

Interest in presidential eating habits may affect the public's food choices

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From presidential physicals to sudden health scares, the health of the commander in chief garners a lot of media attention in the United States. A recent study by a Penn State researcher examined how President Donald Trump's reported fondness for fast food may affect the public's perception of fast food and the likelihood, based on their media habits, one might purchase some.

The study, recently published in the journal *Appetite*, found that people who pay more attention to [media coverage](#) about Trump's diet are more likely to view [fast food](#) as a socially acceptable meal option. They also are more likely to eat fast food in the near future, according to the study's author Jessica Myrick, associate professor of media studies at Penn State's Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications.

While Trump's 2018 physical examination reported the president to be in "excellent health," Myrick was curious what effect his widely reported diet of fast food—which previous research has tied to poor health—could have on the [general public](#).

"When you aggregate those effects across the entire U.S. population, these data suggest there could be harm caused to public health by encouraging many Americans to eat fast food," Myrick said.

According to the researchers, Trump is not the first president whose eating habits have made headlines. Former President Bill Clinton also had a penchant for fast food before undergoing quadruple bypass surgery in 2004 and later becoming vegan. Former President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama promoted healthy eating and started a vegetable garden on the White House grounds.

But Myrick said the media landscape has since changed dramatically, and Trump's reliance on Twitter to communicate—among other major

advances in digital communication—makes his case particularly unique.

Myrick surveyed more than 1,000 Americans in a nationally representative survey. It compared the respondents' attention to media—including news stories about Trump's [eating habits](#)—with respondents' "parasocial relationship" with the president. Parasocial relationships are between two people who don't know each other—like a fan's relationship with a celebrity or politician.

The study also compared those findings with respondent attitudes toward fast food—its acceptability and the likelihood respondents would order fast food in the near future.

After analyzing the data, Myrick found that attention to media about Trump's reported diet was a stronger predictor of intentions to eat fast food than any demographic factor, including education level, race, age, gender or income.

"The results also show that for both Republicans and Democrats, greater attention to media coverage of Trump's diet was related to more positive attitudes toward fast food," Myrick said. "However, for Republicans, this relationship was nearly twice as strong, meaning that as attention to [media](#) coverage of Trump's diet increases, Republicans are quicker to report positive attitudes toward fast food than are Democrats."

For individuals who did not identify as either party affiliation, there was no relationship between attention to coverage of the president's diet and attitudes toward fast [food](#).

Myrick said the study provides guidance for communicators, especially those working in the public health sector. Societal factors and individual preferences affect dietary choice. When major political figures or other newsmakers are reported to choose an unhealthy [diet](#), it can affect news

consumers' dietary choices as well, which can influence the [health](#) of the public at large, she added.

More information: Jessica Gall Myrick, Connections between viewing media about President Trump's dietary habits and fast food consumption intentions: Political differences and implications for public health, *Appetite* (2019). DOI: [10.1016/j.appet.2019.104545](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2019.104545)

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