

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE PREFER FAST- FOOD RESTAURANTS? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This study intends to identify the reasons which determine young people to choose fast-food restaurants, as well as the criteria they bear in mind, when they choose such places to eat. There are relatively a few studies in Romania, on this field, which deal with young people's perceptions about fast-food and the products they offer. This study intends to add new information to the specific literature in this field, where we face a growing number of fast - food restaurants and a huge interest young people shown them. The sample included 13 students from Transilvania University in Brasov. Although the research method is a qualitative one, using the focus- group, the results can be taken into consideration by the public decisional factors in the fast- food field in order to elaborate the proper strategies to attract and keep the young consumers.

Key words: *fast-food, focus-group, motives, young people, restaurant.*

JEL Classification: *L15, L84*

INTRODUCTION

The powerful fragmentation of consumers nowadays, represents a tendency that should be taken into consideration, in order to identify and improve the quality dimensions of the products which are important for each category of consumers.

Young people are not concerned with food preparation and that is why, they prefer to go out for their meals. They usually go to fast-food restaurants, especially when there is nobody to cook for them (while they study away from home) and also when they want to socialize.

Although they have the necessary knowledge about the nutritional value of food and its effects on their body, they don't act accordingly. Fast – food restaurants are famous because they serve the food very fast, they are cheap and they easily replace homemade food. Although people, who are usually very busy working, find fast-foods advantageous, we should all be aware of the fact that fast-food products are high in calories, fats, sugar and salt. Even so, young people admit that it is very difficult for them to change their food habits - especially because they don't have time and discipline to do it.

Fast- food is the fastest growing industry in the world and in Romania too, especially in the urban areas (big and small ones). However, there are only a few things written about the consumers' preferences regarding fast-food products, especially in Romania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When they have to choose a place to eat, young people are influenced by a lot of factors. For example, Campbell-Smith (1967) introduced in their research the pattern of experience, which explains the elements of a restaurant's offer. Cousins, Foskett et al. (2002) classified the factors in five categories, according to their importance, as: (1) food and beverage, (2) serving, (3) cleaning-hygiene, (4) value and (5) ambient.

According to Peri's results (2006), **the quality of products** is an essential condition to satisfy people's needs and expectations. If this condition is not fulfilled, these catering places won't qualify according to young consumers' expectation. The quality of the products was measured using different attributes. For example, Kivela, Inbakaran et al. (2000) considered some attributes, like the variety of the menu, taste and the consistency of food products, in order to examine their effect on customers. Mattila (2001) used the quality of products in restaurants as a way of prediction for measuring the customers' loyalty. On the other hand, Soriano (2002) realized that the quality of products is not the most important thing that determine young people to eat at fast food restaurants. In the past years, Namkung and Jang (2007) noticed that the products presentation, their variety, their taste, freshness and temperature are major factors in appreciation of their quality.

The **servicing** phase plays an essential role, apart from food, in a restaurant (Hansen, Jensen et al., 2005). The most important connection between the restaurant

and the consumers is achieved due to the front-office employees and their performance, which can easily influence the consumers' mood (Edwards and Gustafsson, 2008).

Another important element in a restaurant is **the physical environment**. From this point of view, the restaurant has to be large enough to serve and prepare the food (Carlbäck, 2008). Bitner (1992) named the physical environment of a restaurant „servicescape”. It was defined, according to its dimensions, as: physical conditions (for example, the temperature, the noise), the space (for example, the equipment), signs, symbols and artifacts (for example, direction signs or the decoration style). Moreover, some studies show the fact that the physical environment can be used to influence the consumers' expectations regarding the qualities of the restaurant (Baker, Grewal et al. 1994; Wall and Berry, 2007), as all these factors are part of this catering experience.

Although the atmosphere plays an important part in this experience, the environment can influence the consumers, even before they order something (Ha and Jang 2010). Besides this, some studies show the fact that the atmosphere of a restaurant plays a special role in defining customer's mood, even before they deliver the service. (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Namasivayam and Mattila, 2007)

The process of taking the decision regarding the place to eat, represents an aspect which should be taken into consideration, in order to understand the way people choose the restaurants, how they select them and what influences them in choosing a particular menu etc. (Upadhyay, Singh et al., 2007)

The factors that help us decide upon a restaurant form an aspect that both the researchers and the managers should keep in mind. Surprisingly, there are only a few studies which analyze the criteria people think about, when they choose a place to eat (Kim and Chung, 2011).

Kivela, Reece et al. (1999) studied the differences between the evaluations of a restaurant attributes, according to its clients' demographic characteristics. In this study, the authors divide the restaurants into four categories, according to their prices, locations, environment, services, style and specific .The results indicate the fact that the main determinants in choosing a restaurant are: people's age, income and the type of the restaurant. For example, the ambient of a restaurant is an important factor for people aged between 25 and 34. Another conclusion of this research is that, from the occupation point of view, the students represent a category with different behaviors, comparing with the other consumers.

Customers choose restaurants according to their specific features. Young people represent a specific type of consumers and knowing their reasons and criteria for choosing a certain type of restaurants can be very helpful for people in charge to identify marketing strategies, in order to obtain new customers and keep the old ones.

Ariffin, Bibon et al. (2011) tested young people's behavior from the point of view of restaurant ambient and its effects on their mood, their level of satisfaction and their gestures. The research identified certain ambient elements which the restaurants managers should take into consideration when they intend to create a proper environment for young people. The authors' conclusion is that it is crucial to discover the complexity of young people's behavior.

In a recent research, Voon (2012) analyzed the importance of the environment where the services are offered (the „servicescape” and the contact employees), the food quality and the prices, from the young people's perspective, in three types of restaurants. On one hand, the price is considered as the most important factor in determining the young people's loyalty, it being followed by contact employees. On the other hand, the physical environment („servicescape”) and the food quality are not so important in influencing young people's loyalty regarding a catering place.

Qin and Prybutok (2008) investigated the role of the price when talking about fast-food consumers and they discovered that the price didn't play such an important role. This is because fast-food products are cheaper compared to other restaurants' products. Nevertheless, the price plays an important role in attracting young people, as they have lower income.

METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

This research is part of a larger study which tries to identify the reasons why young people, in general, tend to favor fast-food restaurants when they think about eating and why they are satisfied with fast-foods products. The idea of such a research resulted from a previous research study (Untaru, Ispas et al., 2012), which dealt with perception of restaurants managers about the quality of products and services offered to the consumers in Brasov. Analysis of information offered by certain restaurants' managers conducted the authors to the conclusion that one of their problems is the lack of young consumers. Young people's preference for fast-food restaurants, as some managers stated, is also analyzed in some other comprehensive research studies. For example, Kara, Kaynak et al. (1995) studied the consumers' preferences for fast-food restaurants, in The United States of America and Canada. On one hand, according to this study, the consumers aged between 12 and 24, give major credit to the varieties and the prices of fast-food products, as well as to the location and the employees' abilities, in the USA, and also to the price and novelty in Canada. On the other hand, Brown, McIlveen et al. (2000) studied the importance of nutritional value and the teenagers' preferences for fast-food products. We also have to mention here, Davies and Smith's research paper, where they analyzed the importance of two variables, namely: the nutritional values of fast-food

products and the written or oral information London fast-foods transmit.

In order to identify the reasons why teenagers choose fast-food products, we used, in this first phase of the research, one of the techniques related to the qualitative marketing research that is focus-group method. According to the definitions derived from the marketing literature, the focus-group is an "interview taken to a small group of people in a relax and an informal environment" (Malhotra, 2004, p.139). This method is very flexible and efficient, because the interviewees can express their real feelings, their frustrations and satisfactions regarding the topic (Lefter, 2004).

Although this method stimulates people to give information about the products, filtered through their consciousness (Cătoiu, Bălan et al., 2009), focus-group also has some disadvantages, like: 1) the exploratory character of the research, so it is quite impossible to generalize it to all the people; 2) the difficulty to lead focus- groups, the quality of the results depending, to a great extent, on the moderator' s abilities; 3) the heterogeneous information, determined by the non-structured nature of responses, which makes the coding, analyzing and interpretation process very difficult (Malhotra, 2004).

Considering the limits we have mentioned above, the present research intends to explore and investigate the reasons for choosing fast-foods as the young people's favorite places to eat, and to use these results for accomplishing another research, which will focus on the quality dimensions that form the basis for this preference.

To accomplish this purpose, there were made up two focus-groups. The first focus-group included seven subjects, respectively six subjects in the second one. The subjects were young people aged between 18 and 24. These are all students at The Faculty of Economics Studies and Business Administration at Transilvania University in Brasov. The samples are homogeneous, as we tried to identify some common characteristics, in order to provide a good communication process inside each group. (Cătoiu, Bălan et al., 2009). The young people in the first group were students at Trade, Tourism and Services Economy and Marketing and International Business, and people in the second group were students at Accountancy and Informatics. The selection of the participants was done with the help of a recruitment questionnaire, in order to select people who eat at fast-food at least twice a month.

The interviews took place in October 2012, while the students were attending the university. The interviews were then transcribed in order to carry out its *content analysis*. The codification and categorization of the information, as well as the analysis of frequency of the responses, were done with the help of NVivo 7, a computer program which is used in qualitative researches.

In order to provide the confidentiality of the fast-foods mentioned in the interview, they were named with the letter A, B, C or D.

The hypotheses and objectives of the qualitative research:

The main hypotheses we started from, in doing this research, are:

1. The main segment of consumers who buy fast-food products in Brasov County is represented by the young people.

2. The lower price of fast-food products is the main reason young people choose eating at fast-food restaurants.

In order to get answers to our questions, we established the following *objectives*:

- To find out the perceptions of young people about fast-food restaurants;
- To identify the motives that form the basis for choosing a fast-food restaurant by the young people;
- To find out the criteria the young people have in mind when they choose a fast-food.

Taking these objectives into consideration, we structured the interview guide in five *themes*:

- The fast-food restaurants from the young people's perspective;
- The reasons why the young people choose fast-food restaurants;
- The criteria young people consider when they choose a fast-food restaurant;
- The expectations they have when they eat at fast-food restaurants;
- New dimensions or services that young people would add to fast-food restaurants in order to satisfy their needs at a higher level.

The information the students offered during the interview, was processed, as we have mentioned earlier, with the help of Nvivo 7. The answers were codified, categorized and then ordered descending, according to their frequency in each category. The results were then submitted according to their importance, from the most important ones (with the highest frequencies) to the least important ones (with the lowest frequencies).

To settle the objectives formulated above, the results are presented by first describing the fast-food restaurant from the young people' perspective, secondly, by identifying the motives which the young people have in mind when choose a fast-food restaurant and, thirdly, by establishing the most important criteria that young people use to choose a fast-food restaurant.

THE FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT FROM THE YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVE

First of all, the subjects define fast-food restaurant as **an informal place**, perfectly adapted to their feeding and socializing needs. Besides this, we could add **"the dynamic atmosphere"** of a fast-food, which is determined by lots of young people who are there and whose demanding and behavior are the same.

S6: *"There are lots of young people at a fast-food."*

S1: *"You are not being looked upon, because you are wearing a T-shirt or a pair of jeans."*

S13: *"You are not being looked upon for the way you eat [...] and you can even eat with your hands."*

S1: *"The place is always full, it is dynamic, and you get a lot of energy from there..."*

As fast-foods are adapted to the particular needs of young people, they are generally regarded as being **„youthful, welcoming places"**, where „you feel good".

S11: *„ We have a different attitude. [...] We talk, we laugh!"*

S12: *„ We speak loudly! [...] We are young and we like fast-food atmosphere."*

Another particular aspect mentioned by the young people is that, fast-foods are more **crowded** than other restaurants, because they are usually located in the center, where there are a great number of consumers.

S13: *"Almost all fast-foods are placed in central [...], crowded locations."*

S6: *„[...] it is always crowded there."*

Worthy of mention is the observation of one subject according to whom the fast-food represents **„the modern world"**, characterized by the „lack of time", that adapts to the need of saving time.

S13: *„I associate fast-food with the modern world and with its lack of time."*

Two interesting observations - but different by their nature -, mentioned here by some subjects with regard to fast-foods, were: **„the pleasure"**/ **„the appetite"** for these products **and the unhealthy life style** of those people who eat them. Although they know the unpleasant effects that the fast-food products can have on the consumers' health, young people consider themselves *addicted* to these products due to their special taste.

S13: *„...with an unhealthy life style, with all our health problems. [...] it generates frustrations, but also pleasure, in the same time."*

S11: *„[...] every time you pass by a fast-food there is that smell, that makes you want to eat instantly."*

S10: *„It makes you want to come back over and over again."*

Although the frequency of consuming of the fast-food products is higher for young people, they stated *they are not loyal to one particular place*, as they

intended to taste other products, too, offered by other restaurants in Brasov

S4: *„There is no way you like all the products in a fast-food. That is why very few people are loyal to one particular fast-food. [...] Every type [of fast-food] has something you like."*

S11: *„ I cannot eat every day at the same fast-food."*

Finally, young people think that the fast-food restaurant **„replaces their mother"**, when they cannot arrive at home in time for meals, or during the daily breaks.

MOTIVES FOR CHOOSING FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS BY THE YOUNG PEOPLE

Having in mind the results of the exploratory research, accomplished with the restaurants managers (Untaru, Ispas et al., 2012), the present study proposes, as a main objective, to identify the motives the young people have in mind when they choose a fast-food restaurant. The answers frequency's analysis emphasized several motives the young people have in mind when they choose a fast-food restaurant. In this sense, we could mention, in the descending order of their frequency, the following motives:

a. **The quickness of serving** is an essential criterion of choosing of a certain type of restaurant, due to the lack of time the young people invoked several times during the interview. The young people's preferences for fast-foods are, consequently, justified.

S13: *„I prefer them to be fast in preparing and delivering the food."*

S11: *„ Young people prefer to grab a bite and go."*

b. **The food price.** The young people's preferences for this type of restaurant are not determined only by quickness in preparing and serving the products, but also by the food price.

S11: *„[...] the food is good and cheap [...] a sandwich is 4,5 lei, but it is huge."*

S7: *„The lower prices of the products offered [by fast-foods]. Young people's budget is not big enough for eating at restaurant every day."*

We could notice that the food price is associated by subjects with the food quantity. This connection was brought into discussion related to the time spent out of home by the young people. For example, according to the subjects' opinions, when the hunger sensation is high and the time required to have a meal is short, the solution that satisfy these needs is to choose a fast-food with consistent menus, at lower prices.

S4: *„ If you want to eat a lot, because you have work to do, or you have to attend courses..., you find consistent food and lots of it at a reasonable price."*

S11: *„[...] If you are somewhere and you get hungry, and if you want to eat something fast, you go to a fast-food, grab a sandwich and eat it,... and it's also cheap."*

S4: „*Young people prefer fast-food A, because the dishes are big and ...cheap.*”

The importance of the price was brought into discussion not only by its dimension and association with the food quantity from the menu, but also by the discounts which periodically fast-foods use to boost the demand.

S12: „*The special offers! There are some fast-foods, where if you order one pizza, you get another one for free.*”

Besides these types of special offers, the young people also mentioned other ones, such as price reductions, based on the loyalty card or even the student's book.

S13: „*We prefer discounts, and even loyalty cards [...] if it is possible.*”

S1: „*[...] we can get discounts if we have a student's book.*”

c. **Familiarity** with the products offered by the fast-foods represents another motive which justifies young people's choice. The familiarity with the fast-foods – even the *dependency* of them, as we mentioned earlier – was indirectly explained by the young people through the **trust**, **safety** and **certainty** which this type of restaurant convey to consumers.

S6: „*[...] you got used to eat at fast-food.*”

S7: „*You know what to expect.*”

S13: „*[Fast-foods] are trustful.*”

S11: „*[I associate fast-food] with safety, meaning I know for sure what I eat.*”

d. **The socializing possibility**, as another motive for choosing the fast-food by the young people, is supported by its informal environment, and therefore is adapted, to a great extent, to the young people's needs.

S9: „*[Fast-food is] a place where you can socialize.*”

S10: „*[Fast-food is] a place where you can meet your friends.*”

e. **The accessibility of the location** is another motive for young people to prefer fast-foods. Unlike the restaurants, which are located in less accessible areas for the young people, fast-foods are located in their way towards their home or downtown, and they are more numerous. Easiness of finding a fast-food could be associated with the *lack of time* or the *hurry* which the young people brought into discussion several times during the interview.

S4: „*...because there are lots of fast-foods and we don't have time for restaurants.*”

S8: „*[Fast-food is] a place you meet in your way, wherever you go...it has a great location.*”

f. **The convenience** offered by fast-food is another motive for choosing a fast-food by the young people.

S13: „*Some people don't have the possibility to cook at their home [as they live in a student hostel], or they don't like it.*”

S1: „*Most people who come to a fast-food are able to explain what they want [the easiness of ordering*

due to the menus visibility], *it's very easy to order food.*”

By its content, we could notice some similarities between *convenience* and other three variables that were mentioned earlier, such as: *the quickness of serving*, *the accessibility of location* and *the familiarity*, because they describe similar needs of young people. *Easiness of finding a fast-food* when the sensation of hunger occurs or the need to get out with friends, *the quickness of serving*, resulted in the short time for preparing and consuming the food, and the *certainty*, *safety* and *trust* that they will receive **exactly** what they want represent factors that *define* the **convenience** which the young people request when they choose a restaurant.

Other variables that the young people brought into discussion during the interview, but in a lower number of interventions, were the following:

g. **Home delivery and take away products:**

S8: „*Home delivery is also an advantage. We order and they deliver the food at the hostel.*”

S4: „*If we are in a hurry, we take the food away (...). We don't have to stay and eat there.*”

h. **The menus display and the availability of the menus at any time of the day** are other advantages that fast-foods have in order to justify the young people's preferences.

S8: „*All the menus are always available at any time.*”

S13: „*[...] it is important that all the dishes should be available.*”

i. **The opening hours** are convenient, as some of fast-foods are open 24 hours a day.

S4: „*There is also another advantage – some fast-foods are opened 24 hours a day.*”

S11: „*[...] you can go there at any time, because it is opened.*”

Choosing one particular fast-food depends on its flexibility and capacity to adapt to young people's needs. These needs are in fact *young people's desires to easily find a place to eat, opened at any time*, with a *products display*, to be able to order fast, to *eat the food ordered rapidly*, to have a *place to socialize with their friends* and to take away the food or order at home when they do not want or do not have time to have the meal at fast-food.

YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEFINITE CRITERIA IN CHOOSING A FAST-FOOD RESTAURANT

The answers frequency's analysis has highlighted the importance given by the young people for different criteria in appreciating fast-food products and services. In this sense, we identified three main criteria which the young people brought into discussion several times in the interview, such as: *the taste of the products*, *their freshness and consistency*, *the physical environment* and *contact employees*. In fact, there are lots of research studies written on this topic and the idea

that comes out of them is the importance of the criteria mentioned above, when determining the quality of fast-foods products and services. Goyal's and Singh's (2007) research which has had as a main objective the understanding of the significant factors concerning young Indians' perception about the fast-food products and the decision making process of fast-foods, highlighted that the taste and the quality of the products are of major importance for the consumers who choose a fast-food. Other factors added to these are: the place ambiance and hygiene, the quickness of serving, the price, the diversity of products and fast-food location. Another observation derived from the same study is that the young people give greater importance to the ambiance and hygiene of a fast-food.

a. The food freshness, taste and consistency

The food is perceived as being the most important criterion, according to which young people choose a certain fast-food. Young people gave a big importance to aspects, like: the food taste, freshness and consistency.

S12: „When you mention fast-food, first of all you think about food!”

S4: „[...] at a fast-food (...), because there are lots of consumers, you know for sure that the food is fresh and warm (...), it is good, very good!”

S13: „Fast-food products taste excellent!”

S2: „I like that chicken legs are spicy.”

S4: „[...] the food is very consistent at fast-food A!”

From the food consistency point of view, fast-food restaurants in Brasov have been divided into two categories, such as: *fast-foods which offer more consistent menus* – being requested for satisfying the hunger sensation - and *fast-foods well-known for the special tastes of their food*.

S1: „You go to fast-food A, you eat a sandwich [which has the same price as other sandwiches from other fast-foods], but you know it is bigger and more consistent [...] If we are hungry, we go to fast-food A. [...] at fast-food B you eat even if you are not hungry.”

Although the food's taste, freshness and consistency are the main arguments when young people talk about choosing a fast-food to eat, they are also aware of the less pleasant consequences, the food can have on their body. That is why, when they were asked to mention a few things they would add to these fast-foods, to be completely satisfied, they thought, among other things, about adding a fruit or some fresh fruit juices to menus to make them healthier.

S6: „The food and drinks should be healthier,... for example, the meat should be fried in oil, which is used only once, not seven times.”

S4: „They should keep the same good taste, but find a way to cut off the chemicals.”

S6: „[...] I think that a fruit or something healthy added to the menu would be welcome.”

S13: „The employees should be able to make fresh fruit juices.. it wouldn't take too long.”

b. The physical environment

Other criterion, young people find important when choosing a fast-food, is the physical environment, such as: *the hygiene/ cleanliness, spatial layout and functionality, atmosphere and ambient conditions*. Wall and Berry (2007) found the fact that, although the food and drinks quality was a basic criterion in evaluating the restaurant services, the ambient conditions and services performance played a major influence in the consumers' final evaluation.

- **The hygiene/ cleanliness.** The cleanliness of a fast-food is an aspect young people talked about several times in the interview. The frequency of its mentioning as well as the topics that it included highlight its major importance, not only in the phases of choosing of a fast-food and consuming its products, but also in the one of returning to it.

S8: „The place should be clean.”

S12: „[...] if the toilets are clean.”

S1: „the plates and the tables should be clean.”

S13: „The tables should be kept in good order and clean, even if it's nobody sitting down there, without plastic glasses, paper napkins or mayonnaise left on them.”

- **The spatial layout and functionality.** Closed related to the socializing need, which was mentioned earlier, is the importance given by the young people to the way tables are arranged. In this sense, the spatial layout should play a double role: on one hand, *it should back up the socializing need* of young people, and on the other hand, there should be *enough private space*. Consequently, the spatial layout should be created so as to provide the young people with the possibility of bringing the tables together when they are in groups, even the increasing of their sizes or of the distances between them, separating the tables by walls, when they need privacy.

S8: „I think that fast-food A should be larger.”

S1: „Even the arrangement of the tables [...] we want to join the tables if there are more of us.”

S4: „[...] tables should be bigger.”

S11: „There should be a bigger space between the tables!”

S4: „We need private space!”

The functionality is not determined only by the way in which the tables are arranged but by other aspects that back up the young people's need for fast serving, which has been mentioned earlier. When asked to describe ways of improving the fast-food services, the young people proposed an increasing of the number of cash registers when the fast-food is full of customers, so as the time necessary to make an order or to pay to significantly reduce. Close related to the increasing of the serving time is the proposal of one subject according to whom fast-foods should introduce some *devices* through which the consumer choose and pay the favorite menu; in this case, the employee's role is only to prepare and offer the requested menu.

S1: „*It shouldn't be that stress at the cash register. [...] It is very stressful to make an order at fast-food B.*”

S13: „*It would be better if we are able to order and pay on our own, [...] with a help of a device [...] we should pay by card or cash through that device [...] and wait for the employee to take our order.*”

- **The atmosphere** is, as we have said before, a very important aspect when choosing a certain fast-food. The atmosphere of fast-food is characterized by the young people as being adapted to a great extent to their socializing needs, due to the fact that it's less formal from the point of view of the required clothes, of the way of eating and of their specific attitude and behavior. In this context, Kotler (1973) noticed that the atmosphere in a restaurant could be as important as the quality of the core product (the products and services offered by the fast-food's employees) when making the purchasing decision process.

S11: „*We [young people] behave differently! (...) We talk loudly, we laugh!*”

S12: „*We talk loudly!*”

S11: „*[Fast-food is the place] where we feel good.*”

S9: „*Fast-food is a less formal place, where you don't necessarily need formal clothes.*”

- **The ambient conditions** are described by the young people by elements like: *light, smell, color and noise level.*

S9: „*The interior should be nice and welcoming [...]*”

S1: „*There should be smoking and no-smoking areas.*”

S4: „*There should be fresh air, big windows, [...] lots of light.*”

S6: „*[...] it should be vividly painted, with warm colors.*”

c. **The contact employees**

Another important criterion for young people when they choose a fast-food restaurant is represented by the employees they get into contact with. In order to satisfy at a high level the consumers' needs, the young people consider that the front-line employees should be: **fast, punctual, kind, receptive, physically attractive and well dressed, correct and emphatic.**

S5: „*I would never go to a fast-food where the employees are talking to one another, while I am standing there, waiting for them to pay attention to me.*”

S12: „*The employees are quite fast. [...] They try to be on time with everything.*”

S13: „*The employees should be nice [...] neat.*”

S8: „*The cashier's responsiveness [...].*”

S1: „*I don't like this kind of serving [meaning that situation in which the employees try to sell extra or more products to the requested menu]. It's like they are harassing me.*”

S13: „*There was a product I didn't order on the bill or they didn't put something I order on the bag, but I paid for it.*”

S13: „*[...] They shouldn't judge you for what you order but to offer you more products at the same price [...] they shouldn't make you feel bad or frustrated.*”

Analysis of the statements that young people made to describe the contact employees highlights some particular aspects that need to be discussed here. We are here referring to *correctness, transparency and empathy* of the contact employees. In this sense, some of the interviewed subjects complain about the lack of transparency of the contact employees. That means they don't offer information regarding the supplementary price that consumers should pay when the structure of the menu change. Further, in the situation of home delivery, the participants have noticed that some employees are not correct because they offer less or other products from the order. Another problem regarding the contact employees is their critical attitude towards those consumers who order bigger quantities from a product or more frequent. Besides all these, in order to provide a high level of consumers' satisfaction, fast-foods employees should **keep their promises** and offer the discounts/ prizes they have promised to their clients and also they should always have the products on the menu.

CONCLUSIONS

Fast-foods are, nevertheless, young people's favorite restaurants. They choose these places because fast-food restaurants **succeed in adapting to young people's needs and expectations.** Young people are characterized by low income, lack of time, convenience and need for socializing. Fast-foods fulfill these needs by offering cheap products, advantageous locations - so as to satisfy the young people's need for rapidity -, creating a “youthful, welcoming” atmosphere - so as the young people to enjoy the time spent at the fast-food and to socialize -, increasing the visibility and availability of the menus – so as to satisfy their convenience need -, providing home delivery services – due to the short time the young people owe to dine out of home – and by extending the daily programme, sometimes 24 hours per day.

The criteria that the young people mentioned as being of major importance when choose a fast-food restaurant are: the food and beverage taste, freshness and consistency, the physical environment – including the hygiene/ cleanliness, spatial layout and functionality, atmosphere and ambient conditions – and the contact employees who is assumed that has qualities, like: punctuality, promptness, kindness, responsiveness, attractive physical appearance and clothing, transparency, correctness and empathy.

Although the results we have obtained in this research are valuable, they cannot be extrapolated to the population we did this research on, for two reasons: on one hand, because this kind of research has an exploratory character and on the other hand, because we limited our investigations only to young people, studying at Economics University. Future research

studies can focus on other segments of consumers or achieving more focus-groups in order to complete the results. Nevertheless, these results can be used as hypotheses for future quantitative researches, to verify

if the assumptions we have started from, are in accordance with the real life of the young people.

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