

# Tangy Temptation: McDonald's and Marketing to a Foodie World

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Whether boasting over the latest kill while it sizzled over a pre-historical fire or chatting about an enterprising chef in a contemporary upscale restaurant, humans have always bonded over food. “From primitive times,” Mark Meister writes, food “has been intimately involved in creating identification and consubstantiation” (2001, p. 175). Food gave people a pursuit that redefined the entire human experience. Mary Douglas states that the meal is what brought humans “from hunter and gatherer to market-conscious consumer” (in Meister, 2001, p. 170). In our market-conscious age, the collection and discussion of food is a serious hobby, manifested in user-created reviews and independent food blogs. The term “foodie,” mockingly coined in Ann Barry and Paul Levy’s 1984 book *The Official Foodie Handbook*, once represented a snobby subset of Americans. However, with a proliferation of food media, food-pursuit is more and more accessible to those without a lot of disposable income, making the “foodie” a subset that grows daily. With a little bit of information, the foodies feels adequately fit for publishing their own opinions about the quality of food in restaurants or at a friend’s house (Fattorini, 1994). Originally, the “foodie” acquired this casual-yet-obsessive learning through food publications and programming, but with more and more food media available to a mainstream audience, anybody can be a foodie now.

Beyond using food as a delineator of socioeconomic status, the foodie subset has raised restaurants to be places of recreation in addition to being places of nourishment. The “foodie” has deified its nourishment in the form of trendy restaurants. Others are hopping on the bandwagon, spending less each year on luxury goods such as cars or jewelry and more on experiences such as traveling and dining out. In *Lucky Peach*, Chris Cechin, an online video producer, claims “we have made

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*Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research 12* (2013)

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a legitimate pop celebrity of food” (2012, p. 58). In 2011, cable networks took in more revenue than major networks, with Food Network ranking as seventeenth on most-watched cable channels (Cechin, 2012). Food Network’s subject matter centers around the fantasy of attractive and pleasant cooking celebrities. Pleasuries aside, food media can be harsh, particularly to fast food. Cooking celebrities are quite verbal about distaste for fast food. While describing gentrification and over-commodification of New York City, Anthony Bourdain, host of *No Reservations* and *The Layover*, disdainfully shows images of fast food restaurants in Times Square.

Yet fast food restaurants themselves have begun to take foodie culture into account, adding more “upscale” menu items and even changing restaurant interiors to reflect the new consciousness surrounding eating. Nowhere do we see this encroaching trend more clearly than in the world’s most prominent fast food restaurant, McDonalds.

### Method

This study serves as a exploration of the contemporary McDonald’s brand. Using a qualitative, case study approach of an extensive literature review and interviews, this study describes and explains the shifts in marketing of fast food giant McDonald’s in a food media-saturated environment. Since the topic of food-related media and its impact on marketing practices is novel, existing literature that substantially explains the phenomenon is limited. Due to my desire to gain a holistic and meaningful description of the fast food marketing environment, a case study research design seemed most appropriate for the research. “The case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomena” (Yin, 2009, p. 4).

Since a case study relies on multiple sources of evidence, an exhaustive literature review of scholarly and popular literature, coupled with in-depth interviews was employed as data collection technique. Both scholarly and non-scholarly documentary sources were used, the wide breadth of which allowed me to address an almost exhaustive number of issues within the McDonald’s organization as well as to build on the prior literature (Yin, 2009). Yin (2009) describes documentary evidence as written reports of events, progress reports, formal case studies, as well as mass media clippings, which allow a timely, inexpensive, and accessible wealth of information (Yin, 2009). As such, I looked at annual reports McDonald’s published within the last 10 years, corporate press releases, as well as news clippings from a

variety of sources, including mainstream press outlets or more watchdog-oriented media. Getting this wealth of evidence helped off-set reporter's bias, as well as allowing sources to "augment and corroborate" one another; though the search was imperfect, it provided the necessary background (Yin, 2009). Having a familiarity with relevant material allowed for more natural conversations with industry experts at a later date.

Following the review of relevant documentation, I conducted focused interviews to augment the information gathered from the literature review (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990). The focused interview is when a participant is interviewed for a short period of time. "In such cases, the interviews may still remain open-ended and assume a conversational manner, but an interviewer is more likely to be following a certain set of questions derived from the case study protocol" (Yin, 2009, p. 107). I sought contemporary perspectives that have been relatively undocumented up to this point, and as such, was able to gain valuable insight that bolstered the literature as well as created new avenues to explore.

This study used a purposive sampling method, convenience sampling, to assemble a group of relevant professionals that could provide insight on the topic of investigation. Interview participants were found based on 1) their familiarity/accessibility to the researcher, 2) their exposure to the McDonald's corporation, and 3) their degree of relevant experience in the industry. The researcher utilized the College of Charleston's Department of Communication Advisory Council, a network of professionals in the communications field, to identify potential interview participants. This network of experienced communication professionals has connections in many industries, and several members of the Council provided suggestions for interview subjects. Furthermore, the literature review revealed one former vice president affiliated with McDonald's marketing and a few other potential leads.

Four telephone-recorded interviews that varied in length were conducted over the months of March and April 2013. The researcher instigated contact and guided the interview discussion while taking notes. The researcher used a semi-structured interview protocol for the discussions. It is important to note that the interview protocol was reviewed by a panel of experts prior to the interviews; the panel suggested revisions and changes to the wording of the proposed questions for the sake of clarity. Additionally, the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the College of Charleston, ensuring for ethical research (IRB approval # HFJF-04-25-2013). At the conclusion of the interviews, participants were thanked for their time and insight as well as offered an opportunity to

receive a copy of the research report.

Analysis of the data included the identification of common themes and patterns across the data. Triangulation of the data from both the documentation and interview methods was important before moving forward with the analysis; all data were pooled and analyzed for common overarching concepts. Specifically, I used the constant comparative method of analysis to reach conclusions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I categorized key words and phrases that spanned the interviews. Instead of relying on time series analysis or explanation as techniques for analysis, the constant comparative method took several case studies and several issues at McDonald's, creating a less fragmented glimpse of business practices (Yin, 2009).

### Literature Review

The fast food meal in particular received a good deal of exposure in the food media explosion, but not in the glossy photos and positive attention that more "trendy" and "foodie-friendly" places do. If anything, the mass-produced fast food meal is the villain to personable chefs on television or ingredient-obsessed restaurants and to a general media focus on transparency. Companies are expected to explain a meal to their customers. In size and profit, no other fast food company knows these changing food trends better than McDonald's, the leading global food service retailer. With more 33,500 restaurants in 119 countries employing 1.7 million people and feeding even more, McDonald's is a brand of colossal status and is the foremost example of the American fast food industry. Though the fast food industry as a whole has witnessed a marketing shift in both audience and content, for the intents of this research, the focus is on McDonald's.

Where does this fast food giant stand in the eyes of an American food media audience? For an audience that watches well-manicured hosts polishing off elegant dishes, the plastic-wrapped burger, once a proud symbol of American and Henry Ford-like efficiency may be an image of scorn. With more purchasing power in the hands of more "food snobs," inexpensive and convenient McDonald's is the target of derision. The food media eruption may have created a passive audience; it has also created an entire library of critical looks at the giants in charge. One of the most well-known examples was 2004's *Super Size Me*. This low-budget documentary had a simple, but ridiculous premise. Director Morgan Spurlock eats nothing but fast food from McDonald's for 30 days and traces changes in his health. During his trips to McDonald's, if asked to "super size," or upgrade his order to the larg-

est size possible, Spurlock accepts the suggestion. After 30 days, Spurlock notices weight gain, lethargy, and his doctor demands that he stop his experiment. After the release of independent documentary *Super Size Me*, McDonald's did remove super-size fries and sodas from its national menu, and some believe the film hurt sales among some demographics in some regions (MacArthur, 2006).

*Super Size Me* was just a taste of pointed fast food criticism, while *Fast Food Nation* created a franchise, similar to the capitalistic food businesses it explored. Originally serialized in *Rolling Stone*, Schlosser's investigative journalism turned into a 300-page book, inspecting everything from artificial flavoring to manufacturing practices. A smaller-portioned work targeted a younger audience similar to McDonald's. *Chew On This: Everything You Didn't Want to Know About Fast Food* toured libraries and bookstores in an expensive campaign catered towards "an age with a huge amount of marketing flooding every aspect of their lives" (MacArthur, 2006). *Fast Food Nation* became a feature length film that brought a star-studded cast to a fictional, "character-driven slice-of life look at a small town in Colorado" (MacArthur, 2006). The film that intended to combat the hamburger ended up grossing \$2 million worldwide, a dent in comparison to the \$23 billion McDonald's made that year.

*Fast Food Nation* got some people thinking about eating, not just watching televised eating, and ten years later, this shift in media choices has manifested itself in customer's tastes. The end of *Fast Food Nation* has a strong prediction: "They [McDonald's] will sell whatever sells at a profit. The usefulness of the market, its effectiveness as a tool, cuts both ways. The power of the American consumer has not yet been unleashed" (Schlosser, 2001, p. 269). With food culture becoming more prominent than ever, the market is seeing the American consumer being fully unleashed; this consumer thinks before it chews.

### **"Sue the Bastards": A taste for individual responsibility**

Schlosser's exposé, though now a little out of date, created mass skepticism and profound headaches for fast food. In contemporary food-attentive society, more concerned customers are causing their nourishment to "become [both] an environmental and social cause" (Cechin, 2012, p. 59). In the midst of copious servings of food media, the food-conscious individual has emerged. Some are taking action.

Through lawsuits and individual activism efforts, the difference between the industry and consumer responsibility for healthy eating is now up for debate. If a nation of eaters is overweight, is it a personal decision or an industry responsibility? The industry is responding to criticism, but it is shirking responsibility for

increasingly obese (but more gastronomically aware) Americans. Journalist Tracie McMillan describes the debate: “either Americans are stupid and lazy, or we are dealing with a problem that won’t be solved solely by lectures and individual choice” (as cited in McMillan, 2012, p. 9). Some consumers taking responsibility do so in an oblique, yet conscious way; as Alice Malpass writes, “they accept [that] they do have certain responsibilities . . . [but] they might be asserting finite limits to how much they, as individuals, can be expected to be responsible for” (as cited in Szmigin, Corrigan, & McEachern, 2009, p. 225). Isabelle Szmigin et. al define customers’ “flexibility of responsibilities” as an ability to modify their decision-making environment, like being able to modify their choices of entree at a fast food chain (2009, p. 226). For an obese nation, consumers have a lot of flexibility, and their influence is modifying fast food at a corporate level.

The biggest targets for criticism are the nation’s largest food corporations. Grassroots efforts stretching from regulating children’s marketing to mandating nutritional facts on every package have brought attention to less attractive aspects of food service operations. A robust outlet for food-themed media allows more opportunities than ever to promote an environmental and social cause. McDonald’s, the 7<sup>th</sup> most powerful brand in the world, does not seem to be closing stores or shrinking in market share, so it may only be taking the punches with regards to its reputation in the public’s eye (MacArthur, 2005b). The company is in a battle of words as much as a battle of diet.

This battle has waged over obesity lawsuits, restaurant cleanliness, and food safety. Concerns over portion size, package relabeling, and marketing phrasing emerge in lawsuits involving obesity. From 1993 to 2008, the amount of obese U.S. adults increased by almost 90%, and many people attributed these gains to prevalence of fast food options (Haomiao, 2010, p. 222). Indeed, with costs of obesity-related problems exceeding \$75 billion a year, the issue of responsibility is coming to a head (McMillan, 2012). Cases like *Pelman v. McDonald’s* seem to ask whether it is the McDonald’s Corporation’s responsibility to implement dietary changes or it is overweight consumers who need to be making more sustainable choices. McDonald’s may have colossal burgers and sodas, but it is the public who ultimately pays for them, in money and in health.

Many foodies would argue that much of a meal is based on the atmosphere. A 2003 YouTube video campaign by Dr. Erin Carr-Jordan, a child psychologist and mother of four, brought scrutiny to not just the food kids were eating, but also the environment they were eating in. McDonald’s has always tailored a division of

its corporate personality to children, which makes sense, given that “every month about 90 percent of American children between the ages of three and nine visit a McDonald’s” (Schlosser, 2001, p. 47). Their branded plastic playgrounds called “Playlands” formed a crucial part of a franchise’s architecture and the McDonald’s experience. Carr-Jordan began recording what pathogens were turning up in Playlands, documenting her results on YouTube. McDonald’s, which claimed “stringent sanitizing procedures for weekly, daily, and spot cleaning,” took exception to what was turning up in the lab. Among dirt and rotting food, results indicated four strains of staphylococcus and streptococcus, both serious pathogens that kids were unsuspectingly crawling in. Though Carr-Jordan could not find any major viruses, such as listeria or MRSA, she found enough to start a video campaign advocating safe places for kids to play during a McDonald’s experience. The video campaign found its way to the US Senate. In 2007, Illinois State Rep. Jack D. Frank submitted a bill to the state legislature requiring “places that sold food and had indoor playgrounds to comply with sanitation standards,” including a more regulated clean-up of the miniature play tubes (Hernandez, 2011). The bill failed to pass, but the people had spoken: media would be their toolbox for social change.

Two viral internet fast food-bashing phenomena caused a tremendous public outcry in 2010. That year, Sally Davies took her own series of food photographs. She had purchased a Happy Meal, put the Chicken McNuggets on a plate, and photographed them daily for six months. After the time passed, she saw that a Happy Meal looks relatively the same (Landman, 2010). Another internet sensation, this one proven to be an actual hoax, involved the production of Chicken McNuggets and its ingredients spread. Pictures of pre-cooked chicken depicted what looked like strawberry soft-serve ice cream, instead of what any reasonable person would think chicken resembled. Though this was later revealed as a hoax, McDonald’s responded with its own counter-campaign: visitors to its website can watch its Executive Chef, Dan Coudreaut, in video demonstrations that no doubt emulate cleanly arranged Food Network cooking performances. As a PR-friendly rebuttal to the internet controversy, the spiky-haired and professionally groomed chef proclaims, “the only meat used in Chicken McNuggets is chicken breast meat.” At the corporate level, the use of food media trends is also becoming a successful marketing tool, becoming not just a way to respond to strong criticism in the media, but also a way to promote the brand’s move into more contemporary, appropriate times. As people want to know a record of a company’s social responsibility, they have uncovered the dark side of fast food. McDonald’s replied with consumer-focused

marketing with a new emphasis on sustainability and low-calorie options.

Lois Mohr concludes that many consumers will invest in and value socially responsible companies, regardless of menu price (2001). McDonald's has found a way to illustrate responsibility, but it took a big problem to do so. 2003 was the first quarterly loss McDonald's had experienced since 1965; the corporate strategy, therefore, needed to create change (Boscor, 2011, p. 56). Way-too-rapid expansion, issues with cleanliness, and negative customer reviews led to a menu revitalization (Sanburn). In 2003, McDonald's introduced a new corporate philosophy, called "i'm lovin' it," that emphasized an individual's role and financial value in the company. The company's first global marketing campaign, "i'm lovin' it" invigorated revenue, which rose 11% from 2003 to 2004 (MacArthur, 2005b). Since then, marketing efforts have focused more on a customer's reaction and feeling about the brand, rather than strictly focusing on product promotion. The "i'm lovin' it" campaign sought to reflect the more personal and customer-oriented experience of McDonald's, one that recognizes diversity (Boscor, 2011, p. 56). Even though the taste is standardized across the world, McDonald's emphasized the consumer (the "i" of "i'm lovin' it). Whether serving beer in Germany or Chicken SingaPorridge, a McDonald's menu seeks to appeal to the public's taste, with the individual at the center. For an industry iconic for the simple burger and fry, fast food offers surprisingly abundant choices both healthy and "unhealthy."

No matter how big the appetite or the menu, the customer is always right. Wood (1996) asserts that it's an industry's responsibility to respond to consumer preference. Marketing seems to reflect the meaning of consumer choice with the idea of diversity in retail locations. There is an abstract "personal experience" with products, where an individual's tastes are also valuable (Schröder, 2005). Consumer choice created the foodie; it is also revamping McDonald's.

Scientific research also leans in favor of the customer. Adam Drewnowski, Director of the University of Washington's Center for Obesity Research, said it is "better to improve the diets of many than to seek perfection for the few," and the McDonald's brand is directing a massive menu overhaul in what appears to be a response to consumer desires (as cited in McDonald's, 2011). In 2004, Granny Smith apple slices, marketed as Apple Dippers, found their way on the menu. 88% of individual consumers were aware of the fruit option, yet apples were selected in only 11% of Happy Meals. The Dippers became an essential part of Happy Meals, making McDonald's the responsible unit in a healthy eating initiative. By mandating fruit servings and restricting french fry size in every Happy Meal, McDonald's

is working towards making the recommended serving of produce.

### **Industry response to changing trends**

As “a sense of responsibility emanates across the personal and social domains,” consumers are looking for brands that relate to their domains (Dutta-Bergman, 2012, p. 85). Mark Snyder and Kenneth DeBono (1985) discuss two types of consumers: high self-monitors and low self-monitors, and these distinctive customers divide marketing into two directions. High-monitoring people tailor their behavior to fit social and interpersonal situations, making their social domain a personal responsibility. Within the context of marketing, they react more to image-oriented advertisements, meaning food television styles could be particularly persuasive. These consumers are the ones that see music and décor as a supplementary way to enjoy food. These consumers want to buy an ideal that experience-based marketing targets for them. Low self-monitoring people are more aligned with quality, service, and cleanliness. Soft-selling marketing has little effect on these customers. They react more favorably to product quality-oriented ads. As the foodie becomes less of a social subset and more of a mainstream label, high-monitoring people, with their preoccupation of changing habits and modes of life, are becoming more common.

Whether marketing to high or low self-monitoring customers, “the industry’s overall position is that, at the bottom, individuals are responsible for what they consume” (Buchholz, 2003). All the same, McDonald’s is making individual responsibility easier, due to a more customer-centered marketing structure. Initially, McDonald’s organized itself around “usually speedy and efficient operations rooted in QSC, or quality, service, and cleanliness” (MacArthur, 2006). A uniform store design and flavor for the food created the ability for McDonald’s to spawn franchises offering consistency. Many customers find comfort in knowing that thousands of miles away, whether in Dubai or in London, they can get a hamburger that tastes just like the ones they get at home.

New ad campaigns by McDonald’s, ones that center on people’s emotional needs are seeking to create an all-new image for the company (Dutta-Bergman, 2012). Their corporate image may be most famously associated with burgers, but “corporate image is only partially built on tangible product and process attributes” (Schröder, 2005, p. 214). The brand’s image comes down to the fast food experience itself, which may have changed more profoundly than the food actually has. Over the last ten years, the corporation has responded to local sales and co-op promotions, “to overcome the image of a greedy multinational without a care for local folks’ well-being” (MacArthur, 2005b).

New franchises implement contemporary interior designs that bring sleek aesthetics to the “gaudy and round” designs franchises were founded upon (Schlosser, 2001, 17). These cosmetic changes are doing more than cleaning up the inside; they are attempting to change the way people think about fast food. With even the implementation of free Wi-Fi, McDonald’s is crafting itself not as a place to refuel, but as an experience. McDonald’s once targeted kids with Disney-inspired playgrounds and characters such as Grimace and Mayor McCheese. Now, new designs repurpose the brand as a place for parents to escape. Their new formula appears to be based on their competition. Starbucks, which centers around “friendly, knowledgeable service from the store staff, comfortable places to sit down and relax,” crafts its marketing around experiences, without even mentioning the coffee it sells (Rentas-Giutsi, 2003, p. 44). In a similar way, McDonald’s has taken a cue from this strategy in order to recreate itself, with the idea of changing the atmosphere, starting with the tables and working to the food. Offering a wide range of products can no longer allow a company to set itself apart from competing restaurants, so the food must be secondary to the philosophy (Boscor, 2011, p. 56). Without further ado, marketing enters the picture.

Neil Golden, McDonald’s chief marketing officer, has said, “We win over the holdouts by changing how we think about the food. We also believe that there are more people that would want to come—if they could feel better about the product” (O’Brien, 2012). One of the ways Golden suggests changing the way people feel about the food is through aesthetics and the food’s portrayal. For customers, a large portion of which consumes experience-based food television programs, an aesthetic and abstract redesign in this manner is directed at them.

McDonald’s is making a highly conscious effort to transform the way people feel about products that have changed only slightly in the last 50 years. After the company reduced price promotion portrayals in ads by over 60% in the early 2000s, it promoted items that are not considered the iconic tastes of fast food, such as coffee drinks and items under 400 calories (MacArthur, 2005b). What determines the content of the menu is, of course, operator’s perceptions about public taste (Wood, 1996). Public taste here means public preferences and evaluations, which is in line with what Edmund Gurney says: “the eye and the ear are capable of finer discriminations than the senses of taste and smell” (as cited in Telfer, 2008, p. 20). If sight and sound is what causes more aesthetic reactions, then McDonald’s is on the right track with redesigns and commercials that stress fresh ingredients. “Fresh has nothing to do with food at all. It’s become a convolution, tied up with manufac-

tured images of authenticity, transparency, and even morality-the fleeting ecstasy of doing what consumers are persuaded to believe is the good, right thing” (Van-sAirdale, 2012).

In light of statistics, the company has never done better. Revenue has increased from both the free-standing franchises at the bottom rungs to advertising budgets at the top. In 2011, the average free-standing McDonald's made \$2.6 million, an increase of 13% since 2008. The advertising budget for McDonald's is \$2 billion, with has no industry competitors (O'Brien, 2012).

### **Research Question**

This study draws on the social psychology theories of Snyder and DeBono (1985), exploring the direction in which McDonald's marketing efforts are moving. Specifically, the study seeks to find whether McDonald's is a true trendsetter in the fast food industry or just following the shift in consumer tastes for a profit. Dana Boscor writes that “a company's success is highly dependent on adopting a customer-oriented approach” (2011, p. 57). McDonald's may have more than meets the menu.

The present study was guided by the following research question: In an increasingly food and health-minded culture, what changes have so-called “unhealthy” and culturally-ingrained fast food restaurants made in their approach to marketing and advertising, and what do they reveal about the demands of consumers?

### **Findings from Interviews**

The present study incorporated not only a comprehensive literature review, but also interviews with four participants, each involved with the McDonald's corporation in some capacity. The corporate perspective revealed personal reflection and opinions not found in the literature review. In total, the participants averaged 19 years of direct experience with the corporation, whether in public affairs or relations. Two of the participants provided consent to use their names in association with the data for reporting purposes.

Participant 1 was a founder of a global public relations firm that works with McDonald's on public image and branding. In 55 years of experience, Participant 1 saw the corporation's culture and politics dynamically shift and the opening of the first McDonald's in post-Soviet Russia.

The second participant was Erik Gonring, Manager of Public Affairs & Sustainability for McDonald's. Gonring came to McDonald's as a speechwriter covering supply chain communications. His background in sustainability eventually led him

to his current position.

The third participant (“Participant 3,” hereafter) served McDonald’s for 13 years in communications and left resently to found a consulting public relations firm focused on brand building.

The final participant was Brad Ball, who consulted with McDonald’s with his advertising agency Davis, Ball, Colombatto. Ball came to McDonald’s in 1995 and served as the Chief Marketing Officer until 1998. Along with a team of four, Ball initiated elements of the now-famous merger with one of the most powerful media businesses: the Walt Disney Corporation. This relationship, symbolized in Happy Meal toys and Randy Newman-composed commercials, was worth over a billion dollars and lasted 10 years.

After speaking to these four participants affiliated with McDonald’s, interview transcripts were analyzed, data were categorized, and themes emerged. Participants expanded on three major areas that also seemed to corroborate the findings from the literature review: 1) consumer responsibility, 2) aesthetic and philosophical renovations to the McDonald’s brand, and 3) the state of McDonald’s with regards to the original corporate foundation of Quality, Service, Cleanliness, and Value (QSC and V). Finally, though they used some similarly framed rhetoric, participants repeated two buzzwords with the frequency of a drive-through customer: “learning curve” and “consistency.”

**“You can trust McDonald’s”: The hyper-aware customer is always right**

There was no direct indication that McDonald’s is taking responsibility for a consumer’s unhealthy choices, as *Pelman v. McDonald’s* decided. There are no regulations mandating responsible food promotion or preventing obesity. Participants rarely mentioned arbitrators such as the FDA as driving the changes in both offerings and communication. All of the participants mentioned catering to customer preferences as the largest driving factor behind the evolving corporate communication philosophy. All described their target consumer as a changed individual with new preferences. McDonald’s appears to be pursuing a more mobile and affluent consumer preference. As the participants described, the target McDonald’s customer knows what is behind the counter a little bit better. They have been poring over internet rumors, and they have been hearing all about bacterium in places where they eat. “People are a lot more sophisticated these days. They read more, they’re more conscious of these things. McDonald’s catered to that as well without compromising who they are,” Participant 1 indicated, in light of the original McDonald’s values.

Subjects described these more “sophisticated customers” as presenting a learning curve. They are people who have more experience in the food industry and learning due to media consumption, and they are inclined to trendy offerings. As Snyder and DeBono describe, the target McDonald's consumer is now more highly self-monitoring, a customer who places value on having an attractive decór and an experience at McDonald's (1985). The goal is to stay in front of the “learning curve” while carefully moving forward, so as not to distance consumers with complicated claims or alien menus. Gonring explained a higher degree of consumer awareness but also said that being appropriate with the kind of messages McDonald's transmits to current and prospective customers. The information available to consumers has to be in understandable terms and relevant, especially in an advertisement. Target customers may be more informed but not experts, leaving the industry to summarize grand claims about sourcing ingredients in terms fit for a commercial.

One element that reappeared in both the data collection as well as the interviews was the pull between informed consumers and responsible corporations. To exactly what degree is McDonald's responsible for its hyper-aware customers, whether in the messages it advertises or the food it offers? Each participant referred to the same statement from the 2007 Annual Report: “We're individually accountable and collectively responsible.” With the exception of one participant, all subjects expanded on this idea of accountability and collective responsibility. They differed, however, on what defined individuals, saying very little about the “individuals” who have been buying the products and suing the company. Gonring elaborated on the concept of responsibility: “

One individual can cause damage to the brand and the company, and you need to take that responsibility. You can't take that responsibility lightly. The way you conduct yourself has to be in a way that's consistent with the brand . . . in a way, it guides behavior, similar to our company values.”

Others took up the idea that the responsible “individual” was the franchise-owner or employee who bridges the consumer and McDonald's. As explained by Ball: “The experience you have when you come to my restaurant is my individual responsibility . . . Collectively, the responsibility is everyone of the owner/operators, like myself, and the company to back up the promise of quality, service, cleanliness, value, and your experience, the trust in what we sell: all of those things.”

While the individual consumer was not the focus in the responses about the “individually accountable and collectively responsible” slogan, a concept of consumer consciousness emerged. Participants explained the “conscious consumer”

as someone who reads nutritional labels, who wants healthy choices for his or her children, who watches food programming, and who may have difficulty trusting a large corporation. “[Corporate] size has been their [McDonald’s] advantage in many cases, huge disadvantage in others,” Ball said. What the participants hope McDonald’s provides is a caloric count for its entire menu, a greater sense of awareness of resources (in both quality and origin), and the idea of trust from the leading corporation in food service. Marketing, they believe, is a way to change people’s suspicion into goodwill. They are changing the way people think about fast food. Fast food brands not only taste good, but can also speak out on whatever the “societal issue du jour” is, whether childhood obesity or nutrition (MacArthur, 2005a). “We came up with a term we called the trust bank, which really means building deposits of goodwill,” Participant 1 said. In the future, as McDonald’s makes its steps forward, “doing what’s right” may play a bigger role. Participant 3 believed:

...there’s going to be greater transparency around what’s in the food, the food’s ingredients, and how the food is sourced. I think you’re going to see more engagement from consumers around how not only those products make their way from farm to fork, but how food service organizations are innovating around supply chain, how they give back to the community where they do business, how they are being more socially responsible in animal welfare practices, in packaging, in how they provide nutritional information for consumers.

The societal implications for more transparency and consciousness also appeared, and participants understood that both consumer loyalty as well as consumer well-being would be important to the longevity of McDonald’s. As consumers become more conscious and their purchases reflect responsibility, then the marketing must change. “It is influencing other companies to look at their own business practices and find ways to ensure that they are that much more sustainable and attribute to net benefit not just for business, but for society as well,” Goring said. McDonald’s is one of America’s chief exports and lifestyle brands; as a result, its corporate representatives seemed to corroborate each other on marketing responsibly. Many people absorb and consume the messages McDonald’s promotes, so the corporate viewpoint may become mass opinion.

### **New gloss, same as the old boss?**

The world’s biggest fast food chain is getting a facelift in corporate philosophy, plates, and people. Their famous mascot no longer graces advertisements, the menu strays from the classic hamburger, and ergonomic chairs and flat-screens are more

common décor than plastic benches and Playplace tubes. When asked about the “fast food facelift” with regards to food offerings as well as the aesthetic and architectural appearance, participants explained that, the customer base, not its waist, is getting wider. “Before McDonald’s broadened its chicken and white meat offering and a greater variety of healthier fare and alternatives to hamburgers, you could see how that the decision by the mom was impacting sales,” Ball said.

Similar to Ball’s reference to “the mom” customer, the “learning curve,” or what customers expect, has changed, and all four participants sought to explain the specific influences that have greatly impacted the customer base. As a result, discussion surrounded the impact of globalization and food-related media.

I asked many questions about aesthetic redesign, target demographic shifts, and market share. A variety of influences have instigated the change in customers. As the literature review mentioned, the new McDonald’s atmosphere for these customers is modeled after experience-based eating (Rentes & Giutsi 2003). Interestingly, the participants expanded this by bringing up competitors. The most frequently mentioned competition was fast-casual restaurants, typified by more expensive menu items, gourmet options, and comfortable furniture. The most frequently mentioned examples included Panera Bread and Chipotle, which markets itself under a “food with integrity” message that implements more responsible choices in fast food (VanAirdale 2003). Fast casual restaurants actually received many more mentions than quick-service restaurants (QSR) that McDonald’s more likely would be competing with, such as a Burger King or Dairy Queen. “Time-deprived” customers, or those with multiple commitments to career, families, and extracurricular activities, received mentions and the label “fringe McDonald’s customers,” appeared. These are people who have begun to make more purchases of the McDonald’s brand, particularly smoothies and specialty coffee beverages. The influence on their purchasing power comes from offering similar products. Goring specifically touched on the influence that the competition has on McDonald’s decisions for change:

A lot of McDonald’s growth over the last 5-10 years has come from replicating other QSR (quick-service restaurants) point of differentiation. McFlurry is really just a way of taking Dairy Queen’s market share . . . Then you see smoothies: that’s a way of taking Jamba Juice’s market share. Coffee: Starbucks, or the McCafé: Starbucks. So you start to see that trend continue, so I think we’re good at having a broader menu and doing it well.

Menu additions grant McDonald’s “a pipeline of not only menu offerings but

a pipeline of potential new business opportunities that before the introduction of McCafé, was pretty limited,” Participant 3 said. By moving into other restaurant market shares, McDonald’s is effectively buying out competition and offering its own spin. “The idea is to modernize the restaurant experience and give our customers one more reason to feel good about coming to McDonald’s,” Participant 3 explained. Gonring claimed that having higher quality and cleaner restaurants than the competition will cause the perception of a customer to change. The customer believes that the food is higher quality and tastes better, and they will have a better overall experience, which reaffirms Neil Golden’s belief that more consumers would try to product if they felt good about the product. Feeling good about food skyrocketed Chipotle’s value and cultural role, and it is doing the same for McDonald’s.

Chipotle, which used to be owned by McDonald’s before going public on its own, was a frequently mentioned fast-casual place with similar characteristics yet plenty of “points of differentiation.” Ball zoomed in on Panera Bread as a source of competition and “foodie” manifestations that have proven influential in the redesign at McDonald’s. “Panera Bread encourage[s] you to enjoy your meal without feeling like you’ve got to wolf it down and get the hell out.” Through the comparisons that the participants referenced between McDonald’s and the competition, additional insights began to emerge about what the target customer expects.

The architectural redesign seems to be coming around to retain people who choose to dine in, with more comfortable seating, free Wi-Fi, and a cozy environment. The interviews revealed a redesign project, a byproduct of European redevelopment at McDonald’s. This redesign started five years ago, and the “modernization” is set to be complete in 10 years. By then, the participants hope that every single one of the 14,500 locations in the U.S will be re-imaged, and participants were excited. “When that happens, there’s going to be even more distance between us and our competitors,” Gonring said. The modernization is taking place for two reasons: 1) to compete more adequately in the market place, and 2) to change people’s attitudes about the brand.

When asked for particulars about the dining room renovations, participants talked about lingering in a McDonald’s with furniture that customers are meant to relax in. Participant 3 touched on this effort encouraging customers to do more than just eat: “For those customers that want to go into the restaurant and spend time and linger, the way the restaurant décor is set up in the dining room affords the customer to come in and experience the restaurant the way they want to experi-

ence it.”

The brand, according to Participant 3, is moving in the direction of business travelers plugging in a laptop, and sipping a latte while “getting business done.” This coffeehouse culture, though not traditionally aligned with McDonald's, boosted lesser parts of the brand and helped McDonald's create a new meal. “You've got some unused capacity on the inside of the store, and it further supported a commitment to McCafé,” Ball said. In fact, when referencing the effort of changing consumer attitudes about the brand, participants consistently pointed to more than just the food. They pointed to the atmosphere as a significant factor in the McDonald's brand. Participant 1, who has seen the restaurant revisions in their entirety from its public relations standpoint, touched on the importance of the aesthetics: “When they first got started, a lot of people thought McDonald's was a little garish, with the red and white tile, the neon arches. The transition to the tasteful décor they have today has been a big factor [in revamping and revitalizing McDonald's].”

Although décor appears to be a major area of change for McDonald's, participants also mentioned menu redesign, which at McDonald's has practically redesigned the way the mainstream American is eating by creating a 4<sup>th</sup> meal during the day known as “snack,” stuck between lunch and dinner. The example of the 4<sup>th</sup> meal included cheaply produced snack McWraps, which utilize ingredients found in other menu items. It is the strong opportunity for additional profit that seems to drive the creation of the 4<sup>th</sup> meal. The rationale for the 4<sup>th</sup> meal was provided by Ball: “One of the reasons that you're also seeing menu changes take place, like McWraps and some of these other products, [is] to try and capitalize, maintaining the food margin for profitability but [maintaining the low] consumer price so it can stay in the budget a customer can afford.”

Consistently, though maybe unintentionally, the participants used the same examples when describing menu changes and new meal options. Snack wraps received attention during the interviews, but the McMuffin overwhelmingly found its way into several different responses, even about seemingly unrelated topics. For its value, nutritional benefits, and being outside of typical McDonald's fare, the Egg McMuffin may just be the next all-American meal. Three of the four interview participants gave the Egg McMuffin, a breakfast sandwich, as an example during discussion about menu redesign. For a place that started off on burgers, fries, and shakes, the menu has been redefined along with the American public. Participant 1 referenced the McDonald's breakfast as an example:

They've managed enough to adapt nicely . . . They know how to serve it [break-

fast] in the confines of what they are. And have done that successfully. Or their Egg McMuffin can be altered a little bit—for example, people are conscious of cholesterol, so they have an all-white Muffin, with a whole wheat muffin and that kind of thing. They're not going to turn off anybody not to go to McDonald's, for example. The key is really keeping delicate balance.

Whatever global opportunities open up, whatever lawsuits may happen, McDonald's participants believe in the power of consistency and the power of value. Ball highlighted the Egg McMuffin in the grand scale of the company's mission, "as much as we do in the world for McDonald's, marketing a 300-calorie Egg McMuffin has been a very good move.

It is also worth mentioning that many of the participants reiterated the consistency of the brand, believing that while the world might change its diet, it will not change the core purpose of McDonald's. Participant 1 shared his belief that McDonald's will always stay true to the original fast-food brand that the world came to know as McDonald's: "They're always looking to change without destroying who they are. They're not a health food store. This world is littered with closed health food restaurants. They don't go overboard in making it something that they're not."

The participants stressed cosmetic changes and consumer consciousness; essentially, McDonald's has to do what any operating business needs to do: make revenue. Ball explained how creating a healthier item can neither betray what the McDonald's corporate brand represents nor what makes a food service business work. "What McDonald's has to decide is that, if they can make a healthier sandwich, but if nobody buys it, what does that tell you? That it's their responsibility to lose money to make a sandwich that nobody buys?"

### **Compromised values?**

As stated in the literature review, McDonald's corporate communication and philosophy is organized around the values of quality, service, cleanliness, and value (abbreviated as QSC and V). "All aspects of quality, service, cleanliness and value, those are the overarching tenants of the brand," Ball said. These abstract terms are what makes up the globe-spanning McDonald's brand, and they are what Ray Kroc originally envisioned while forming the company (Schlosser, 2004, p. 32). These core tenants are ever in the background during the reported transitional period in which McDonald's is revamping its brand image. They give a good idea of perspective and comparison as new regulations pass and customers want new options on menus. Throughout the interviews, participants were asked their opinion on the degree to which the aforementioned values have morphed, if at all. While most of

the changes participants described were in response to more well-read customers than adhering to abstract philosophy, exploring the original values of the company shed some light on the current situation.

A few participants maintained that the core values to McDonald's corporate philosophy have remained consistent, in a way that is not too different from uniform store designs and food flavors. "There's no other company in that industry [of fast food] that has the solidity that McDonald's has," Participant 1 said, while other participants discussed previous efforts to revamp the corporate values. In fact, some of these attempts resulted in disastrous communication campaigns.

During his time at McDonald's, Ball headed up a national initiative, titled Campaign 55, a strategic way of paying homage to the original corporate values. To explain, Ball shared, "What I had envisioned was building on the heritage of a restaurant chain that opened in 1955." It was also an umbrella-like and badly needed strategy for standardizing franchises. At the time, the entire national fast food industry was fixated on what Ball called "the heroin of discounting." Reduced prices were inconsistent between store locations, and Ball claims some were charging as little as 29 cents for burgers. He voluntarily described how Campaign 55 addressed all aspects of QSC and V and sought to re-embrace the corporate values. For cleanliness, restrooms would be cleaned twice every 55 minutes; for service, a drive-through order would be filled and completed in less than 55 seconds; most importantly, for value, hamburgers were priced at 55 cents, the 1990s equivalent of the original 15-cent burger. Although Campaign 55 was intended to be permanent, it "failed miserably" very quickly. Initially, the internal corporate debate centered the discount on larger sandwiches such as the Big Mac before moving to regular hamburgers. These low prices for the hamburgers caused franchisees to correct pricing in other places, such as potato products or soft drinks. Customers reacted definitively: they felt they were getting a bad deal. The strategy folded, but the impact was not entirely negative. Campaign 55 did not result in a lot of customer support, but it did lay the way for future value propositions and the now-uniform Dollar Menu, which keeps values at a constant regardless of ingredient cost.

Campaign 55 was not the only troubled time with regard to maintaining values. Participants also mentioned some troubles during the '80s, when the company "lost [its] focus on overall restaurant operations and cleanliness," as stated by Erik Gonring. In addition, the brand's tenants also came under fire in the late '90s and 2000s. As a result, the QSC and V philosophy has been modified through two strategies: The "I'm lovin' it" slogan and more broadly, the Plan to Win strategy,

introduced in 2003 and crafted by Larry Light, Global Chief Marketing Officer, 2002-2005. “If QSC and V is foundation, the Plan to Win is the architecture that sits on top of that foundation that speaks to how you’re going to bring the McDonald’s brand experience to life,” Participant 3 said. Gonring described Plan to Win as a classic business move. Plan to Win is an international campaign, one that brings the brand’s abstractions of people, products, place, price, and promotion to more than just the United States, much like “i’m lovin’ it” globalized the brand in 2003. “Our quality standards and consistency [are] something that our customers and foodies to an extent have come to value,” Gonring stated in reference to the brand’s global impact.

Interestingly enough, in all of the discussion of core corporate values, one participant revealed that it was his personal opinion that founder Ray Kroc was a “fabulous, charismatic guy” but a “very basic black and white kind of guy.” He went on to say Kroc, though entirely responsible for instilling values would not be the right choice for today’s CEO. “He stuck to his principles . . . I don’t think he [had] the kind of sophistication to run this kind of company today.” All the same, Kroc’s vision is what propelled the company forward. The participant described a press conference where Kroc was asked what he’d be serving in the year 2000. Kroc replied, “I don’t know, but we’re going to be serving a lot of it!”

Whatever McDonald’s will be selling, its marketing will be carefully engineered to suit a mainstream audience. As more people become aware of their health, nutrition, and source of supply chain, the messages will need to reflect these changes in language that is understandable and markets McDonald’s in a contemporary way that is also cognizant of its original values. The national diet may have changed for both media and food, but the participants seemed adamant about maintaining the corporate values of McDonald’s, wherever supply chain or technological advances may take them.

## **Discussion**

As previously revealed, several themes emerged from the interviews conducted and the literature reviewed. First, it was apparent that McDonald’s is doing what any company worth its 55 cents is doing: focusing on consumer tastes. Consumer tastes were referenced as “learning curves” during the interviews, and it is in the best interest of McDonald’s to embrace the learning curves and market items that consumers demand. There appears to be a balancing act between recognizing consumer demand/trends and doing what makes sense for the longevity of the

brand. What the company faces is answering the question of how to adapt to these consumer tastes without betraying its original values or profit motives. Doing the “right” thing for the consumer appears to be good business, and as highlighted by interview participants, it is also profitable to make them feel good.

The second major finding was probably the most unexpected. One of the ways McDonald's is finding a way to market “food with integrity” and to more sophisticated tastes is by capitalizing on points of differentiation with major competitors. McDonald's no longer seems to compete with Burger King; it seems aimed to compete with Starbucks and Chipotle, chains with minimal television marketing, higher-priced products, and a definitive brand. Instead of competing with quick service restaurants, McDonald's is going for a fast casual-influenced brand. Though fast casual restaurants are ostensibly still fast food restaurants, their presentation creates a different impression in people's minds. These are comfortable places to spend time with friends and enjoy gourmet foods. With new architectural designs and more comfortable furniture, “tinges in the décor,” as Participant 3 called them, consumers can expect to linger with friends or family—a far cry from the past, when the original layout of a McDonald's was deliberately made uncomfortable in order to keep customers constantly cycling out of the dining room as if it were a drive-through.

The final major finding is at odds with the quintessential item at McDonald's. The research revealed a tension between moving forward into contemporary times and tastes while still consistently recognizing Ray Kroc's original values he used to found the company. Past attempts to modify the original tenants of quality, service, cleanliness, and value ended in trouble, particularly in Campaign 55, as Ball described. McDonald's is poised on a new image and brand message. The target audience of McDonald's is getting more sophisticated; their tastes more complex, and this is requiring some justification. Competing with fast casual also means the average price of menu items is a little higher, which may affect the tenant of value. While the research revealed the core values of the company have not significantly changed, the way they are conveyed will be dramatically different from the last 10 years.

### **Implications of the research**

The original research question was developed to examine changes in fast food companies. Tinges in McDonald's décor have been the byproduct of following consumers and trends, indicating grand changes in a consumer mindset worth exploring just as much as the McDonald's brand. The findings revealed both structural

and philosophical changes to the McDonald's brand communication strategies as well as in the minds of American consumers. This study was instigated by the wake created from the 2003 release of *Fast Food Nation*; since that time, gourmets, marketers, and media have experienced profound changes that question the relevancy of that exposé, especially in light of the financial success McDonald's continues to have. This study sought to explore the how and why behind the "New McDonald's," the one that has risen from scandal, economic trouble, and lawsuits.

One topic the "New McDonald's" will need to face is whom it is actually targeting. Socioeconomics may have a surprising effect on the future of the company and the way it brands itself. Traditionally, the fast food McDonald's offers is convenient and inexpensive, appropriate for working class consumers. In attempting to brand itself as more luxurious and upscale option, McDonald's may cater to more "foodie" consumers, but it might also alienate the primary base of consumers that provides the bulk of business. If McDonald's is also spending money on aesthetic redesign, does this also mean that meals will become more expensive in order to make up for the costly revamp? Americans are very familiar with the image of McDonald's, and their associations with the brand have been embedded since the 1950s. If the McDonald's brand is trying to change its image, it could spell an uncertain public. The interviews indicated that marketing efforts attempt to stay behind trends and be conservative in presentation. A radical branding change may change the attitudes about McDonald's, but it may also change who continues to purchase food there.

The stream of inquiry surrounding the role of media in this study is important because the media create public consciousness of food trends. As more people are reading and becoming more sophisticated food consumers, they are changing their opinions about food as well as their food consumption behaviors. How McDonald's is reacting to this more aware, "foodie" culture illustrates the highly influential effect media have had on consumers, and in turn, McDonald's business practices.

This study's findings show that Americans have changing and evolving expectations from food corporations, wanting transparency, healthier choices, and even accountability. They are voicing their opinions and demanding more options, and corporations are trying to meet these consumer demands. The findings of this research provided additional insight about these changes as well as the relationship between corporation and consumer. As one participant suggested, their social contract will lead to more transparency, more options, and greater influence from media. After all, public opinion's most influential tool is the media.

### **Impact of the research**

What we eat is such a significant part of our society; it determines a great deal about our health, culture, and values. McDonald's serves millions of people a day, so it is no surprise that Schlosser called the population a "fast food nation." Millions of people are taking part in the exchange of calories and currency for a McRib sandwich, but they are also buying into something much greater and more abstract than food. They are buying into values that define our culture. Whether people are aware or not, the efficiency and diversity defining the fast food culture also define the capitalistic system as well as our daily lifestyle.

Fast food is an indelible part of our culture, so how the consumer and the corporation interact is important, especially when it comes to corporate efforts in relation to consumer choice. Whether it is "addictive" or not, Americans heavily consume fast food, and the effects of consumption are starting to show. While the participants stated that McDonald's does not assume responsibility as a business to encourage limited consumption or alternative options, McDonald's is making alterations to what it is known for, the fast and fried. Consumers now have more options than ever to pick from a McDonald's menu, and this choice stems from McDonald's response to the consumer voice. A present case study has the potential for educating consumers and businesses alike in regard to the relationship and interplay between the two. Isabelle Szmigin provides support to the finding that consumers play a powerful and influential role in this relationship: "[Consumers] are knowledgeable about issues such as food miles, local sourcing, and fairly traded goods and factored these into their choices[,]but such concerns did not always overcome issues such as taste, price or convenience" (2009, p. 228). As a result, corporations like McDonald's consider the same issues in their decisions, with heavy emphasis on taste, price, and convenience, as well.

### **Recommendations for future research**

Although this case study provides an initial glimpse at the ever-evolving marketing strategies of the McDonald's Corporation, additional research would prove valuable in answering the line of inquiry. The next steps for this case study would be to gather a longitudinal review of McDonald's finances in relation to the changing marketing practices. Tracing the economic effects of marketing trends on company finances (e.g.: stock price hikes, revenue, and commodity pricing) would create an even more definitive and complete investigation in regard to the evaluation of efforts. Additionally, there would be a possibility of speculating correlation between sales and messages McDonald's is sending out.

Furthermore, conducting a study on the fast-casual restaurant industry that was referenced in the findings of the present study would be interesting. Such a study would explore how restaurants such as Chipotle substantiate their claims that clearly appeal to consumer trends. For example, is there a quantifiable way to support the claim that Chipotle serves “food with integrity”? How does a restaurant purport to be fresh yet compete in a fast, prepared foods market? Though fast-casual restaurants argue their difference from fast-food restaurants, they are competing with all establishments that offer the quick-service meal, with McDonald’s included. Finally, what are the shared marketing practices that define the fast-casual restaurant industry and differentiate it from the fast-food industry?

While fast-casual restaurants would certainly be worth studying, further investigating other fast food brands would also be worthwhile. Inspecting how competitors like Burger King and Chik-Fil-A are also rebranding themselves in this newer, more conscious consumer’s eyes would be interesting to explore. If McDonald’s is truly going after the points of differentiation it has with fast casual, the corporation is leaving a large void. This void market will have something taking its place. The more the research inspected branding changes, the more accurate of a prediction about the “Next McDonald’s” could be.

On a macro-level, additional research on the food trends that result from the consumption of food media would be an excellent study to pair with the findings from the current study. The interview participants from the present study did not elaborate much on the relationship between the fast-food/fast-casual industry and food media. Whether the omission was intentional or not, participants did not talk about the opportunities of food media and the resulting “foodie” culture. While this case study certainly revealed quite a bit about the characteristics and expectations of the new consumer, their media diets were not discussed. Perhaps examining consumer response to food media messages would explain effects food media had on consumer preferences and trends.

### **Limitations of the research**

Since I did not have access to the locations, resources, and funds that would have supported a comprehensive case study, I had to rely on existing literature and a few interviews to gain a clear idea of the how and why the fast food industry has changed. Pragmatically, the scope of this research had to be reduced, but this study attempted to shed some light onto a phenomenon that is changing the fundamental ways we eat and the business that forms a part of American culture using the most powerful brand.

Further, I recognized that the implications were not completely observed with only four interviews. Ideally, I would have had the opportunity to interview the three other potential research participants identified through the purposive sampling method; however, time restrictions as well as concerns of the potential participants interfered with their participation. The additional participants would have represented a local franchise, a fast-food co-op, as well as the McDonald's global communication division.

### **The final course**

How and where human beings get their food led to the emergence and evolution of society, and continues to help distinguish differences between cultures. The United States often uses food as a subculture delineator or socioeconomic dividing line. Americans also use food to make money in the exchange of goods between consumer and vendor. The restaurant industry was originally developed for pragmatism: food vendors provided convenient meals for travelers on the go or a place of relaxation for ancient Chinese socialites (Van Guhl, 1974, p. 179). However, in contemporary times, the restaurant is a place of social gathering and recreational experiences more than ever before. The secret behind a restaurant's success today appears to be "placing the customer in the center of the entire dining activity" (Boscor, 2011, p. 57). The focus on consumer tastes and expectations might reveal the ingredients for a successful and distinct future for McDonald's, a future that may redefine the All-American meal. So, who is hungry?

### **Notes**

Thomas Werner of Fort Mill, SC graduated magna cum laude from the College of Charleston in 2013 majoring in communication with a concentration in media studies. He wrote "Tangy Temptation: McDonald's and Marketing to a Foodie World" to satisfy his senior bachelor's essay project with the Honors College. The essay was completed with the supervision of Amanda Ruth-McSwain, PhD. Thomas served on the editorial staff of several food-oriented publications during his time as a student, learning the relationship between food and media. He hopes to pursue a career in food journalism or public relations and eventually attend graduate journalism school.

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