

How The Burger War Was Won: An Analysis Of 18 Years of Data on Customer Hamburger Preferences

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Abstract

Survey data collected over 18 years via a repeated cross-sectional design was examined to explore customer preference between the two main competitors in the fast-food hamburger industry: McDonald's and Wendy's. The primary purpose of the study is to determine whether burger preference has changed over the time series and the relative importance of price and taste in determining restaurant preference. Results of the study show no significant time series effect for preference but a trend toward McDonald's in terms of intentions to visit. McDonald's is slightly preferred over Wendy's overall, and taste is an overwhelmingly more important consideration than the price in determining preference, even though the results show respondents consider Wendy's to be the better-tasting competitor.

Keywords: Fast-Food, Quality, Price, Taste, Repeated cross-section

A. INTRODUCTION

Few rivalries can match the intensity and cultural relevance of the “Burger Wars” between fast-food giants McDonald's, Wendy's, and Burger King, beginning in the 1980s as each brand competed for market dominance. These wars involved many creative advertising approaches, such as Wendy's “Where's the Beef?” campaign, which poked fun at the bun-centric offerings of its two competitors. The environment sometimes devolved into contentious comparative advertising, or tit-for-tat battles, that directly claimed to taste superiority over rivals that paralleled the cola-wars between Coca-Cola and Pepsi since the 1960s. The “Burger Wars” have collectively captivated, entertained, and fed the U.S.'s love for fast-food burgers while simultaneously inflaming the competitive spirit among industry rivals that continues today.

According to Statista.com, in 2023, consumers in the U.S. spent over \$349 in the quick service restaurant (QSR) industry (Statista, 2023), a segment encompassing eateries that emphasize service speed and efficiency, such as fast-food chains. The global fast-food market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 4.9% between 2024 and 2032 (Claight, 2024), a trend that exists despite consumers seeing an average fast-food price increase of approximately 28% from 2019 to 2023 (Baker, 2024), and contrary to growing interest in healthy eating and surveys that indicate over 50% of Americans claiming to eat healthy (Buchholz, 2023). These indicators make the continued evaluation and study of the fast-food industry and the customer preferences for these offerings as relevant today as when the fast-food industry first began.

Fast-food restaurants are deeply entrenched in American culture, and our collective brand preferences cover a breadth of brands and product offerings. Any broad discussion surrounding fast food in America would be amiss if it did not mention other QSR brands, such as Taco Bell, Subway, and pizza chains, such as Domino's Pizza and Starbucks. However, this research will focus on two fast-food brands that reflect the traditional ‘burger and fries’ fast-food prototypical archetypes offered in most U.S. markets. Those key players are McDonald's and Wendy's.

A customer's perception of a fast-food brand is ultimately formed from personal experience and the organization's marketing and positioning efforts. Regarding customer perception, which of these burger-based fast-food brands do customers consider the best overall? Which ranks highest in overall taste, which has the best value for their price, which has the overall fastest speed of service, which has the best menu selection, and which has the most convenient locations? How has this changed over the last 18 years?

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Ultimately, which of these product and service attributes will impact the ultimate customer decision to select one fast-food offering over other market offerings?

Research Question

The analysis of service factors shows that taste has been found to be the single most important factor to customers. However, customers also derive value from lower prices, menu variety, speedy service, and the convenience of restaurant locations for fast-food chains. The following research questions have been created for this study.

Rq1: How have evaluations of the performance of McDonald's and Wendy's changed over time?

Rq2: What are the key drivers of burger preference between the two? Is taste more important than price?

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

McDonald's Overview and Service

McDonald's first opened in 1954 in San Bernardino, California (McDonald's, 2024), and the brand has become synonymous with American culture, with over 36,000 locations worldwide (McDonald's, 2024), reflecting its global impact (Ritzer, 1983). They have long excelled in providing location convenience to customers because of the large number of locations and the unique ability to select locations at the center of major markets and acquire real estate effectively (Thomadsen, 2007). Harry J. Sonneborn, a former CFO of McDonald's, once said, "We are not technically in the food business. We are in the real estate business. The only reason we sell fifteen-cent hamburgers is because they are the greatest producer of revenue, from which our tenants can pay us our rent." (WSS, 2024). McDonald's also continues to prioritize innovation to deliver fast service to customers, such as the "Speedee Service System" from 1948 (Tălpău, 2011) and today's automation with self-service kiosks and mobile ordering (O'Toole, 2014). The drive-thru accounts for 70% of McDonald's business (Meyersohn, 2023), and the company has integrated gig delivery networks like DoorDash to expand convenience (McDonald's, 2021). McDonald's menu variety continues to be a strength, and it has long-held strategic advantages in the areas of breakfast and coffee-related offerings (Tice, 2010).

Wendy's Overview and Marketing Strategy

Founded by Dave Thomas, Wendy's focused on offering higher quality, better-tasting products with fresh ingredients (e.g., fresh, not frozen beef), differentiating itself from competitors like McDonald's (Wendy's, 2025). In 1970, Wendy's was the first to introduce a "Pick-up Window" (Wendy's, 2025), setting the stage for its innovations in service. Wendy's marketing is widely known for its memorable campaigns, such as the 1980s "Where's the Beef?" commercial (Friedberg, 2015) and the founder, Dave Thomas, making appearances in ads until he died in 2002 (Wendy's, 2025). Wendy's has embraced their competitor's strategies, launching breakfast offerings in 2020 to compete with McDonald's to improve operational efficiency (Kelso, 2022). Wendy's has also gained attention on social media through "roasting" other brands, increasing their Twitter followers from 2.1 to 2.4 million in six months (Thorne, 2020) and reaching over 106,000 followers on their Twitch account (Thorne, 2020).

Customer Preferences and Service Attributes in the Fast-Food Industry

Research highlights the importance of food quality, intention to revisit, service quality, and price in shaping customer satisfaction and their likelihood of recommending a brand (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020). Among these attributes, taste is considered the most influential factor in food choice, with price serving as the second most significant factor (Kourouniotis et al., 2016). Service attributes such as perceived 'speed of

service' may also contribute to customer experience, with customer expectations potentially differing from actual service speed. Convenience, influenced by the number of locations and the ease of access, further impacts brand preference and satisfaction (Lee, Hyun, & Lee, 2022). Price sensitivity, particularly among Millennials (Smith, 2012), plays a significant role in driving consumer decisions, especially in times of economic strain (Andreyeva, Long, & Brownell, 2010). Additionally, customer satisfaction is influenced by the perceived fairness of price and the relationship between food quality and taste (Konuk, 2021; Siregar, 2022), with brands like Wendy's positioning themselves on their higher-quality offerings (Shahid, 2024), while McDonald's is valued for its consistency (Shahid, 2024).

C. RESEARCH METHODS

Sample And Procedure

According to (Hunter and Schmidt, 1990), "scientists have known for centuries that a single study cannot resolve a major issue. Indeed, a small sample study will not even resolve a minor issue. Thus, the foundation of science is the cumulation of knowledge from the results of many studies." To address the shortcomings of the "single study", a repeated cross-sectional design was used in the current research. A survey of fast-food hamburger preferences was developed, and it was administered on the first day of class to all the students present in a marketing consumer behavior class at a midwestern university. Students were given extra credit for taking the survey, and the data were subsequently used for class assignments. Data were collected in this manner over 18 years. The survey asked students to rate the performance of fast-food restaurants across five attributes using 7-point semantic differential scales. It also asked students to rank the restaurants in order of preference and indicate their intentions to go to each restaurant the next time they bought fast food on a 7-point semantic differential scale. In all, the survey was replicated 30 times, and the data were merged with a times series variable created to assess differences in hamburger restaurant preference and intentions over time. After merging data from the 30 iterations, 2050 respondents were amassed, and 25 cases were eliminated due to data errors, resulting in a final sample size of 2025. While records were not kept on the number of students enrolled compared to the number of students who completed a survey, it is estimated that the response rate is above 95% due to typically high attendance on the first day of class and the opportunity to earn extra credit.

Measures

The survey was based on Fishbein's model of attitudes (Fishbein, 2008). According to this model, one's attitude toward a brand is a function of how strongly one believes the brand will perform on an attribute (McDonald's has good taste) multiplied by the desirability of the attribute (good taste is very important to me) summed across all relevant attributes. With the exception of the ranked preference question, all survey items were measured using seven-point semantic differential scales that were positively scaled and anchored by 1 = poor performance - i.e., poor taste, high prices, slow service, narrow menu variety, inconvenient location, very unlikely to visit - and 7 = good performance - i.e., good taste, low prices, fast service, wide menu variety, convenient location and very likely to visit. The importance of the five attributes was measured with scales anchored by 1= not important and 7 = very important. The ranked preference questions asked respondents to rank McDonald's, Wendy's, and two other competitors (which varied across the 30 replications) 1 through 4, with 1 signifying the most preferred and 4 indicating the least preferred fast-food hamburger restaurant.

D. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Analysis 1: Comparison Between Mcdonald's And Wendy's Service Attributes

Table 1 shows an overview of McDonald's vs. Wendy's performance over time. In terms of difference in ranked preference, customers who preferred Wendy's were coded as 1, and customers who preferred

McDonald's were coded as 0. Means below .5 indicate that the cohort preferred McDonald's to Wendy's (more 0's than 1's), while means above .5 indicate a preference for Wendy's. The overall mean across the 30 iterations was .48, indicating a slight preference for McDonald's over Wendy's (52% to 48%). Among the 30 replications, McDonald's was preferred 20 times, and Wendy's preferred 10 times.

Table 1. McDonald's Vs Wendy's Performance Over Time

Academic Term	Prefer Diff*	Intent Diff**	Taste Diff**	Price Diff**	Speed Diff**	Menu Diff**	Locat Diff**
Fall 2005	0.53	0.00	-0.45	0.78	0.11	0.33	0.87
Spring 2007	0.53	0.01	-0.63	0.78	0.07	0.31	0.81
Fall 2007	0.55	0.24	-0.42	1.07	0.18	0.53	1.01
Spring 2008	0.39	0.66	-0.05	0.70	0.11	0.63	0.54
Fall 2008	0.48	0.34	-0.29	0.94	0.14	0.47	0.53
Spring 2009	0.43	0.75	-0.16	0.69	0.09	0.42	0.96
Fall 2009	0.60	-0.18	-0.59	1.08	-0.04	0.29	0.54
Spring 2010	0.52	0.13	-0.30	0.65	0.22	0.52	0.74
Fall 2010	0.49	0.45	-0.21	0.78	0.13	0.50	1.03
Spring 2012	0.43	0.69	-0.19	1.11	0.37	0.74	1.00
Fall 2012	0.38	1.20	-0.11	1.50	0.37	0.81	1.41
Spring 2013	0.47	0.67	-0.32	1.47	0.25	0.61	1.07
Fall 2013	0.47	0.67	-0.32	1.47	0.25	0.61	1.07
Spring 2014	0.44	0.45	-0.35	1.50	0.44	1.06	0.99
Spring 2015	0.40	0.96	-0.14	1.71	0.64	1.04	1.31
Fall 2015	0.40	0.28	-0.33	1.49	0.38	0.92	0.94
Spring 2016	0.59	0.19	-0.54	1.12	0.06	0.82	0.81
Fall 2016	0.60	-0.06	-0.85	1.44	0.11	0.71	1.14
Spring 2017	0.47	0.59	-0.30	1.67	0.20	0.52	0.77
Fall 2017	0.48	0.18	-0.54	1.30	0.35	0.84	0.86
Spring 2018	0.43	0.60	-0.10	0.93	0.02	0.80	0.91
Fall 2018	0.40	0.77	0.04	0.76	0.57	0.87	0.77
Spring 2019	0.48	0.69	-0.47	0.86	0.57	0.57	1.00
Spring 2020	0.39	0.67	-0.12	0.88	0.61	0.94	0.88
Spring 2021	0.36	1.75	-0.23	0.70	0.21	0.82	1.09
Fall 2021	0.44	0.93	-0.04	0.73	-0.04	0.87	0.93
Spring 2022	0.46	0.72	-0.25	0.42	0.19	0.75	1.25
Fall 2022	0.43	0.25	-0.33	0.25	0.42	0.71	0.79
Spring 2023	0.46	0.87	-0.19	0.33	0.00	0.63	1.11
Overall Mean	0.47	0.49	-0.32	1.05	0.24	0.67	0.93

Note: *if value is above .5, Wendy's is preferred; if below .5, McDonald's is preferred.

**if value is positive, McDonald's beats Wendy's; if it is negative, Wendy's beats McDonald's.

Source: Reserach data, 2025

Regarding intentions to visit, the results were much more in McDonald's favor, with Wendy's only winning the category 2 times out of 30 with one tie and zero wins in the last 12 iterations of the survey. Overall, McDonald's averaged .49 scale points higher in intentions to visit. Thus, while the two are very close on the overall preference metric, McDonald's enjoys a clear advantage in intentions to visit, likely due to their greater practicality, i.e., cheaper, faster, and more convenient.

In terms of performance on the attributes, overall, Wendy's beat McDonald's on taste by an average of .32 points and won the taste competition 29 out of 30 times. McDonald's beat Wendy's in the other four attributes, ranging from .24 scale points on menu variety to 1.01 scale points on price. Out of the 30 survey iterations, Wendy's beat McDonald's twice on menu variety but was bested by McDonald's every other time. McDonald's was perceived as having lower prices, faster service, and more convenient locations in each of the 30 replications. In summary, overall, the survey respondents found Wendy's to be better tasting and McDonald's to be cheaper and faster, with more menu options and more convenient locations.

Analysis 2: Logistics Regression of the Effect of Performance Differences on Five Service Attributes on Preference for McDonald's Vs. Wendy's

To determine the key drivers of hamburger preference between McDonald's and Wendy's, a logistic regression analysis was conducted on preference (Wendy's = 1, McDonald's = 0) using weighted differences in performance on the five service attributes as the predictor variables. Weighed difference scores were computed for each respondent by taking their rating of McDonald's on an attribute minus their evaluation of Wendy's on the attribute multiplied by how much importance they attached to the attribute. The logistic regression was run with and without importance weighting. Weighting was included because it was consistent with Fishbein's model of attitudes (Fishbein, 1963), allowed differences in more important attributes to carry more weight, and improved the R-square of the model. A time series variable was also included in the model to account for changes over time.

The results are presented in Table 2 and indicate that the overall model is significant; $F = 19.53$ and $p < .001$ and produces a Nagelkerke R-Square of .535. In terms of the classification table, the model correctly classified 79.3% of the cases, which compares favorably to a naïve rate of 52%. In terms of analysis of the predictors, all were significant at the .05 level except the time series variable. This indicates that preference has remained stable over time. In terms of the impact of the attributes, taste had by far the biggest influence, with a Wald score of 401.65. Surprisingly, the next most influential attribute was the menu, with a Wald of 25.167, followed in order of influence by speed (Wald = 14.73), price (Wald = 12.70), and location (4.76). While it is not surprising that taste was the biggest driver, it was surprising how much more impact it had than the other four attributes. Given the previous findings of (Glanz et al., 1998), it was also surprising that price showed so little importance in this analysis. The reason price may not be a great discriminator might be because its quantitative nature makes it the most objective criterion for customers to assess. Whether one prefers McDonald's or Wendy's, most customers agree that McDonald's has lower prices - although the level of perceived difference and the importance of price does vary from customer to customer. This is supported by the fact that the price variable had the lowest standard error of any of the five attributes customers evaluated.

Table 2. Results of Logistics Regression of the Effect of Performance Differences on Five Service Attributes on Preference for McDonald's Vs. Wendy's

Predictor	B	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Time	-0.004	0.258	0.611	0.996
Taste	-0.235	401.647	<.001	0.790
Price	-0.023	12.695	<.001	0.977
Speed	-0.041	14.734	<.001	0.959
Menu	-0.064	25.167	<.001	0.938
Location	-0.020	4.756	0.029	0.981

Note: $F = 19.53$ and $p < .001$ Nagelkerke R-Square of .535, 79.3% correctly classified (naive rate = 52.0%)
 Source: Reserach data, 2025

Analysis 3: OLS Analysis Of The Effect Of Performance On The Five Different Attributes Of Difference In Intentions To Visit Mcdonald's Versus Wendy's

This analysis used the same six independent variables as were used in Analysis 2, with the dependent variable in this case being the difference in intentions to visit the two restaurants. Since the dependent variable in this analysis is continuous rather than binary, an ordinary least squares regression was performed. Intentions to visit both McDonald's and Wendy's were measured by asking respondents how likely they were to go to that restaurant the next time they visited a fast-food hamburger restaurant, using seven-point semantic differential scales anchored by 1 = very unlikely and 7 = very likely. A difference score was then calculated by subtracting Wendy's intention score from the intentions score for McDonald's. This intentions difference score was then used as the dependent variable in the multiple regression analysis, with

the predictor variables being the weighted difference in performance for the five attributes assessed in the study along with the time series variable.

The results are presented in Table 3. Overall, the model was significant, with an F value of 245.85 ($p < .001$), and the R-square for the model was .432. In terms of the predictor variables, in this case, the time series variable was significant ($p = .008$), with the positive slope indicating intentions to visit McDonald's over Wendy's increasing over time. In terms of the attributes, all five variables were significant at a .05 level. Once again, taste was by far the key driver, with a standardized beta weight of .573. The remaining attributes in order of influence were location ($\beta = .112$), menu ($\beta = .102$), price (.088), and speed (.037). Once again, the taste has substantially greater influence than the other four attributes, and the price is much less influential than expected.

Table 3. Multiple Regression of Difference in Intentions to Visit McDonald's vs. Wendy's

Predictor	Coefficient B	Standardized Beta	Significance
Time	0.005	0.046	2.642
Taste	0.004	0.573	31.759
Price	0.004	0.088	4.937
Speed	0.007	0.037	1.992
Menu	0.007	0.102	5.667
Location	0.006	0.112	6.187

Note: $F=245.85$, $p < .001$ R-Square = .432
 Source: Reserach data, 2025

Discussion

The two major issues this research sought to address were whether burger restaurant preferences and intentions to visit changed over time and what attribute is the key driver of these choice metrics. Overall, the data showed stability over time. In the two regression analyses, the time series predictor variable was insignificant in the preference model and moderately significant in the intentions model, showing a trend in favor of McDonald's. Data suggests that McDonald's received a pandemic/post-pandemic boost in intentions to visit, perhaps because of its state-of-the-art drive-through facilities, which made them a more attractive option when dining rooms were closed, or when Coronavirus fears made them limit their public eating.

In terms of performance on the attributes, the results have been remarkably stable over time. Wendy's was evaluated as better tasting in 20 out of the 30 iterations, and in two instances, Wendy's was evaluated as having a wider menu. McDonald's was perceived as cheaper, more conveniently located, and faster all 30 times, offering more variety 28 times and better tasting 10 times. The data conclusively showed that Wendy's is perceived as better tasting while McDonald's is perceived as better in the other four categories. The competition for overall preference between the two is close (52% vs. 48%) because even though Wendy's outperforms McDonald's on taste, which the regression analysis indicates is by far the key driver of preference, McDonald's still came out on top because it was able to be competitive on taste and dominant on the other four attributes examined.

Table 4. Preference for Brand and Taste Crosstabulation

Taste Preference	Prefer McDonald's		Prefer Wendy's		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
None/taste is equal	367	64.4%	203	35.6%	570	100%
Prefer Wendy's taste	187	20.8%	710	79.2%	897	100%
Pref. McDonald's taste	479	94.1%	30	5.9%	509	100%
Total	1033	52.3%	943	47.7%	1976	100%

Note: Adjusted sample size for this (total of counts = 1976)
 Source: Reserach data, 2025

Thus, the most interesting finding of this analysis is that although taste is by far the biggest driver of burger preference, the brand that lost the taste competition still came out on top overall. The reason for this is best illustrated by the crosstabulation analysis in Table 4. This analysis breaks down burger preference for

three categories of respondents: those who think Wendy's has better taste, those who have no taste preference, and those who think McDonald's is better tasting. Wendy's is preferred by 79.2% of respondents who think Wendy's has the better taste, but that preference level drops to 35.6% among those who have no taste preference and drops to 5.9% among those who prefer McDonald's taste. Thus, McDonald's gets a much larger share of customers than Wendy's of those who do not have a taste preference and is dominant among customers who prefer McDonald's taste (94.5%) and does much better than Wendy's in gaining preference from customers who prefer the taste of their competitor (21.8% to 5.9%). Even though more respondents prefer the taste of Wendy's, for those who either prefer McDonald's or who have no taste preference (which accounts for 54.6% of the respondents), McDonald's superior performance on the remaining attributes gives them little reason to prefer Wendy's and ultimately accounts for the 52% to 48% overall preference advantage. These results suggest that a decision tree approach is being used by customers, where the first question is which restaurant tastes better, and the other four attributes only really come into play amongst those customers who lack a strong taste preference.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the use of convenience samples of college students who are not representative of the overall population. This is somewhat offset by the 30 replications obtained from the repeated cross-sectional survey method, which generated a large sample size and high response rate and clearly showed stable and consistent results across multiple iterations with limited time series effects. In addition, since college students have been found to be more price sensitive (Smith, 2012; Spralls III, Divine, & Garver, 2016), it is noteworthy how overwhelmingly more important a factor taste was than price even amongst this group who are predisposed to be more price-oriented in their purchase decisions than the general population.

A second limitation is that the scope of the study was constrained to the preferences of McDonald's and Wendy's. Results may have been different if other competitors, such as Burger King, had been included in the study. That said, focusing on Wendy's and McDonald's provided the cleanest comparisons of taste vs price-oriented operators, which was needed to sort out the relative importance of the two attributes.

E. CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth analysis of customer preferences in the fast-food burger industry over 18 years, focusing on McDonald's and Wendy's. The findings confirm that taste is the single most important factor influencing consumer preference, surpassing price, speed of service, menu variety, and location convenience. Despite Wendy's consistently outperforming McDonald's in taste perception, McDonald's maintains a competitive edge in overall preference and visit intention due to its strengths in price affordability, convenience, and operational efficiency.

The study reveals that consumer preferences have remained relatively stable over time, with McDonald's enjoying a slight advantage in overall preference (52% to 48%) and a significant lead in visit intention. This advantage is likely due to McDonald's strategic emphasis on affordability, accessibility, and speed, factors that resonate strongly with consumers who do not prioritize taste as their primary decision-making criterion. Regression analyses further confirm that while taste drives preference, the influence of other attributes ensures that McDonald's remains the dominant choice for a broad segment of consumers.

These findings highlight the nuanced decision-making process among fast-food customers, where preference is shaped not only by sensory appeal but also by practical considerations such as pricing and accessibility. Future research could expand on this study by incorporating a broader range of competitors, exploring consumer behavior in different demographic segments, and assessing the impact of emerging trends, such as health-conscious dining and digital ordering innovations, on burger brand preferences.

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