# Is globalization a threat to local cultures? McDonald’s Case Study

## Introduction

Globalization is a worldwide ongoing interaction process where cultures, economies and societies are becoming more integrated. This process is driven by investment and international trade and is made possible by the recent advancements in information technology. Globalization has both positive and negative effects on the political systems, culture, economic development, environment and the physical well being of societies around the globe. Globalization enables the trading of goods all over the world. The whole globe is interconnected and communication is faster and easier. This has opened up and brought to light the injustices and human rights violations that take place in societies around the world. The negative impact of globalization include increased terrorism due to the internet being a conduit for easy and undetectable communication, exploitation of labour as children are used for labour and the degradation of the local culture due to globalization of products and availability of cheap imports. The threat of globalization to the local culture is real and ever growing (Koh, 2010). For instance, McDonald’s is an American fast food restaurant that operates around 37,000 outlets in over 120 countries. It has a footprint all over the globe and the meals it serves have essentially changed the eating habits of most local residents where it operates. By analysing the McDonald’s one can study firsthand how globalization changes the local cultures. The study will involve analysing both the negative and positive effects of McDonald’s on the local culture as well as discussing if these effects pose a threat to the local cultures. A solution to the threat to local cultures (if any) will also be recommended.

## The Effect of Globalization’s on the Local Culture

## Positive Influences

One of the positive effects of globalization on the local culture is that it empowers various cultures through the sharing of information and allows self representation. Advances in technology enable the provision of a medium where one can portray themselves freely. The worldwide media centres enable different cultures to voice their identities, promote their ideas and tell the public in general their true identities and life stories. These global media centres also allow the communication of the relevant information that is important in teaching the cultural ways of particular societies and therefore aid in the preservation of these cultures. This also allows for the retention of cultural diversity. Globalization also allows different cultures to own media companies which in turn enable them to be in control of cultural property such as signs, symbols and other artefacts. When various cultures are in control of such public images then issues such as misrepresentation can be avoided (Marling, 2006).

Instead of destroying cultures, mass media can and should be used in assisting in the revitalization and restoration of various cultural preservations. Technology can be used in preservation of culture, customs and language. Technology can also be used for the preservation of both personal and collective identity and for providing autonomy and self-representation. Global technology has enabled the redefining of collective identity while maintaining a place for unique/individual cultures. By combining common goals with global political, economic and social networks, there will be greater empowerment amongst the emerging cultures. This will have greater impact for individual groups or communities wishing to raise local or global concerns (Veseth, 2005).

Cultural groups are able to garner more political and social power through global positioning. This revolution has been made possible by the emergence of information exchanges and social networking platforms such Twitter and Facebook. Information sharing on such avenues is on a different level than any witnessed before. Global networking enables different cultures to share ideas, views and challenges and come up with problem solving strategies as well as run campaigns that make the public aware of various issues. Various cultures can look for support and foster relations with the public that will lead to acceptance of their values. Creating and strengthening these relationships globally will enable different cultures to remain intact (Friedman, 2012).

Globalisation leads to cultural awareness which leads to understanding, tolerance and empathy. The history of mankind is littered with examples when greater communication between cultures fostered great creativity. Renaissance in Italy and Periclean in Athens are main examples. Furthermore, diversity is internationally valued and is encouraged by various international organizations of great repute.

## Negative Effects

Due to globalization, there has been unmatched access to various cultures worldwide. A much larger audience (global audience) than before has the opportunity to experience different cultures that were inaccessible before. The result of this is stereotyping and misrepresentation of various cultures as well as the loss of intellectual and cultural property rights due to the unchecked access. The negative impact of globalization on cultural diversity includes the promotion of consumer culture by multinational companies, influence on societal values and the exploitation of markets and workers. The availability of commercial products as well as the influence of global media can easily eclipse the influences of the local culture (Rappa, 2011).

Globalization causes the degradation of individualism as well as the loss of group individualism as it encourages ‘Western ideal of individualism’. This leads to the creation of an identical set of beliefs and values. Most of these values and beliefs are based on the western culture and ideologies and are developed and marketed through western markets. The dominant population, in this case the westerners; will determine the next great technology and this will be offered to the rest of the world. For those who cannot afford such technologies can only long for it. Furthermore, the current e-learning technologies are designed to mimic the dominant western culture. This means that the non-dominant cultures are not passed on from one generation to the next and gradually die out. The legal, power and educational structures are all based on the western philosophies and ideas. Other cultures will easily assimilate these western ideas with dire consequences (Marling, 2006).

Moreover, globalization promotes colonization which negatively impacts cultural and intellectual property rights. Globalization has enabled the access to information that allows for the acquisition of cultural information and property. Individual’s gain access and control of cultural artefacts such as cultural dances, rituals, signs and songs. Such icons that belong to individual cultures are viewed as living heritage by the society and an important part of their identity. The use of these images/artefacts, misrepresenting them and/or reselling them is property theft and a serious crime against these societies/communities. However, it is difficult to control and monitor the internet and therefore almost impossible to prevent or prosecute the perpetrators of these heinous crimes (Tomlinson, 2013).

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## The McDonald’s Case

McDonald’s is a fast food restaurant that was founded in America in 1940. It began as a barbecue joint in California. In 1948 the owners, Maurice and Richard McDonald reorganized their business into a humbugger stand that applied production line principles. The business quickly became a success and got the attention of businessman Ray Kroc who initially joined the company in 1955 as a franchise agent but later bought it from the McDonald’s. From its humble beginnings the McDonald’s has expanded its business and currently operates in over 120 countries globally and has over 36,000 outlets. McDonald’s employs more than 1.9 million employees globally making it the second largest (private) employer and only behind Wal-mart. McDonald’s restaurants main foods include cheeseburgers, hamburgers, French fries, breakfast items and soft drinks. However, due to changing customer taste and partly due to criticism for the unhealthy foods they serve, they have expanded the menu to include salads, fruits and fish (David Held, 2007).

With such a prominent global presence McDonald’s has great influence on people’s culture. This is compounded by the fact that McDonald’s deals with food products. Food is a very important constituent that defines any culture. In fact food is one of the oldest known carriers of culture globally. The traditional beliefs and culture of a people is greatly affected (diminished) if changes occur in the way food is prepared or even the way food is served. Furthermore, food is central to any culture and any changes to the kind of food consumed by a society will impact greatly on the culture of that society. The introduction of fast foods eateries such as McDonald’s restaurants in foreign countries brought some of the most influential changes to various cultures around the world. The transformations that occurred can either be viewed as being beneficial to the local communities or as an agent that corrupts the local culture. Before McDonald’s began exporting the concept of fast foods, the concept of fast foods in most foreign countries was unheard of. The company became the first to export the fast foods concept which was then America’s number one love and this concept began changing the eating habits of societies in other counties (Frank J. Lechner, 2014).

With more than half of the total of McDonald’s franchises being located outside the United States there has been concern from around the globe that the standardization of its franchise has a great impact and affects attitudes and cultures across the globe. The supporters of globalization state that McDonald’s enhances local cultures and does not adulterate it. They argue that McDonald’s does in fact conform to the local culture. Furthermore, the local franchises in foreign countries are mostly owned by local business people and the company also goes to great lengths to try and buy produce that are grown locally. McDonald’s also will try and alter the menus of its restaurant to conform to the local taste. For instance, in Italy McDonald’s has introduced a new line of burgers known as McItaly burgers that were really a hit with the locals. These burgers contained locally sourced ingredients such as ricotta cheese which is a favourite with the locals. By having its menus conform to the local tastes, McDonald’s aids in preserving the local food culture (Friedman, 2012).

India is one of the countries whose local culture has been negatively affected by the introduction of McDonald’s restaurants. The introduction of non-traditional food into the Hindu culture has led to a loss of traditional values. The Hindu people consider the cow to be sacred and their food and cooking is heavily influenced by the Muslim and Hindu tradition. The introduction of foreign foods such as the beef burgers sold by fast foods such as McDonald’s has adverse effects on the traditions that the Hindu community tries to uphold. Furthermore, in many societies the consumption of fast foods almost certainly leads to the less consumption of traditional foods. This is not only considered the “Americanization” of the diet but it is also viewed as the “Americanization” of how a society thinks and this is unacceptable for many countries. This anti-Americanization sentiment has seen McDonald’s suffer the consequences of being the face globalization/Americanization. For instance, a French farmer once invaded a local McDonald’s and he became an instant hero of the anti-globalization movement. The McDonald’s restaurants suffer such attacks because they act as a symbol of “Americanization”. Most societies will fight to preserve their culture and tradition and the opening of these restaurants represent unwanted changes and are therefore are unwelcome (Koh, 2010).

Another aspect of McDonald’s that is contentious is the nutritional value of the food they serve in their restaurants. By eating at McDonald’s fast foods, then the local people eat the same food as the American’s. The United States has one of the highest obesity rates in the world. Therefore, consuming the same diet will undoubtedly make the people of these other foreign countries obese too. Furthermore, fast foods restaurants encourage unhealthy eating habits as these foods contain less fibre and more calories than homemade foods. This habit affects the traditional culture significantly. The major causes of death in these societies will gradually shift and more people will start suffering and dying from non-communicable and lifestyle diseases. This is contrary to the main causes of morbidity and mortality in these foreign countries (communicable diseases are the main causes of mortality and morbidity). For instance in China, more people are eating more meat and fewer vegetables than before. According to a research that compared nutritional intake of Chinese people between 1982 and 2002, the study found that fruit and vegetable intake had decreased from 276 grams to just 45 grams. In the same period the intake of meat had more than doubled. Fast foods were found to be the cause of this change in dietary intake. It was found that there wasn’t any cheese market in China prior to the introduction of fast foods in 1982. The Chinese cultural diet never used cheese. However, the introduction of fast foods by McDonald’s changed the Chinese cultural diet. Chinese grocery stores now stock pizza and cheese burgers along with other groceries. This was only made possible by the globalization of fast foods (Rappa, 2011).

Globalization of fast foods has not only led to the change of what kind of foods are consumed but has also led to a change of how these foods are consumed. The American way, food is consumed as a necessity and as the name ‘Fast Foods” suggests it is geared towards individual dining and away from the family oriented dining. Most cultures across the globe view dining as a social/family experience and in most societies religion also plays an important role during meal times. These cultures value conformity and group experience which is essential in promoting harmony in the society. On the other hand, the American way (culture) promotes individualism and independence and this is well articulated in the fast foods culture. The proliferation of fast foods, led by McDonald’s, has left many societies changing not only their eating culture and practices but their life culture as a whole. Food plays an integral part of any society and any change in the way people dine is bound to have great effect on their entire culture as well (Marling, 2006).

## Implications of the Case Analysis

In most societies, the globalization of fast foods has been met with mixed reactions. Some societies have embraced the American culture together with its food culture. For instance, when the first McDonald’s opened in Kuwait in 1994, it received more than 15,000 customers. The lines to this restaurant formed a 7mile queue at the drive through. As such the appeal of the American culture transcends all boundaries. Other societies will perceive the globalization of fast foods as an infringement to their way of life and will fight the establishment of such restaurants. McDonald’s is perceived in most quarters/societies as the symbol that represents the American way. There are proponents of globalization who support the idea of having a McDonald’s in every corner of our world while there are those who oppose such ideas (Ritzer, 2014).

While much focus is on the negative influence that globalization of fast foods has on the local cultures, there are positive effects brought about by fast foods restaurant. The modern world is changing rapidly and advances in technology have lead to the need of one having to live a fast paced life if they are to succeed. The fast food culture will enable one to be able to keep up with the fast pace of today’s modern life. Therefore, people in foreign countries will get attracted to the fast foods restaurants because they are becoming essential despite the fact that such people may wish to continue practicing their culture. The demands of the modern world make it a necessity for one to indulge in the fast foods culture (Tomlinson, 2013).

Furthermore, the fast foods offer a range of different foods that are not present in the traditional menu. The modern world is interconnected and the current generation is eager to experiment on new ways of life. This means that while the older generation may feel that McDonald’s and its ilk are invading their revered cultures, the younger generation continues to embrace these new cultures. Some have learnt from the fast foods business models and have even opened their own businesses christened fast food – street food. Another benefit of globalized fast foods such as McDonald’s is that it has spurred the growth of traditional fast foods such as the spread of Asian cuisine across the globe. Such trends are bound to continue as societies across the globe continue to assimilate the fast foods culture and utilize it to their benefit (Veseth, 2005).

The fast foods culture has become increasingly engrained in various societies so much that these societies are consuming even more fast food than American’s. For instance, studies suggest that China’s cuisine has been completely altered by the proliferation of fast foods. The Chinese is more likely to order fast-foods than the American. The Chinese are attracted to the fast foods taste and are also engaging more and more in western lifestyle as a result of globalization. The American companies are aware of this and are aggressively marketing their products in the Chinese market. The end result is the total erosion of the Chinese culture (Watson, 2006).

### Conclusion

Globalization has increasingly become a controversial issue. There are proponents of globalization who argue that it brings the different cultures of the world together and promotes interaction amongst different people. They further argue that globalization also helps societies show case their local culture and traditions. The opponents of globalization argue that it destroys diversity by promoting homogeneity. They also argue that globalization only favours the dominant cultures while the less dominant cultures fade into oblivion. The globalization of fast foods, where McDonald’s is viewed as the face of Americanization, has had a great impact on different aspects of foreign societies’ cultures where the fast foods restaurants operate. There are benefits of fast foods globalization such as the employment of the local community, opportunity to invest in the foreign restaurants for local investors and the buying of local produce to be used in the fast foods. However, there is insurmountable evidence that suggest that globalization such as that of fast foods does more harm than good to local cultures. Fast foods cultures erode most of the local culture by discouraging diversity, promoting individualism, encouraging obesity and generally disrupting the entrenched local culture and tradition. As globalization takes root in our world, most cultures are bound to fade away and only the dominant cultures will remain. Therefore, it is important that as societies embrace globalization, they should also put measures in place to protect the local culture from being lost forever.

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