

## McDonaldization, Society, and Education

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### Abstract

*Applying all that McDonald's is employing in the food industry to other aspects of life is called McDonaldization. In today's world the effects of McDonaldization can be seen in all aspects of life not just in the food industry but also in culture, globalization, education, and higher education. This paper intends to shed some light on the concept of McDonaldization and its prevalence in different facades of life. Examples of McDonaldization in culture, globalization, and education are presented. Also, the paper shows that e-learning is the ultimate realization of McDonaldization of education.*

**Keywords:** McDonaldization, education, e-learning, globalization

### 1. McDonaldization

Ritzer, influenced by theories of Weber, popularized the term McDonaldization; therefore, it is helpful to throw some light on Weber's theories. With the growth of the population in the world, the need for serving this population efficiently grew. However, the question was, how can a population already huge and in growth be served orderly and efficiently. Weber found the answer in "rationalization". For Weber, rationalization occurs when humans organize their thoughts and actions according to some specific criteria. Those criteria are efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control all of which became the cornerstones of McDonaldization. According to Hudgins and Richards (2000), Weber (1974) listed four forms of social actions based on the principal of rationalization. Those were Zweckrationality, Wertrationality, Emotive rationality translated as Effectual action, and Traditional rationality or Traditional Action with Zweckrationality and Wert rationality being the most two common in the modern day. In addition, Ritzer defines formal rationality as: "To Weber, formal rationality means that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures"(p7). However, a look at the modern world shows that, the nature of the modern world today is in a manner that people (actors) are constantly, slowly but steadily losing all the choices they could once make. It only seems that there are too many options to choose from; however, all the options are being dictated to people from the society where people live in. People can no longer choose how they want to reach their goals, let alone choose their goals by themselves. The availability of the (limited) options for the goals that one can reach as well as the availability of the (limited) options for the means of reaching those goals are what Weber believes to come from bureaucracy.

Going back to the original question of how an overpopulated society can be efficiently dealt with, Weber finds the answer in "the rationalization of society in the modern period". By that he means decreasing the number of individual choices for means and goals and instead rationalizing the society through institutions with particular standards that can measure everything. Nevertheless, the rationalization of the society puts the society and the actors into what Weber calls an "iron cage." And by that he means that all people who live in a rationalized society are trapped in a web that imposes on them, efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. It is from Weber's ideas on rationalization of society and iron cage that Ritzer proposed the idea of McDonaldization of society. Ritzer (1996) believes that what McDonald's represents in the modern food industry can be applied, to all facades of life in society, and as a matter of fact, it has already been applied, or it is just a matter of time before it gets applied. While for Ritzer rationalization of the society is the essence of McDonaldization, Weber, sees the same concept in bureaucracy. According to Hudgins and Richards(2000), "bureaucratic structure is characterized by rules and regulations, hierarchy of authority, careers, specialization of role, all in an effort to maximize efficiency, the essence of what Weber called "formal rationality"(p 8). Bureaucracy is efficient, predictable, able to quantify and control.

And these are the same themes that Ritzer uses to define what McDonald's represents in the food industry. When people go to McDonald's, they actually pay for the efficiency they receive and not for the gourmet pleasure that normally should be accompanied by food. According to Margolis(2004), "McDonaldization" was summarized conceptually by Ritzer (1996) as "efficiency," "calculability," "predictability," and "control." Therefore, simply put, McDonaldization is the process in which all that McDonald's is applying in the food industry gets applied to other dimensions of the life of the modern man in the rationalized society. For example, McDonaldization can be traced in food industry (in a larger scope), culture, globalization and education/higher education.

### **1.1 McDonaldization in Culture**

An example of "Mcculture" is the shopping experience, whether it is grocery or clothes. All the Safe ways, not just in the U.S., but even in Saudi Arabia look the same, smell the same and are arranged in the same way. All the shopping malls have the same stores, the same arrangement of stores, and the same food courts. By the same token, probably if a store or a shopping mall does not meet the criteria of predictability, it will not be so popular with "Mcpeople". Also, it is expected for the sake of efficiency for the grocery stores to have self-serve cash registers and for the banks to have automatic bank machines. Another aspect that "Mcculture" is accentuating is the culture of consumption. The actors trapped in the rationalized society are pushed by invisible hands to buy more than they need, to consume more than they need, and to buy more than they can afford. The people in the rationalized society are always in need of something better, newer and as a result something more efficient. How is it that if the consumer does not have the touch and quiet microwave (which itself is a product of McDonaldization of life in any form of it!) with preprogrammed touch buttons for more than nine dishes, it is considered inefficient? How is it that if the three-year-old microwave is still working and has no problems, the consumer feels the "need" of buying the newest, top of the line microwave in the market? Is it wrong to assume that one reason for feeling this need is efficiency and control? Furthermore, it is worth noting that the availability of the unavailable funds through credit cards is what pushes "Mcpeople" to spend more than they can and to pay no attention to the question of need. "Mcpeople" never ask them if they really need that newer microwave, or do they just feel the illusion of the need?

### **1.2 McDonaldization and Globalization**

The "Mcpeople" have a strong tendency to export McDonaldization and make it a globalized phenomenon. They might have one or more reasons for globalizing this phenomenon; however, they are oblivious of the effects that this phenomenon would leave on other cultures and life styles. First, McDonaldization as a means of, crudely yet efficiently saying, "satisfying the hunger" affects and changes the way eating and cooking are in many cultures in the world. In many cultures, cooking is a means of socializing with members of the family as well as an educational process. Through cooking together, for example, girls learn lessons of life from their mothers. And through eating the food that the mother has cooked, one feels the smell and taste of home, her own home. People distinguish their homes through the smell and taste of homemade food.

Second, looking at the experience of shopping in many "non-McDonaldized" cultures, one can realize that shopping is an experience of socializing with the neighbors, asking for new recipes, exchanging the news of the community, and finally supporting the neighborhood stores. In addition, even today in many societies and cultures, credit does not come in the form of a credit card. It comes in the form of trust and the word of the person. Moreover, efficiency does not really play an important role in shopping because what matters is the personal interaction with the grocer who will get the customer what she needs. All of these said with the globalization of McDonaldization all these aspects of importing cultures will be affected and probably changed. The question that will consequently be raised is that why "Mcpeople" feel the need of exporting and globalizing this phenomenon? Is it because "Mcpeople" have already been entrapped in the web of the rationalized society to the extent that they cannot deal with anything different? In other words is it that they are looking for efficiency, predictability, and control everywhere they go? As a result of the globalization of McDonaldization even when traveling "outside" the rationalized society, one will still experience "back home"! Also, in the age of global village, dealing with people with the same definition for and expectation of efficiency, predictability, and control is much easier and more "efficient".

### **1.3 McDonaldization of Education/Higher Education**

Like other facades of life, education and higher education also have not been able to stay safe from McDonaldization. First, the influence of McDonaldization is obvious in what is taught at schools and in a broader sense at universities. For example, one of the newest methods of teaching is communicative approaches, and this is where the teacher is only a facilitator, and the students are the center of learning. In this method the students sit in groups and discuss; they are responsible for their own learning. This method is considered to be a student-centered method. However, this resembles to the pick up your own order and buss your own table in McDonald's. Although this remains a question, is this method really effective or is just more efficient? Another aspect of McDonaldization that is taught to the students and the students are expected to follow, is the way students are to write paragraphs or essays. The teachers tell the students that their paragraph is expected to have a topic sentence, three supporting ideas, and a conclusion, and that's the only acceptable way. The reason being is that all readers predict to find the topic sentence in the beginning and the concluding sentence at the end of the paragraph. Is this merely the style of academic writing, or is this the effect of predictability, the reminiscent of McDonaldization in writing?

The third manifestation of McDonaldization in education is visible in standardized tests and their connection with school funding. The students are all supposed to study based on a standard curriculum, and at the end they need to be accountable for what they studied not through the internal tests, but external tests that are all the same for all schools. Based on the performance of the students, the schools receive funding. This is another manifestation of accountability and control in the McDonaldized school. The process of McDonaldization started at the universities some time ago. For example, one of the major aims of the universities is to retain students; universities set vigorous numbers and work vigorously to reach this number of students. One way of retaining students is by giving better grades to the students and helping the students to graduate. After all the students are the customers that need to have a fun and pleasant experience at the university. After retaining the students, the university needs to have efficiency. One of the most common ways of acquiring efficiency is to have teaching assistants (who they themselves are customers too!) teach a majority of undergraduate courses. Obviously, it is more efficient to pay a current customer than to pay a professor with a Ph.D. to teach the students. On the other hand, the universities squeeze in as many students as possible in classes to increase efficiency. As many as three hundred students gather in a lecture hall to hear the "lectures" of the professors. Of course in some cases there are a couple of teaching assistants present in the room too. However, the idea is to pay one professor for three hundred students rather than paying ten professors for three hundred students.

Also, by providing the students with satellite campuses and even more so distant learning classes, the universities increase efficiency. The same way that it is more efficient and profitable for the fast food restaurants to give their services through drive-through windows; it is much more profitable for the universities to have the students take the lessons in their own spaces. By the same token, the students can "bus" their own studies by doing the exercises on the computer and having the computer check the answers for them. In the same way that the customers of McDonald's are the unpaid employees of McDonald's for bussing their own tables. The idea of self-serve is spreading even more so than ever before. For example, day by day the number of the options on the university websites for choosing a course, availability of seats, and paying for courses increases. The number of the options increases in a manner to eliminate contact with people. In this way customer service representatives are being replaced by machines, and the students themselves take care of their business without getting paid. As a result, the universities make more profit.

Finally, as mentioned above, technology plays a role in student retention (customer retention), efficiency, and control. By means of technology the students will go through the process of self-regulation. For example, many foreign language classes which are supposed to meet five times per week meet only once or twice in class with the instructors, and the rest of the week the students, through self-regulation with the help of technology, do their homework assignments on the computer and evaluate their progress immediately. This process is the manifestation of another element of McDonaldization in higher education, control.

### **1.4 E-Learning: The Ultimate Realization of McDonaldization of Education**

Carroll (2013) maintains that e-learning is the McDonaldization of learning. Therefore, students now play a different role in the education system, i.e., the students do not discover, question, or look for knowledge, but instead they consume what is readily available and packaged.

Carroll is concerned about the fact that e-learning is an experience in isolation. Also, he expresses concerns regarding the unknown effects of e-learning on learning and the educational institution itself. Carroll expresses concern that the current studies do not focus on “understanding the process of learning” but instead focus more on technology used (p343).

All that is being described, as concerns for Carroll are the manifestations of McDonaldization of education. With cars being accessible to more and more people, the concept of drive-thru became a common characteristic of fast food restaurants. Also, fast delivery of food to homes or the choice location of the consumers became more and more common and expected. I draw parallels with e-learning. The Internet access, home computers, all e-gadgets have become common household items. Therefore, it will only make sense for “education” to be delivered in places other than the “point of sale”, the educational institution. Mcpeople get their foods from a drive through window and either eat it in the car or at home. Eating used to be a form of socialization, but now it is an experience in isolation; this is exactly what is happening to learning through e-learning. The e-learner expects to have certain demands available to her in the e-learning tool or technology. And they have to be in a certain order. There is always the need for a newer version of a program or tool. The invisible hands are not so invisible in e-technology; after some time the older version is not compatible with the newer version. Therefore, McPeople now E-McPeople have no choice but to buy the new E-version. By the same token, Mcpeople buy their prepackaged meals from McDonalds and receive their e-learning packages with no options to choose from. Some Mcpeople throw away the pickles, and some e-learners/users use Moodle just to upload lecture materials and have no use for other commands.

## **2. Conclusion**

In the same manner that the effects of the globalization of Mcdonaldization on other cultures are not clear, the effects of e-learning on learning, educational institutions, learners, and educators are not clear. The issue is that the unknowns of Mcdonaldization of other facades of life are the same as the unknowns of Mcdonaldization in education. Therefore, it behooves educators and researchers to start studying the effects of Mcdonaldization of education before they become too pervasive and uncontrollable.

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