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Fast food is not only bad for health, it can trigger impatience and hasty behaviour in people, a new study has found.

The original idea behind fast food is to increase efficiency, allowing people to quickly finish a meal so they can move on to other matters.

Now, researchers at the University of Toronto have found that the mere exposure to fast food and related symbols can make people impatient, increasing preference for time saving products, and reducing willingness to save.

"Fast food represents a culture of time efficiency and instant gratification," said Chen-Bo Zhong, who co-wrote the paper with colleague Sanford DeVoe.

"The problem is that the goal of saving time gets activated upon exposure to fast food regardless of whether time is a relevant factor in the context," Bo Zhong added.

In one experiment, the researchers flashed fast food symbols, such as the golden arch of McDonald's, on a computer screen for a few milliseconds, so quick that participants couldn't consciously identify what they saw.

They found that this unconscious exposure increased participants' reading speed in a subsequent task compared to those in a control condition, even when there was no advantage to finishing sooner.

In another study, participants who recalled a time when they eat at a food restaurant subsequently preferred time-saving products—such as two-in-one shampoo—over regular products.

A final experiment found people exposed to fast food logos exhibited greater reluctance for saving—choose a smaller immediate payment rather than opting for a much larger delayed payment.