

Unchecked Consumption? The Unbridled Access to Processed Foods in America

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Senior Project Proposal

Essay Option Project Proposal

1. Name & Concentration

Name: Jordan Perry

Area of Concentration: English Studies

2. Focus

Why are processed food with large amounts of sugar, sodium, fat and the variety of other things that affect people so easily accessible in America? Even though the government is well aware of the situation at hand, why is there not more oversight or control in one of the most important areas of American interest: our food system.

- I chose this topic because it does not make any sense how in America we are well aware that the food that is widely consumed is terrible for us, and yet it is still widely available and in some areas more accessible than healthier alternatives.

3. Alignment with Common Theme & HCOM

Needs work

4. Purpose

My project's primary purpose is to focus on the food system in America. I hope to find out through this project why the food in America sucks. Is it just cheap and easy and made for profit? Or is there a reason that lies behind why the food in America is mass produced widely available pig slop?

5. Capstone Title

Culling the population: How the American population is controlled by its food system

6. Working Summary

It is not some mystery to any american that garbage high calorie low nutrition food is easily accessible and available to anyone in this country. There are individuals and corporations that are behind this and are pushing for the population to consume and not ask questions. Food and Beverage corporations are the ones pushing this crap on American consumers

7. Sources

FDA and us government studies

Peer reviewed journals

Mass media articles

8. Next Steps

I need to begin working on an outline

9. Timeline

- **Outline- early march**
- **Rough draft- mid march**
- **Draft 2- end of march**
- **Draft 3- april/ mid april**
- **Final Draft**

Research Essay

I. Introduction

Growing up in a densely populated area in Los Angeles, California, I can vividly remember trips to the store as a child. One thing that comes to mind whenever I think of stores are the brightly colored packages and enticing advertisements that would adorn the shelves and racks throughout the entire store. Beckoning to anyone the promise of convenient goods as well as a variety of choices. However, amidst the plethora of options available, one thing over the many years that I have lived as well as the variety of different places that I have stayed, an overwhelming abundance of processed foods high in sugar, sodium, fat, and a myriad of other additives. One place in the store that likely stands out in the memories of every American as a child: the cereal aisle. A parallel row with shelves like any other aisle in a grocery store. What separates this from the rest? Boxes lining the shelves with recognizable and beloved cartoon characters and flashy logos, which to a child seemingly stretch endlessly. Each box boasts irresistible flavors alongside eye-catching flashy designs. Although upon closer inspection the ingredient lists would reveal a disconcerting reality, ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup, artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives were among the top offenders, lurking behind the guise of supposed breakfast so called nutrition. Despite the efforts of my parents and those of most other American parents with their children to instill healthy eating habits, the enthralling allure of these sugary, sodium-laden concoctions often proved too strong to resist. The cereal aisle is not the only place in the grocery store that this occurs and not only with children. In

every grocery store all across America, thousands of individuals and families succumb to the convenience and allure of processed foods, unwittingly contributing to a growing epidemic of diet-related illnesses. Reflecting on these experiences, one cannot help but beg the question. Why are these products so readily available, and why does it seem like the government turns a blind eye to their harmful effects? My personal observations have ignited a curiosity within me that would drive me to delve deeper into the complex web of factors shaping America's food system and the glaring lack of oversight therein.

Processed foods have become a dominant feature of the American diet, contributing significantly to public health challenges. A comprehensive analysis published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* in 2019 examined the association between ultra-processed food consumption and mortality risk among adults in the United States. The study found that higher consumption of ultra-processed foods was associated with a higher risk of all-cause mortality, independent from other dietary and lifestyle factors. These foods are often high in added sugars, sodium, unhealthy fats, and various artificial additives, while lacking essential nutrients. The study's findings highlight an urgent need to address the pervasive influence of processed foods on American public health and culture, and to promote healthier dietary patterns in order to mitigate the burden of chronic diseases. Despite the government's awareness of the health risks associated with processed foods, there is a lack of oversight and control in the American food system, allowing these unhealthy products to remain easily and widely accessible.

II. Overview of Processed Foods in America

As defined by the *Public Health Nutrition Journal*, processed foods are any food item that has undergone deliberate alteration from its natural state through various techniques such as, but not limited to cooking, canning, freezing, drying, or the addition of additives. According to the journal “Almost all foods are processed to some extent, if only by preservation, and it is therefore unhelpful to criticize foods as being ‘processed’. A number of food classifications have been devised that pay special attention to types of processing” (Monteiro). These alterations are typically made on purpose to improve anything from taste, texture, appearance, shelf life as well as other factors to increase the products convenience in terms of production, distribution and consumption. Processed foods can range from minimally processed items such as bagged salads or canned fruits to highly processed products like sugary snacks, frozen meals, and fast food. They often contain added sugars, sodium, unhealthy fats, and artificial ingredients, while being lower in essential nutrients compared to natural, unadulterated, and unprocessed foods.

Some of the common ingredients found in processed foods and where to find them are: added sugars, often found in processed foods such as sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, and other sweeteners. These added sugars are commonly found in beverages, baked goods, and snack foods. Sodium is frequently added to an extensive amount of processed foods for flavor enhancement as well as preservation. The highest levels of sodium can be found in canned soups, processed meats, condiments, and savory snacks. Processed foods often contain unhealthy fats such as saturated and trans fats, which can increase the risk of heart disease and other health problems. These fats are commonly found in fried foods, baked goods, processed meats and snack foods. Various artificial additives such as preservatives, colorings, flavorings, and texture

enhancers, are often incorporated into processed foods to improve their taste, appearance, and shelf life. These additives can include monosodium glutamate (MSG), artificial sweeteners, and food dyes. Frequently refined grains are used in the production of processed foods. These have been stripped of their fiber and nutrient content during processing. Refined grains are most commonly found in products such as white bread, pasta, rice, and baked goods. These common ingredients found in processed foods contribute to their palatability, convenience, and extended shelf lives, but can also have detrimental effects on health especially when consumed in excess. Understanding and being mindful of these ingredients can help individuals make healthier choices and reduce their intake of processed foods.

There are some compelling consumption trends and statistics related to processed foods in the American diet. There are high consumption rates of processed foods across the country, not only do they constitute a significant portion of the American diet, studies indicate they contribute to a large proportion of total caloric intake. As stated in “Big Food, Food Systems, and Global Health” an article by David Stuckler, and Marion Nestle in the *PLOS Medicine Journal*. “Food systems are not driven to deliver optimal human diets but to maximize profits. For people living in poverty, this means either exclusion from development (and consequent food insecurity) or eating low-cost, highly processed foods lacking in nutrition and rich in sugar, salt, and saturated fats (and consequent overweight and obesity)” (Stuckler and Marion). Over the past few decades, there has been a steady increase in the consumption of processed foods in the United States. Busy lifestyles, widespread availability, aggressive marketing tactics, and the noticeable affordability differences between processed foods and non-processed foods are all factors causing this upward trend in the consumption of processed foods. The higher

consumption of processed foods has been linked to various health issues in the American population. These include obesity, type two diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and certain cancers to name a few of the many adverse health effects associated with the consumption of processed foods. In general the consumption of processed foods tends to vary across demographic groups, with lower-income individuals and communities oftentimes having much higher rates of consumption. According to the article “Poverty and obesity: the role of energy density and energy costs” by Adam Drewnowski and S.E. Specter in the *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*:

Many health disparities in the United States are linked to inequalities in education and income. The highest rates of obesity occur among population groups with the highest poverty rates and the least education. There is an inverse relation between energy density (MJ/kg) and energy cost (\$/MJ), such that energy-dense foods composed of refined grains, added sugars, or fats may represent the lowest-cost option to the consumer. Poverty and food insecurity are associated with lower food expenditures, low fruit and vegetable consumption, and lower-quality diets (Drewnowski and Specter).

There is a direct and identifiable correlation between the amount of money an individual has and the accessibility nor necessity it becomes for them to have to consume processed foods. The privilege to have healthy food and access to non processed goods has a direct correlation with wealth and class in America.

III. Food Industries Monopolization of Unhealthy Foods

The food industry plays a significant role in shaping the accessibility of unhealthy foods through various ways such as but not limited to marketing strategies, product placement, pricing, distribution network, product innovation, as well as political influence. Addressing these factors is crucial for promoting healthy eating habits and reducing the prevalence of diet related diseases.

Advertising specifically targeted toward children is one example of the marketing strategies used by corporate entities in the food industry. Food companies frequently target children through advertisements on television, the internet, as well as social media platforms. By making use of colorful packaging, recognizable often cartoon characters, and celebrity endorsements are strategically used to promote these products to children. In the journal article “Protecting Children From Harmful Food Marketing: Options for Local Government to Make a Difference” Jennifer L. Harris and Samantha K Graff discuss the harmful effects of food marketing on children:

Most research on the effects of television food advertising to children confirms that it increases children’s preferences for advertised brands, choices of specific foods after advertisement exposure, and requests to parents for advertised foods. More recent research has demonstrated, however, that food marketing also has potentially profound effects on children’s overall diet and health. For example, television food advertising increases consumption of any available snack foods during and immediately after

exposure, and exposure to commercial television is associated with increased overall calorie consumption, higher body mass index, and reduced fruit and vegetable consumption five years later. Research has also demonstrated an association between exposure to soft drink advertising and consumption of all sugar sweetened beverages. Marketing can even affect how much children like the taste of advertised foods: preschoolers indicated that snack foods presented in packages with licensed characters tasted better than the same foods in plain packages. Research on the harmful effects of food marketing on broader health-related outcomes (beyond brand preference and attitudes) is in its early stages; however, potentially far-reaching and dangerous effects have been hypothesized. Because of its ubiquity, food marketing likely affects children's normative beliefs about the types of foods that are acceptable to eat regularly without adverse consequences, may affect how much children like the taste of advertised foods, and may automatically prime other unrelated goals and behaviors, including children's motivation to engage in unhealthy behaviors (Harris and Graff).

The various different research points that Harris and Graff present an appalling picture of the lack of oversight in regards to how these large corporations are allowed to target the demographic of young children in America so clearly. The fact that it is more or less proven that these advertisements that are constantly played on television have a noticeable effect on children's motivations and desires regarding the foods which they choose to eat. The language used does not proclaim that this is what will happen and yet it seems as though many people in the population, children especially, are swayed by these same marketing strategies or there would

not be nearly as much incentive for these companies to make these concentrated marketing efforts.

Another way in which food companies aim to promote their products is through product placement. Product placement is when these companies strategically place their products in movies, television shows and video games in order to increase their brands visibility and awareness, in order to influence consumer behaviors. In a study published in the *American Academy of Pediatrics Journal* entitled “Prevalence of Food and Beverage Brands in Movies: 1996–2005” by Lisa A. Sutherland. The objective of this study was to describe food and beverage brand placements in a large representative sample of popular movies. As a result of the study Sutherland found that:

Of the 200 movies coded, 138 (69%) contained at least 1 food, beverage, or food retail establishment brand. Movies rated PG-13 and R were significantly more likely to have brand placements compared with movies in other rating categories. Comedies, action/adventures, and horror films had more brand placements than other genres. We did not detect a significant difference in the number of movies with brand placements or mean number of placements per movie by year of movie release. A total of 1180 brand placements were identified and verified, including 427 food, 425 beverage, and 328 food retail establishment brand placements. Candy/confections (26%) and salty snacks (21%) were the most prevalent food brands, sugar-sweetened beverages (76%) were the most prevalent beverage brands, and fast food composed two thirds of the food retail establishment brand placements. Food, beverage, and food retail establishment brands are

frequently portrayed in movies, and most of the brand placements are for energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods or product lines. Movies are a potent source of advertising to children, which has been largely overlooked (Sutherland).

Sutherland's study presents that out of 200 randomly selected films produced and released between the years 1996-2005, 69% contained at least one advertisement for a food or beverage product. As an American consumer myself this is another example of the efforts undertaken by these companies in order to integrate themselves further and further into our lives. I can personally look back on my own experiences and memories, and find many references to products such as coke, mcdonalds, and other notable american brands appearing and reappearing in television and films throughout the course of my life. These representations have certainly played a part in the integration of these companies as staples and or name brands in society, as far as I am concerned this is quite disconcerting to say the very least.

Another extremely effective marketing strategy undertaken by these companies is the elaborate use of health claims and labels. This is a tactic used to create a misperception that certain options are healthier, even when those same products may still be high in unhealthy things such as but not limited to sugar, salt, and or unhealthy fats. In a collective review of 11 different studies entitled "Systematic review of the impact of nutrition claims related to fat, sugar and energy content on food choices and energy intake" published in the *BioMed Central Public Health Journal* by Laura H. Oostenbach. In the review it was stated by Oostenbach that:

Results showed that nutrition claims can influence the knowledge of consumers with respect to perceived healthfulness of products, as well as expected and experienced tastiness of food products – making food products with nutrition claims seem healthier and less tasty. Nutrition claims can make the appropriate portion size appear to be larger and lead to an underestimation of the energy content of food products. Nutrition claims can also influence food purchase intentions, moderated by the perceived healthfulness of the relevant food products and the health consciousness of individuals. Nutrition claims were also found to have an impact on food purchases, to influence ‘consumption guilt’ (i.e., feeling of guilt associated with eating), and to increase consumption, moderated by the weight status of individuals. These influences were shown to vary depending on the type of claim and food carrying the claim. There is evidence that, while nutrition claims may lead some consumers to improve their nutrition knowledge and select healthier options, it may also lead consumers to increase food consumption and overall energy intake. This may run counter to efforts to address overweight and obesity (Oostenbach).

According to the collective results of the 11 different studies that were cited in this review by Oostenbach, there are quite a few general conclusions that can be drawn from the results found by Oostenbach. There is strong evidence provided that things including labels with false or misleading claims such as “low in fat” “reduced sugar” and “energy boosting” to be correlated with shifting people's perceptions about these food and beverage products. Oftentimes leading people to believe that these products that are marketed and boasted as being low fat, energy boosting, reduced or sugar free insinuate in consumers’ minds that they are making a healthy purchase when the reality is often the opposite or at the very least a much different reality. This

also extends to the ways in which we perceive an intended flavor outcome for a product. For example, one of the studies cited in the review observed “the expected as well as experienced tastiness of milk chocolate based on a nutrition claim relating to fat. They observed that a ‘reduced-fat’ claim led consumers to believe and expect milk chocolate to not be as tasty as the ‘regular’ milk chocolate. Yet, no difference in experienced tastiness between milk chocolate labeled ‘reduced-fat’ or ‘regular’ was found” (Oostenbach). This displays just how malleable consumer’s perceptions of products are dictated significantly by these health claims and product labels.

IV. Government Awareness and Response

The American Government's awareness of the health risks associated with processed foods, as well as its general lack of oversight and control of the American food system is appalling. Despite ever mounting evidence pointing towards linking processed foods to a wide range of diet related health issues. Regulatory measures enacted in order to combat and address this issue have been insufficient leading to the perpetuation of processed foods in the American food system.

Some of the same food and beverage companies that are responsible for the primary development, production, and distribution of processed foods in the United States are the same that Lobby for political influence with individuals and groups directly and indirectly associated with the United States government therefore contributing pressure on the same political institutions to “help” these companies keep their processed food in the American Food system. OpenSecrets, a nonpartisan, independent and non profit organization, its main purpose is to track

the flow of money in American politics and provide the data and analysis to strengthen democracy. It is for Americans to use this knowledge to create a more vibrant, representative and accountable democracy. As stated on a page on their site entitled "Food & Beverage Summary":

The restaurants and drinking establishments grouping spends money on direct contributions to local, state, and federal candidates as well as lobbying for specific bills and commenting on proposed federal regulatory rules. They are generally in favor of lower taxes on small businesses and want to be involved in the regulations that affect food safety, worker safety and organization, and tourism. During the Covid-19 pandemic this grouping spent significantly more, most likely due to new federal laws that directly affected the operation of restaurants: the CARES Act, the RESTAURANTS Act, the American Rescue Plan and Build Back Better. Contributions to political candidates and party committees skyrocketed in 2020, from a previous high of \$20.7 million in 2012 to \$42.5 million. In the 2020 cycle, giving was more evenly distributed between the two major parties than is typical. Since 1990, Republicans have received at least 60% of contributions from the restaurant industry except in 2020, when they received 54%. The trend returned to normal in 2022, when Republicans received 65% of contributions.

This webpage provides a lot of insightful background information regarding why these food and beverage companies are investing so much money into the United States government. Some of the companies that were listed include but are not limited to McDonald's Corp, Bloomin' Brands, Roark Capital Group, Pere Antoine, Bobby Cox Companies, Darden Restaurants, MUY! Companies and various other individual restaurants were the top donors in

this industry. For example, some of the largest recorded public lobbying contributions recorded in 2023 were \$3,940,000 from Coca-Cola Co, \$2,670,000 from McDonald's Corp, and \$1,940,000 from Mars Inc. (Chocolate Company). These enormous sums of money are clearly indicative of a direct and cooperative relationship between these companies contributing to politicians in the United States government. It is no wonder that the members and parties associated with the United States Government being directly involved and funded due in part by these very same companies they should be watching seems to be a huge contributing factor to the prevalence of processed food accessibility as well as over abundance in the American Food system.

There is a phenomenon that occurs in many different industries that interact directly with the American Government referred to as the revolving door phenomenon. In which individuals move between positions within government and the private sector. This has become prevalent in various American industries and in particular a great deal between the federal government and the food and beverage industry in the United States.

Tom Perkins writes about this in his article “US nutrition panel’s ties to top food giants revealed in new report” for *The Guardian*. In the article Perkins claims that:

Almost half of a federal government panel that helps develop US nutritional guidelines has significant ties to big ultra-processed food companies with a significant stake in the process’s outcome. The revelation is part of a new report from US Right to Know, a government transparency group that looked for ties to corporate interests among the 20-member panel of food and nutrition experts that makes recommendations for updating the US government’s official dietary guidelines. It found nine members had ties to Nestlé, Pfizer, Coca-Cola, the National Egg Board and other prominent food lobby groups,

among others. The findings raise questions about whether the panel is looking out for Americans' health or corporate profits, and "erodes confidence in dietary guidelines", said Gary Ruskin of US Right to Know. "Millions of Americans' lives are affected by this report and it's crucial that the report tell the truth to American people and it's not degraded into another sales pitch for big food and big pharma," he said. The panel, called the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DAGC), makes the recommendations to the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department Of Health and Human Services (HHS). The guidelines are considered the "gold standard" for dietary advice in the US and around the world, and influence which foods are served in institutional settings such as schools, hospitals and military facilities. They inform how healthcare professionals and nutritionists treat people, and influence how federal food aid is distributed, nutrition labeling, and how food products are formulated. 'The guidelines affect the entire US food system quite strongly,' Ruskin said (Perkins).

Perkins' article provides a great deal of information that is not commonly known. For example before discovering this article I personally had never heard of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. The fact that it consists of members who have a direct connection and conflict of interest to the companies in the food and beverage industry is shocking. Especially when this committee supposedly makes recommendations directly to the USDA. It is a very strange thing that the very same people with direct ties to these industries are the ones in the very same government positions meant to overlook them, it's almost as if it's by design.

V. Conclusion

Over the course of my research I have been able to form a better understanding of some of the American Food System. Questions that I had such as why are these processed foods high in sugar, sodium, fat, and a myriad of other additives products so readily available? Why does it seem like the government turns a blind eye to their clearly harmful effects? After delving deeper into the complex web of factors which shapes the American food system I was able to develop a clearer understanding of how and why it came to be this way.

To answer my own research questions directly provides necessary insight into the problem. So one of the main reasons why these foods are so readily available is one that is quite obvious and if anything quite telling of the situation at hand. These products are extremely cheap and increasingly easier and easier to produce and distribute. This incentivises food and beverage corporations to do anything and everything in order to invest their focus in particular products. These products with a clear intent on developing the cheapest, longest lasting, most convenient consumer goods possible. One of the prevalent tools utilized by food and beverage companies are the various artificial additives such as preservatives, colorings, flavorings, and texture enhancers, which are often incorporated into processed foods to improve their taste, appearance, and shelf life.

Another interesting aspect of why processed foods are such a prominent part of the American Food system is the lack of government oversight, which was one of my guiding questions as I developed a better understanding of Food in America. It is a less well known fact that politicians and groups apart of the United States Government are directly involved and

funded by the very same Food companies which they should be watching is obviously an undeniable contributing factor to the prevalence of processed food accessibility as well as over abundance in the American Food system. When the companies that make these processed foods make money they then use that money in order to buy themselves political protections via direct campaign donations, insider trading, and job promises are a few of the methods employed by companies not just in the food and beverage but across most American industries in order to advance the companies power and profits.

In conclusion the food system in America is a dark place ruled by companies that dictate most of the foods that are readily available to me as well as millions of other American citizens. It is quite harrowing that our food system is so tightly controlled and monopolized by a select group of companies and the individuals who make decisions within them control our food system so tightly that many Americans are not even aware about this. Over the course of completing my research in the American food system it has become apparent that corporate profit and individual greed has overtaken any desire for these companies to not produce the cheapest garbage for American Consumers to ingest.

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