where they could get a meal the child enjoyed in a quick fashion.' Male, US, 34 years old.

'To me it would appear that he can't be bothered to cook for his child, and it is more convenient to take this child to a fast-food chain.' Female, Canada, 34 years old.

'He is in a rush and cannot be bothered to cook. He is happy to treat his child.' Male, UK, 41 years old.

'The man is just like any other parent, taking an opportunity to provide a quick and easy meal for the kid.' Female, Australia, 52 years old.

Evaluation of the 20 statements

After qualitatively describing their thoughts on the vignette, respondents were presented with a series of 20 randomized statements. They were asked to rate how much each statement described their interpretation of the vignette, on a 5-point scale. The statements covered four categories: the respondents' perceptions of the parent, the parenting style, weight (parent and child) and perceptions of the child.

The response descriptors given to the respondents were: 1= Does not describe the situation at all, 2 = Describes the situation a little, 3 = Describes the situation to some extent, 4 = Describes the situation to a moderate extent, 5 = Describes the situation to a large extent.

Responses were analysed for differences using independent sample *t*-tests to determine if the gender of the parent portrayed in the vignette, gender of respondent, or generation of the parent changed respondents' opinions. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for country level differences. Mean scores are given in Tables II, III and IV.

<Insert Tables II, III and IV>

Parent attributes

For most statements, the gender of the parent portrayed in the vignette did not impact how respondents rated the statements (Table II). However, the gender of the respondent evaluating the vignette did have a statistical influence on how the statements were evaluated. Male respondents were more likely to describe the parent in the vignette as organized, smart, healthy, well dressed, and attractive (Table III).

The age of the respondent also had a statistical impact on their responses. Younger parents (millennial parents) were more likely than their older peers (non-millennial parents) to describe the parent in the vignette as well dressed, attractive, and wealthy (Table III).

Across countries, Australia, Canada, and the UK had statistically similar mean scores for parent attributes. However, respondents from the US rated the parent in the vignette as more likely to be organized, smart, healthy, well dressed, and attractive (Table IV).

Parenting style

Similar to the qualitative statements from the open-ended vignette question, under parenting style, when the vignette depicted the parent as a father, there were statistically higher scores from respondents. The father was viewed as more likely to be a good parent, a responsible parent, and that he was taking good care of his child (Table II).

Male respondents had a mixed response to the vignette. They were more likely than female respondents to agree with the statements critiquing the parenting style, including '*indulges their child*', '*does not know how to cook*', and '*should feel guilty about feeding their child this food*'. However, male respondents were also more likely to agree with '*is a good role model*' and '*makes healthy choices for their child*' (Table III).

Across countries, Australia, Canada, and the UK had statistically similar mean scores for parent attributes, while respondents from the US, rated the parents statistically different (Table IV).

Weight

Across countries, Australia, Canada, and the UK had statistically similar mean scores for parent attributes, in that they did not expect the parent or child to be overweight. Respondents from the US were statistically more likely than Australia, Canada, or the UK, to say that the parent and the child were likely overweight (Table IV).

The gender of the parent portrayed in the vignette did not statistically impact whether the respondents felt the child or parent was overweight (Table II). However, male respondents were statistically more likely than women, and millennial parents were statistically more likely than non-millennial parents, to say that it was likely that both the parent and the child were overweight (Table III).

Perceptions of the child

Respondents were given three statements about the child and asked to evaluate if it described the situation: '*The child is happy*', '*the child is healthy*', '*the child is well behaved*'. There were no statistical differences in responses between vignettes depicted with a mother vs a father. Nor were there statistical differences in responses between millennial and non-millennial parents. However, based on the gender of the respondent, male respondents were

more likely to describe the child as healthy (Table III), as were respondents from the US (Table IV).

Discussion

In the literature, vignette studies have been used to explore gender stereotypes in other fields, such as health care and social tolerance. It seems plausible that gender might well play a role in how parental behaviours are perceived. For example, the eating disorder study by Schoen *et al.* (2018) illustrates gender bias in vignette perceptions/responses.

Tanner *et al.* (2014) explored food perception differences in terms of fathers and gender. They also noted very different perceptions in terms of maternal and paternal attributes. Kasparian *et al.* (2017) discuss how mothers have more permissive food rules in restaurants for their children (age 5-8 years). However, they have higher behaviour expectations and that more quality time with family is an important factor in eating-out, but a limitation of their study was lack of father insights.

In the vignette study, with the aim of exploring perceptions of fathers, respondents viewed fathers dining with their children in fast-food restaurants more favourably than when mothers were depicted in the same vignette. Fathers were praised for spending time with their children. Respondents were more likely to evaluate the father as '*a good parent*', '*a responsible parent*', and as '*taking good care of the child*'.

The more positive perceptions of fathers vs mothers, in the exact same vignette, offers an insight into how society perceives parents (and parenting) based on their gender. Male respondents typically viewed the parent in the vignette more favourably in terms of parenting style and parenting perceptions, with the exception of weight. In terms of weight, male respondents were more likely to say that both the child and the parent in the vignette were overweight. This observation that fathers noted the weight issue more than mothers was unexpected, however Kasparian *et al.* (2017) noted in their study that mothers were not necessarily accurate in assessing the weight of their children, suggesting perhaps there was social desirability in their responses.

Increasing obesity has been a concern in all four of the countries. The frequency of families dining in fast-food restaurants has also been increasing in these four countries. Despite these fast-food visits now being a regular meal occurrence for many, they were still viewed by 25% as a 'treat' occasion in the vignette study. McGuffin *et al.* (2015) suggest that viable menus to ensure success of healthier eating must maintain the 'treat' element of the occasion.

Culturally, respondents from Australia, Canada, and the UK had statistically similar responses for 18 of the 20 attribute statements. Respondents from the US had statistically different responses from these three countries. Was this difference a result of the higher number of fast-food restaurants present in the US, perhaps making a fast-food meal more of an everyday option? Additional research would help to explore why respondents from the US tend to view family dining in fast-food restaurants more favourably than respondents from the other three countries.

Strategies to nudge US consumers behaviour in fast food restaurants may need to be different than the strategies used in Australia, Canada and the UK. However, the similarities between Australia, Canada and the UK may prove to be beneficial for further research,

suggesting that a successful intervention strategy in one of these countries, could be implemented with potential success in other countries as well.

In the past, nutrition has been identified as one of the top concerns facing millennial parents (Barkley, 2013), with day-care holding the number one spot. Millennial parents appeared to take a strong, but not extreme, position on the topic of nutrition and are probably less restrictive in what they allow their children to eat than what they say they allow them to eat. This is aligned with the findings in the current study, where only 19% of respondents associated fast-food dining with unhealthy food decisions.

Convenience has long been given as one of the key reasons that families visit fast-food restaurants (Rydell *et al.* 2008; Kellershohn *et al.* 2018). Family dining outside of the home is frequently viewed as a 'treat', with 'healthy' eating not the key priority for many parents, during what they consider are quality 'family time' occasions (McGuffin *et al.* 2015; Robson *et al.*, 2016). The importance of 'convenience' was also reflected in the survey by Harrington *et al.* (2013), which found that although it was an important factor in fast-food restaurant visits, it was not as high a priority as criteria such as food safety and cleanliness. The theme of 'convenience' was mentioned by 9% of respondents in the current survey, aligned with previous studies on the importance of 'convenience' and 'family time'. 'Family time' was mentioned by 25% of the respondents, perhaps reflecting the growing role that fast-food restaurants are fulfilling as a 'third place' for families as described by Oldenburg (1989).

Many respondents felt they should not judge the choices of others. Future research could explore if parents, who do not view the visit as a 'treat' or a 'family time' occasion, make different food decisions for their children. Bertol *et al.* (2017) explored what the influence of young children is on overall family consumer behaviour and this should be further explored specifically in terms of fast-food and family behaviour. This study was a preliminary attempt to gain insights into consumer assumptions, specifically in regard to a child eating with a parent in a fast-food restaurant. It offers some early insights but also raises many additional questions to be explored in future studies.

Conclusions

Family dining in fast-food restaurants was most often associated with an opportunity for family time together (25%), a treat (25%), and an unhealthy food decision (19%). For some, this is a normal meal that should not be judged (11%), for others, this is merely a meal of easy convenience (9%). Respondents from the US viewed fast-food family dining more favourably than respondents from Australia, Canada, or the UK. Fathers, when depicted as the parent in the vignette, were more likely to be praised for spending time with their children, while mothers were more likely to be critiqued for making poor nutritional choices.

Despite obesity concerns in these four countries, and millennial parents fearing that they are being judged by their peers on what they feed their children, only 19% of respondents focused on the unhealthy element of the food choice and only 11% questioned if fast food was simply an easy, albeit perhaps lazy, choice.

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