

Original Research Article

Practice of junk food consumption among college students: an observational study in Northern Karnataka

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ABSTRACT

Background: Globalisation and urbanisation have significantly changed peoples eating patterns and forced many individuals to eat foods which have high calorie and low nutritional value foods called junk foods. Excessive consumption of fast food is often associated with increased risk of non-communicable diseases, presenting a public health challenge. India's fast-food industry is expanding at the rate of 40% every year. India ranks 10th in the Fast-food per capita spending figures with 2.1% of expenditure in annual total spending. The aim of the study was to assess the knowledge and practice of junk food among college students.

Methods: A cross sectional study was conducted among college students in Vijayapura city, during June to July 2022. The data was collected using semi-structured questionnaire, convenience sampling of 683 students were the participants of the study.

Results: Out of 683 participants, 25.9% doesn't care about the harmful effects of consuming junk. Around 61.8% of respondents are influenced by the taste and flavour of the junk. And 64.9 % of the respondents were aware enough to check mostly, whereas 29.3 percent were never had the habit of checking the nutrient fact label.

Conclusions: As majority of the students consume junk, the adequate knowledge about the junk among them were relatively low, along with public health awareness, nutritional counselling can also be given to the students. And they are influenced mostly by the taste and easy availability.

Keywords: Junk food, Students, Knowledge, Practice, Nutritional counseling

INTRODUCTION

The term "junk food" is used to characterise foods that are high in calories from sugar and/or fat, as well as sodium, but low in protein, dietary fibre, vitamins, and other essential nutrients.¹⁻³ It also goes by the name HFSS food. (high in fat, salt, and sugar).⁴

Junk food is widely consumed and is becoming more and more popular. The availability of foods that are ready to eat, in cans, and can be stored for a long period has nearly completely replaced traditional cuisine.⁵ The consumption

of these foods has peaked in developed nations, whereas there is a rising tendency in global developing nations.⁶ There is a definite upward tendency in the consumption of such junk food in South Asian nations.^{7,8}

Despite strong evidence of the adverse effects of junk food, more than one-third of individuals regularly consume it.⁹ According to the studies, such consumption could increase the prevalence of coronary heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension.¹⁰ Large amounts of junk food consumption are linked to a sharp decline in the consumption of nourishing foods including milk, fruits, and vegetables.¹¹ Junk food consumption is on the rise due

to high profitability, accelerating urbanisation, free home delivery, attractive advertisements, and international cuisines.¹² Based on some evidence, junk food addiction is on pace with that of alcohol and drug addiction.¹³

The objective of this study was to determine why consumers choose to buy and eat junk food, as well as to estimate their consumption rates and levels of consumer awareness. Numerous causes for this trend have been proposed by previous studies conducted all around the world. In our study, we attempted to examine the same issues in a different setting. The younger generation is said to have the strongest attraction to junk food, and previous research have confirmed this. The same group of people were used for this study. To learn more about the practices and perspectives of the younger generation

Objectives

The objective of this study were to (a) understand the factors that influence junk foods on the regular food habits of students; and (b) explore the awareness level among students regarding the impact of junk foods on health.

METHODS

This was a cross-sectional study conducted among college students of Vijayapura, Karnataka, India verbal consent was obtained from all the participants.

Sampling method

This cross-sectional study was conducted among the College students of district Vijayapura, from November 2022 to February 2023.

An empirical sample of about 683 participants was planned using a convenience (nonprobability) sampling methodology. Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire by interview technique.

Inclusion criteria

All the students who were willing to participate in the study were involved.

Statistical analysis

Data was entered in MS excel and analysed using SPSS 20. Data was represented in terms of frequency, percentage and in graphs.

RESULTS

Considering the trend of replacing regular meals with junk food, nearly 56.4 percent of the students responded as they would opt most of the times, while 37.9 percent would replace it occasionally and 5.6% of study participants rarely.

In this analysis, we can observe the trend of students consuming junk foods as their regular meal replacement, have a significantly higher percentage. The analysis of observations is given in Table 1.

Analyzing the level of concern among students regarding the health consequences of consuming junk food, it was observed that approximately 25.9% expressed no significant concern. In contrast, a considerable 34% of students demonstrated a high level of concern. The graphical representation of this data is presented in Figure 2.

When analyzing the factors impacting students' food habits, a significant finding emerged. For over 60% of the respondents, the primary influence on their food choices was taste and flavor. Meanwhile, 19.3% were primarily driven by the ease of availability, and 14.8% cited time constraints and schedules as a key factor limiting their choices. A visual representation of these factors affecting food habits is depicted in Figure 3.

Analyzing how the participants come into contact with junk food trends, it was found that advertising played a prominent role, with over 44% of respondents being influenced in this way. Approximately 33.9% mentioned the peer factor as a significant influence, while 22% attributed their exposure to junk food trends to their homes, specifically their parents and relatives. This information is visually presented in Figure 4.

Table 1 summarizes the findings of our analysis concerning student awareness of checking nutrient fact labels. Notably, the data reveals that a significant majority, specifically 64.9% of the participants, exhibited a high level of awareness and consistently practiced the habit of checking nutrient fact labels.

In contrast, a notable portion, accounting for 29.2% of the participants, had not adopted the practice of checking nutrient fact labels. These insights shed light on the varying degrees of awareness and habits among the student population regarding this critical aspect of food information.

In Table 2, it's evident that the majority of participants, specifically 28%, prioritize taste when selecting an eat-out place. Following closely, 19% consider the price factor as their primary consideration, while others take menu variety and restaurant discount offers into account. This table presents the key factors influencing students' choices when it comes to dining out.

Table 3 highlights that a significant proportion of participants, comprising 62.7%, report a high level of influence from the digital food environment when it comes to food delivery. This data provides insight into the considerable impact of digital platforms on students' food choices and preferences.

Table 1: Percentage of students versus awareness to check the nutrient fact label.

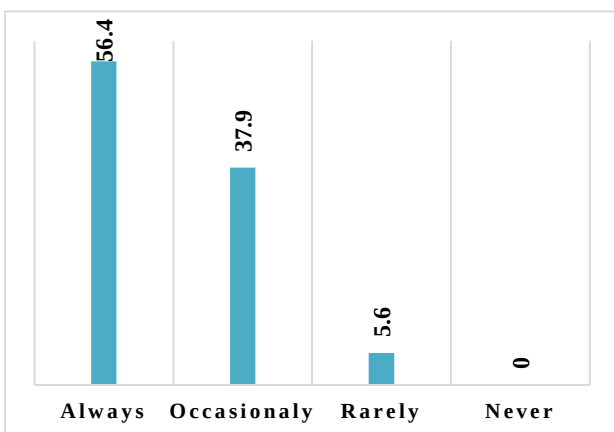
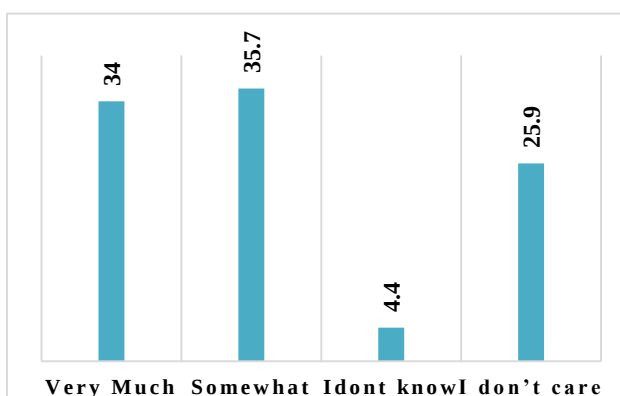
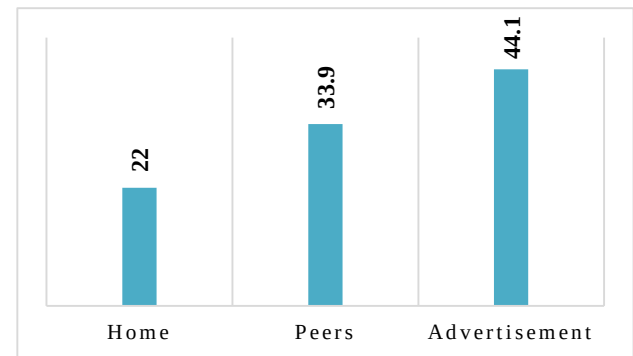
Always	Mostly	Sometimes	Never
15.4%	49.5%	5.9%	29.3%

Table 2: Percentage of students versus what they considered most while choosing an eat-out place.

Factors you would consider	n=683	%
Quality	21	3.07
Hygiene	12	1.76
Brand name	68	9.96
Taste	192	28.11
Price factor	131	19.18

Table 3: Percentage of students versus impact of food delivery.

Does the digital food environment has a major role on choosing junk food	n=683	%
Yes	428	62.7
No	255	37.3

**Figure 1: Percentage of students who opt junk foods instead of regular meals.****Figure 2: Percentage of students versus level of concern on health impacts of junk food.****Figure 3: Percentage of students versus factors affecting their food habit.****Figure 4: Percentage of students versus factors affecting their food habit.**

DISCUSSION

In our study, when analyzing the level of concern among students regarding the health consequences of consuming junk food, we found that approximately 25.9% of the participants did not express significant concern. However, it's worth noting that a study conducted by Sequeira from NITK, Surathkal et al showed 21%, indicating a similar trend of students expressing a lack of concern about the health impacts of junk food in their research.¹⁴ Similar to our study, a study conducted by Nora, et al on Saudi young females also identified delicious taste, followed by convenience, as the primary reasons for the increased consumption of junk food.¹⁵ This parallel finding suggests a common trend in the factors influencing junk food consumption among young individuals.

The influence of branding on children's taste perceptions was evident in a study conducted by Robinson et al and our study aligns with this by revealing that approximately 44 percent of the participants were exposed to junk food through advertisements.¹⁶ This finding underscores the impact of advertising and branding on shaping preferences and choices, particularly among young individuals.

Limitations

The research focused on a specific demographic of students, limiting the generalizability of the findings to a

broader population. The study did not explore the impact of cultural or socio-economic factors on food choices, which could have significant implications for developing effective interventions.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the majority of students admitted to eating junk food. Ads were the most frequent source of information. As a result, stricter laws are needed to control the marketing of fast food. Television commercials for fast food should come with brassbound warnings about potential dangers (they should also mention the nutrient fact of the food in the Advertisement). And the home delivery of the foods, encouraged them to take more, so to minimise it, the strict time hours constraint can be done so as to reduce the frequency of eating.

Considering the ambiguous idea too, around 64.9 percent of participants are aware of the health hazards, but although they are practicing junk food because of the taste, price factor, and easy availability. Thus, nutrition counselling is necessary to reduce the gap on good eating habits. They need to be aware of and adequately handled the price element, which also influences their willingness to consume nutritious foods.

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Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee

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