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COMMENTARY

MOOCS: digesting the facts

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The techniques used in massive open online courses (MOOCs) are compared with supersizing in the fast food industry. Similarities include the profit motives, marketing techniques, criticisms, industry defences, and evolution of the two controversies. While fast food restaurants strategically increase the size of their meal courses and consumer base, MOOC providers increase the size of their student enrolments and the amounts of online course material they provide for the students to consume. In the two contexts, franchise owners and educational administrators deliver the supersized courses to their customers with apparent disregard for their widening negative effects. Educational institutions are encouraged to consider the ethics of these practices in order to prevent the unmonitored spread of junk education.

Keywords: massive open online courses; MOOCs; supersizing; junk food; profit motive; marketing strategies

Those responsible for the promotion of massive open online courses (MOOCs) should take a look at the history of junk food marketing. The two processes share similarities in six distinct areas.

(1) The profit motive

In the 1950s, the McDonald's food chain learned that cinema patrons are unwilling to pay for more than one packet of popcorn at a time, but will pay extra for a larger size. McDonald's developed this marketing insight into "supersizing," charging more for larger amounts of fries and soft drinks (Richardson, 2012). Since then, McDonald's has added a second meaning to supersizing, representing the massive increase in the number of customers who consume its courses (De Angelis, 2013). In the 2000s, educational administrators have been similarly unwilling to increase student enrolments by paying for extra courses, faculty members, etc. With the advent of the MOOC, however, many have succumbed without question to the idea that supersizing the number of students in a course and dispensing with teaching support is a viable alternative. They have also embraced the MOOC practice of supersizing the copious, even daily updates of material provided for students to sift for relevance (Siemens & Downes, 2008).

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(2) The marketing strategy

McDonald's marketed supersizing by suggesting that larger portions provide a value-added bonus. In the 1980s, McDonald's and other major fast food franchises developed the "value meal," which achieves the same effect as supersizing by persuading customers to pay extra for combined items that they might not have bought otherwise. Yet the added content and counter service of supersized and value meals actually cost the providers much less than they charge for the extra amounts, which have little or no extra nutritional value (Peretti, 2012). MOOC advocates have succeeded similarly in persuading educational institutions that increasing student numbers and reducing student support produces an educational value meal. Junk food and MOOC consumers alike seem slow to notice when such claims are not justified by objective research and evaluation.

(3) The industry's defence

In the early 2000s, the fast food industry was confronted by evidence that excessive junk food causes a third kind of supersizing, obesity (Jackson, 2004; Spurlock, 2004). The industry denied this link by arguing that consumers are responsible for identifying the amounts of food appropriate for them, and that parents are responsible for educating their children about the importance of daily exercise (Benton, 2004; Peretti, 2012). The latter argument turns a blind eye to the fact that people are unable to exercise adequately when they eat too much (Dray, 2014) and to the finding that obesity in children is unrelated to amount of exercise over time (Voss & Wilkin, 2003). Similarly, MOOC advocates suggest that students are responsible for digesting the information presented to them by discussing it ("connecting") with other students (Siemens, 2012). This idea overlooks research findings that many MOOC students are overwhelmed by the peer-to-peer approach (Andersen & Ponti, 2014; Knox, 2014; Mackness, Mak, & Williams, 2010).

(4) Widening effects

As a response to the anti-junk food argument that bigger is not necessarily better, McDonald's announced its abandonment of supersizing (NBC News, 2004). But the practice continues a decade later in the value meal approach of McDonald's and the fast food industry generally. Today's fast food restaurant meal sizes are 2–5 times higher than in the 1950s, with standard helpings similar in size to the extra-large helpings served before supersizing was introduced (Richardson, 2012). Meanwhile, that other North American phenomenon linked with supersizing, obesity, is also spreading globally (Swinburn et al., 2011). North American MOOC practices are spreading internationally too, despite (a) lack of evidence about their transferability to other regions (Liyanagunawardena, Adams, & Williams, 2013) and (b) evidence of the ill effects of MOOC practices in North America: for example, the knowledge indigestion caused by massive amounts of frequently updated MOOC course materials (Adams, Yin, Madriz, & Mullen, 2014; Andersen & Ponti, 2014).

(5) Eventual downsizing?

Will the international impact of MOOCs on educational practices continue to spread unchallenged, or will ethical concerns prevail regarding profit motive and student exploitation (Marshall, 2014)? Universities including Harvard are already replacing their initial MOOCs with downsized versions known as SPOCs, "small private online courses" (Coughlan, 2013). Shrewd restaurant customers develop similar downsizing strategies to combat having too much on their plates: for example, asking for an extra plate, knife and fork, or a container so they can share the supersized meal with a companion or finish it at home. Alternatively, will the range of non-MOOC approaches be downsized by initiatives such as the Global Learning Council, the US body including MOOC providers, created to identify the online practices worth preserving (Baggaley, 2014a), as when large restaurant franchises reduce the local competition?

(6) Final outcomes?

In 2013, the California State Legislature attempted to end the MOOC debate by requiring educators to recognise MOOCs for credit. Faculty opposition stalled this attempt (Kolowich, 2013), just as the Luddites fought to oppose the destruction of their time-tested methods by automation in the nineteenth century (Baggaley, 2010). Meanwhile, a similar battle has been raging in the food industry. For a decade, Canada's food and drug regulations have required the nation's flour to contain the same additives as US flour (Government of Canada, 2006; US Food & Drug Administration, 2001). A decade later, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has suddenly reinforced this requirement by banning the import of British food and drink items—for example, Marmite and Ovaltine—not containing these ingredients (John, 2014; Prynne, 2014). The ban has lead to a public demand for justification, and evasive responses by CIFA officials, giving the impression of a political decision not supported by solid research and evaluation (Meade, 2014). A few weeks after the ban, the merger has been announced of US and Canadian flour producers into an entity controlling a third of the US flour industry (Nickel, 2014). Simultaneously, the companies involved in the upcoming corporate merger have received multiple awards for "sustainable supply"—from McDonald's (FoodIngredientsFirst.com, 2014). The mystery of the sudden ban of British foods in Canada appears to have been explained.

Conclusion

The supersizing of food courses and educational courses is political as well as educational and nutritional. Political interests are unlikely to lose their hold in the fast food industry in the near future, and supersizing methods will no doubt continue as a key element of fast food marketing strategy. For now at least, the value of educational supersizing in the form of MOOCs still appears to be up for discussion. Continued evidence supporting both sides of the MOOC argument is needed to convince educators that MOOC practices need either improvement or rejection, in order to prevent the uncontrolled spread of junk education. Unfortunately, when

their decisions have political motives, decision-makers are apt to turn a blind eye to adverse pedagogical findings, and the ethical approach taken by Marshall (2014) may ultimately pose the unarguable challenge that decision-makers cannot ignore.

Postscript

On the day this article was written, the prominent distance educator Tony Bates announced his retirement from the field after 45 years. He writes about the fight that lies ahead for others concerned to maintain educational standards in the face of the adoption of MOOCs by major universities.

> It was as if 45 years of work was for nothing. All the research and study I and many others had done on what makes for successful learning online were totally ignored, with truly disastrous consequences in terms of effective learning for the vast majority of participants who took MOOCs from the Ivy League universities. Having ignored online learning for nearly 20 years, Stanford, MIT and Harvard had to re-invent online learning in their own image to maintain their perceived superiority in all things higher educational. And the media fell for it, hook, line and sinker. This is a battle I no longer want to fight—but it needs fighting. (Bates, 2014)

Best wishes, Tony! Your example will inspire younger educators to maintain this fight for years to come. Time for you to settle back with a mug of Ovaltine! Oh, sorry, you live in Canada and cannot do that any more…

Notes on contributor

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