

Article

Feeding the Campus Craze: Unpacking the Influencers on University Students' Fast-Food Delivery Choices—An In-Depth Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract: One very essential tool for the success of any business operation is a good knowledge of the consumer behaviour of its target. Consumer behaviour encompasses the various actions, thoughts, and emotions that impact individuals' decisions related to the purchase, usage, and disposal of goods and services in their daily lives. While existing literature extensively covers consumer decision-making processes, there is a noticeable lack of information on the factors influencing the decision-making processes of university students, particularly in a developing country like Ghana. To address this gap, the present study investigates the factors influencing the decisions of University of Cape Coast (UCC) students when choosing specific fast-food delivery vendors. Utilizing one-on-one interviews, a purposive sample of 12 University of Cape Coast students was selected to gather their perspectives. The findings from these interviews indicate that the primary factors influencing students' choices to engage with fast-food delivery services are convenience/proximity, timely delivery, and the taste of the food. Additionally, sub-categories such as the quantity of food, packaging, and the appearance of delivery motor riders were identified. The outcomes of this study have implications for marketing communications, highlighting the importance of addressing factors like convenience, timely delivery, and taste to effectively engage university students in the context of fast-food delivery services.

Keywords: consumer behaviour; fast-food; delivery services; university campus; marketing communications; Ghana

1. Introduction

The global shift in consumer behaviour, especially among university students, has witnessed a significant transformation in recent years, with the rise of fast-food delivery services playing a pivotal role in shaping dining preferences. Fast food, once synonymous with immediate consumption at brick-and-mortar establishments, now extends its reach to university campuses through the convenience of delivery services [1]. This shift raises intriguing questions about the factors influencing students' patronage of fast-food delivery services, a topic that remains underexplored in current research.

As noted by Smith et al., the landscape of food consumption is evolving rapidly, and university students represent a demographic at the forefront of these changes [2]. The convenience-centric lifestyle embraced by students, coupled with the ubiquity of digital platforms, has led to a surge in the utilization of fast-food delivery services [3,4]. However, the nuances of this phenomenon, including the specific factors influencing students' choices, remain an area warranting thorough investigation.

The existing research primarily focuses on general trends in fast-food consumption or the impact of fast-food advertising on young adults [5,6]. Consequently, there is a conspicuous gap in understanding the intricate factors that contribute to the patronage of fast-food delivery services among university students. This study seeks to address this gap by employing a qualitative approach to delve into the motivations, preferences, and underlying factors that shape students' decisions in opting for fast food delivery.

The study is prompted by the recognition of a notable surge in the sprouting of numerous fast-food establishments and food delivery services within and in proximity to higher education environments. Given this context, a crucial research question arises: What are the determinants that lead university students to choose fast-food establishments and utilize fast-food delivery services, and what underlies these determinants in influencing students' decisions regarding their patronage of such services on campus? Consequently, this research aims to offer valuable insights for businesses, marketers, and institutions seeking effective ways to connect with the student demographic and improve their overall campus experience.

In addressing the research inquiries, the study established three primary objectives: (1) Recognize the pivotal elements influencing the inclination of students toward fast-food delivery services. (2) Investigate the repercussions of socio-economic factors on the decision-making of students. (3) Comprehend the influence of convenience and technology in moulding their preferences. Consequently, this research adopts a qualitative methodology, specifically employing in-depth interviews, to capture the intricate and diverse facets of consumer behaviour within the University of Cape Coast campus in Ghana. To put it differently, this approach aims to thoroughly explore the multifaceted factors influencing consumer behaviour on a university campus in Ghana, shedding light on the distinctive socio-cultural, economic, and environmental dynamics that impact students' choices in making purchases.

In conclusion, understanding the factors influencing students' choices in this context is not merely an academic pursuit; it holds practical implications for businesses in the fast-food delivery sector. As outlined by Davis & Smith and that of Amoako et al., businesses that grasp the intricacies of consumer behaviour are better positioned to tailor their services, marketing strategies, and offerings to meet evolving demands [7,8]. Therefore, this research aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform marketing and business management practices in the fast-food industry. By identifying the key factors that shape students' choices, businesses, marketers, and university administrators can develop targeted strategies to better cater to their needs and preferences. The outcomes of this study may inform the development of marketing campaigns, pricing strategies, and service offerings that resonate with the diverse student body, fostering a more vibrant and inclusive campus environment.

2. Literature Review

In directing the focus of our study, we reviewed previous studies that explored consumer behaviour, a complex and multidimensional field encompassing factors influencing individuals' decision-making when purchasing goods and services [1]. According to the Food Standards Agency of the United Kingdom (FSA), food choice involves selecting foods based on competing, reinforcing, and interacting forces. Notably, several empirical investigations identify food quality as the most significant factor influencing customer satisfaction [9–11].

Research on the fast-food sector indicates a continuous shift in consumer preferences and habits, driven by substantial changes in the market environment [10,12,13]. The increasing popularity of fast-food delivery services in recent years poses challenges for analysing consumer behaviour in this sector. Marketers and business owners must understand the elements influencing customer behaviour to adapt to changing demands and preferences.

2.1 Consumer Behaviour of Patrons of Food and Fast-Food Delivery Services

While consumer behaviour studies can address various aspects, they often focus on actions related to finding, acquiring, and using goods and services [14]. Recent trends show an increase in food consumption away from home, with the fast-food industry playing a major role [15,16]. The fast-paced lifestyle and dual-working households contribute to the growing preference for quick meal options.

The acceptance of the fast-food culture, even in regions like Ghana, is attributed to the convenience it offers in the face of busy schedules and Western influence [12,17]. Factors influencing patrons' choices include price, quality, freshness, taste, local vs. imported products, food safety, packaging, "halal" status, healthy options, proximity, ease of preparation, advertisements, and social influences [17].

2.2 Factors Influencing Students to Patronize Fast-Food Joints

Understanding consumer choices in fast-food joints involves considering societal development factors, such as time restrictions, longer working hours, demographics, healthier meal preferences, and new eating patterns [17,18]. Convenience and time emerge as critical factors in consumers' decisions, with influences from friends, family, and preferred brands [4,19].

2.3 Factors Influencing the Choice of Fast-Food Delivery Services on University Campuses

Youths, especially students, constitute a significant portion of fast-food patrons [20]. Studies on university students reveal considerations such as convenience, perceived customer control, marketing strategies, and a positive attitude toward technology as influencing factors for using fast-food delivery services [12,13]. Concerns about health, cost, hygiene, and food safety play roles in university students' choices of fast-food outlets [21–23].

In conclusion, this literature review provides a comprehensive overview of consumer behaviour in the fast-food business and delivery services, addressing the nuances of patrons, students, and factors influencing their choices.

3. Materials and Methods

The study rests purely on the qualitative research paradigm, using the case study approach. The authors employed interviews as the main data-gathering technique with the use of an interview guide. The choice of a qualitative research paradigm, specifically the case study approach, and the utilization of interviews as the primary data-gathering technique were deliberate decisions aimed at gaining a deep, contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. A case study approach is particularly well-suited for exploratory research where the goal is to delve into a complex and nuanced subject within its real-life context [24]. In the context of our study on "Feeding the Campus Craze," we sought to explore the influencers on university students' fast-food delivery choices in a holistic and in-depth manner.

Again, case studies allow for an in-depth examination of a specific instance or case, providing rich, context-specific insights [25]. In our research, understanding the intricacies of the campus environment and the influences on fast-food choices among university students required this detailed and contextualized approach. Qualitative research is well-suited for exploring subjective experiences, perceptions, and behaviours [26]. Since the focus of our study was on unpacking the influencers, attitudes, and decision-making processes related to fast-food delivery among students, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate.

Interviews are effective in eliciting detailed and nuanced information directly from participants, allowing researchers to explore their perspectives, motivations, and experiences [27]. By employing interviews with an interview guide, we aimed to capture the richness of participants' insights, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their fast-food choices. Similarly, qualitative approaches provide flexibility in data collection, allowing researchers to adapt to emerging themes and explore unexpected avenues during the study [26]. This flexibility is crucial when dealing with a multifaceted phenomenon like fast-food delivery choices, where new insights may arise during the research process.

The authors used the multi-stage sampling procedure in locating the participants (who were all undergraduate students at the University of Cape Coast) for the study. First, the purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting the initial participants ($n = 4$). Second, using the snowball sampling technique, the initial participants introduced the authors to their colleagues who met the inclusion criteria – to be eligible as

interviewees for the study; the person must be a current University of Cape Coast undergraduate student. He or she must have patronized fast-food joint(s) as well as fast-food delivery services at least three times. Lastly, he/she must be willing to be interviewed with no demand for monetary or any other benefit aside from contributing to the success of the study.

A total of 12 students were interviewed (N = 12). All participants provided verbal consent. The participants were interviewed individually, and one-on-one. All interview sessions were audio-recorded, and each interview session lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded.

The choice of a sample size of 12 students for the case study in your research is justified based on the qualitative nature of the study and the specific objectives of in-depth exploration and understanding. A case study, particularly in a qualitative paradigm, prioritizes depth over breadth, and a smaller sample size allows for a more in-depth examination of each participant's experiences, perceptions, and behaviours. This approach aligns with the goal of gaining rich insights into the influencers on university students' fast-food delivery choices. Additionally, a smaller sample size is more manageable within limited resources such as time and personnel, enabling comprehensive interviews and thorough analysis. The concept of data saturation, where additional participants may not significantly contribute to new insights, is also considered, ensuring that each interview adds valuable information to the overall understanding of the phenomenon under investigation [28].

An excerpt of this paper was presented at the 19th International Bata Conference for Ph.D. Students and Young Researchers (DOKBAT), Tomas Bata University in Zlin, Czech Republic, and has been published in its proceedings.

4. Results

In this section, we present the results of the study first, in a summarized table, and then we present the detailed results under their respective research questions before moving on to the discussion section. In order to protect their identities, we used the following pseudonyms for the interviewees, by prefixing each pseudonym with the letters IN (short form of INTERVIEWEE): IN-Jesse; IN-Kofi; IN-Esi; IN-Evans; IN-Joan; IN-Neli; IN-Laud; IN-Nash; IN-Ama; IN-King; IN-Mends; and IN-David. Three major categories (convenience, timely delivery of food, and taste of food) emerged from the transcripts. The following three sub-categories also emerged: quantity of food, packaging, and appearance of delivery motor riders (see in Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of results of the study

Category	Description	No. of IN	Extract
Major Category 1	Convenience/Proximity	7	...they are located very close to my hostel accommodation. (IN-Jesse).
Major Category 2	Timely delivery of food	9	...they can take the whole day and errmm I hate it (IN-Ama).
Major Category 3	Taste of food	5	I'm in love with the taste (IN-Mends).
Sub-Category 1	Quantity of food	3	...It is about filling the stomach lol (IN-King).
Sub-Category 2	Packaging	3	...if the food doesn't taste so good but the package appears neat and presentable, I will go for it (IN-Joan).
Sub-Category 3	Appearance of delivery motor riders	2	...If they do not appear as good as in their clothes and shoes, I would not buy ... (IN-Laud).

5. Discussion

Authors Research Question: What factors influence university students to patronize fast-food joints and fast-food delivery vendors/services and why do these factors influence students' decisions regarding the patronage of fast-food joints and fast-food delivery/vendor services on campus?

Convenience/Proximity

In respect of this research question, the authors were interested in investigating factors that influence students to patronize a fast-food and/or fast-food delivery service. Out of the 12 interviewees, the majority (7 out of 12) stated that their decisions were influenced by convenience/proximity. We chose to combine these two factors because it appeared that the interviewees used both words interchangeably, to convey the same idea. The following extracts display evidence from the data:

As for me, even though their food is quite expensive compared to other sellers, I like the Kenkey Boutique people because they are located very close to my hostel accommodation. (IN-Jesse).

Similarly, three other interviewees (IN-Nash; IN-Evans; and IN-Esi) disclosed that they chose Chedda Chops because of convenience. The following are verbatim extracts from them:

I always choose Chedda Chops because it is very convenient for me. My roommate also likes it because, in a few minutes, I am able to bring good food for us. (IN-Nash).

Proximity, proximity, proximity is the key. I cannot compromise on that so I will always buy from Oseikrom (IN-Evans).

Hmmmm, it is very convenient for me to buy from Chedda. Aside from the good taste of their food, I find it very convenient to buy from them (IN-Esi).

Two interviewees expressed the notion of convenience with other words such as cool and comfortable. However, when they were asked to explain, they ended up indicating that by those words, they meant convenient and proximity respectively: The following extracts capture their responses:

Ooo, it is cool to buy from them (Chedda Chops). I mean it is convenient for me when I buy from Chedda (IN-David).

Ok, I feel comfortable buying from Oseikrom and I like it that way. Oh yeah, I mean because of the closeness of their joint to my hostel (IN-Ama).

The last interviewee expressed the notion of convenience in a rather different fashion. This interviewee aligns convenience with a good feeling. The extract below captures his thoughts:

I mean it feels good buying from them. Everything feels good about the experience. I will always choose them for that good feeling (IN-Mends).

For the students to consider convenience/proximity over other factors in patronizing fast-food vendors it may be an indication that students are saddled with many academic activities and so may not have the luxury of time which may be influencing their decision for the choice of fast-food vendors. As displayed by the response from IN-Jesse, the costly nature of fast food does not influence her. It is obvious that the decision to patronize a fast-food joint is highly influenced by convenience/proximity. This finding therefore agrees with Jibril and Adzovie who found convenience and time to be the most influencing factors for fast-food joint selection [4].

Time of Delivery

Also, regarding the choice of delivery services, what stood out for the interviewees was the timely delivery of the food they ordered. Nine, out of the 12 students interviewed said that they could not compromise on time factor when it came to patronage of delivery services, particularly, food delivery services. Other interviewees were however indifferent. The following are some of the responses from the nine interviewees:

I have tried some of the delivery services before but I did not like them. They took so long to deliver my food. So, I prefer to walk to the venue to buy the food myself (IN-Laud).

Four of the interviewees – IN-King, IN-Ama, IN-Nash, and IN-Jesse expressed their thoughts on delivery services:

I like eating my food on time so it must be delivered on time for me (IN-King).

Most of these fast-food people are nice when you go there to buy but when you order for it to be delivered, they can take the whole day and errmm I hate it (IN-Ama).

Chedda Chops used to delay with delivery but they are now on point. They deliver my food to me mostly on time (IN-Nash).

The fast-food people joke with time and so I usually go there to buy or send a friend because a delivery guy has messed me up before eh (IN-Jesse).

From the above, it is clear that the interviewees value time and so would not like any delivery service provider to mar their orders. This is an indication that delivery service providers must reconsider the time factor.

It could also be that as one of the interviewees stated, a fast-food vendor operates a delivery service that has improved its delivery in respect of time and this act has endeared this customer to that vendor.

Taste of Food

The third major category identified is the taste of food. Five of the students interviewed placed some form of emphasis on the taste of food constituting an influence on their choices. The extracts below display the evidence from the interviewees:

Okay, so I would always choose taste over any other thing when it comes to food. My dear, the taste of food is everything oo! (IN-Evans).

Similarly, these two students said:

So, I purchase Mally Heels because of that unique taste. It always does something to my feelings. So, I will choose to taste it any day (IN-Kofi).

Ok so with that, Mickylan is one of the food vendors whose food tastes so well that I can't get enough of it. I'm in love with the taste (IN-Mends).

Quantity of Food

Regarding this sub-category, three students' decision on patronage is highly dependent on the quantity of food from a vendor. The following extracts capture their exact words:

With Cheddar chops, it has to do with the quantity of the food. The price is moderate too oo (IN-Kofi).

As for me, I want to be satisfied so I need more food for less amount (IN-Laud).

You know that we are students and we don't have much money so we try to get more food for a little money. It is about filling the stomach lol (IN-King).

From the extracts, it appears that these students are quantity-conscious, not necessarily, because they do not value the taste of food or other factors. It appears that getting satisfied constitutes the major reason they patronize certain fast-food joints.

Packaging

Regarding this sub-category, three interviewees expressed their thoughts with respect to the fact that they made their decisions to patronize a particular fast-food joint or fast-food delivery service based on how a vendor packages the food. The following extracts capture their exact views:

I will continue buying from Tasty Chef Food Services because not only is their food nice but their packaging is also on point. I feel ok carrying their food in public because the packaging looks really great (IN-Evans).

Another explained the reason why packaging convinces her:

It was my boyfriend who sent me lunch one day and ooo my gosh! I didn't even believe it was from a food vendor here in Cape Coast. The packaging is a guy. So, I can say that I also became a loyal customer because I fell in love with the way Tasty Chef presents their food to their customers (IN-Esi).

I think how food is packaged speaks volumes about the person selling the food. To me even if the food doesn't taste so good but the package appears neat and presentable, I will go for it (IN-Joan).

From the above, it appears that even though the interviewees who rated packaging as the reason why they would patronize a fast-food joint, it is worth noting that packaging is important to customers.

Appearance of Delivery Motor Riders

The last sub-category is a concern three interviewees raised as the reason why they patronized fast-food delivery services, and below are their sentiments:

I remember dashing food delivered to me by a friend because when I went out to pick the food from the delivery guy I did not like the unkempt nature of the guy. He looked so dirty. I observed that his fingernails were not trimmed and they were dirty too. So, I did not feel ok to eat the food (IN-Ama).

Two other students expressed similar views:

You know, I enjoy buying from Authentic because not only is their environment very clean but also, their delivery guys look cool and they always put up a smile when they hand over my food to me. Their motorbikes also look clean all the time (IN-Neli).

As for me once the delivery guys come to deliver my food, I observe them very well. If they do not appear as good as in their clothes and shoes, I would not buy from that vendor anymore (IN-Laud).

Even though this might appear insignificant, it seems to be the reason why some customers would or would not patronize a fast-food delivery service.

6. Conclusions

Drawing from the study's outcomes, we can deduce that the factors shaping consumer decisions regarding the selection of fast-food joints and engagement with fast-food delivery services are intricate and multifaceted, particularly within university campuses. The results distinctly highlight that three primary factors; convenience/proximity, timely delivery, and the taste of the food, remain pivotal in influencing consumer choices. This aligns with prior quantitative research, as referenced in the literature review section of this paper, including works by Kennedy et al., Habib et al., Jibril & Adzovie, Bakar et al., and Nondzor & Tawiah [4,12,17,18,20].

Moreover, additional considerations such as the quantity of food, packaging, and the appearance of delivery personnel also exert an influence on consumers. Given the substantial attraction of the fast-food and delivery service industry, it is advisable for each vendor to carefully consider these factors and integrate them into their strategic planning. This strategic approach becomes crucial for vendors seeking to either enter the market successfully or expand their existing market share.

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