

An Exploratory Study on Junk Food Consumption among Kids of Rural India

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MA. Velusamy

*Associate Professor & Head i/c, Department of Social Work
Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India*

S. Keerthana

*Research Associate, Department of Social Work
Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Karaikudi, Tamil Nadu, India*

Abstract

Countries across the globe are seeing a rapid increase in all forms of processed and junk foods. Such eateries are becoming some of easy accessible and affordable stuff for a fast paced population. Equally, recent years people are also witnessing a steady increase in the awareness calls through digital and online media platforms. Unfortunately, the awareness calls only caters to those population that has accessibility, time and advantage of digital world. The disadvantage is largely faced by rural populations of developing countries like India. Marginalized populations such as daily wage workers find it easier to afford cost friendly packaged eateries to their children instead of taking the pain of homemade snacks. Lack of awareness, westernization and voracious marketing has forced such culture on rural population. This study seeks to analyze the causes and implications of such food practises among the financially deprived rural population in India.

Keywords: Junk Foods, Rural Population, Packaged Eataries, Westerization, Voracious Marketing

Introduction

People across the globe are exploring multitude varieties in food options more than ever. The question of “whether such options are healthy” is not significantly posed by either consumers or regulators. Junk foods are those eateries that has very low nutritional value and mostly contributes to ill health. These are often loaded with calories, salt and sugar content. Catchy marketing and increased accessibility has enabled the penetration of junk foods to every corners of world. Rural regions are of no excuse. Extreme affordability, lack of awareness on physical and mental health makes rural regions an easy target.

“According to the Global Food Policy Report of 2024 released by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) on May 29, almost 38 percent of Indians are eating junk foods and processed foods instead of healthy meals and 6.6 percent of the population are suffering from malnourishment” (IFPRI, 2024)

Undoubtedly, Rural population contribute majorly to the above statistics. Indian villages are deeply influenced by urban standards of living. While we are witnessing an positive shift on awareness of

healthy eating through digital platforms, rural population thriving in bare minimum standards of living has a long way to reach the mark. Malnutrition and Anaemia have been a pertinent issue in villages due to financial deprivation and absence of healthy food. These factors are catalysed by the widespread presence of junk foods. The study aims to bring about a clear picture on overall usage of junk foods among the kids of rural India with their implications and future trends.

Objectives

1. To analyse the prevalence of junk foods among rural kids
2. To study those combined factors that influence the consumption of junk foods among rural population
3. To identify the physical and mental health impacts of junk foods among kids of rural India
4. To suggest measures and policies to promote healthy eating habits in rural India.

Review of Literature

(Gupta, 2018) The paper analyses the junk food consumption practices among school aged children (SAC) in rural parts of Himachal Pradesh. More than 425 school aged children are chosen for the study aged 12-18 years. The study reveals an astonishing 36% of the SAC groups had consumed junk food in the last 24 hours of the survey. Boys constituted around 44% and 56% were girls. This high proportion of population resorting to junk food is linked to the increasing trend of children who are overweight from 9.7% to 13.9% over the span of 10 years (2001-2010).

(Sahu, 2018) This study focuses on junk foods consumption pattern and awareness about ill effects of Junk foods. Percentage of participants who consume junk more often, more than 5 days a week lies between 5.6% to 24.1% and people who consumed junk for 1 to 4 days a week accounted to 49.4% to 70.8% of total population. 33.3% of teens spend their pocket money to pay vehicle rent, where the next higher ratio of 16% spent the money to buy chips and 13.5% use it to buy ice cream, the least majority of 6.9% spent it on chocolate. While assessing their knowledge on junk food, 51.5% pointed stomach problem and 16.8% acknowledged obesity while 22.4% were not aware of ill effect on intake of junk food.

(Mansoor, 2020) The study focuses on assessing junk food consumption pattern among the children of rural population from the region of Mangalore, Karnataka. Nearly 54% of the population gets prone to junk more than twice a week and close to 68% of the population got used to junk through television ads. 88% of the population reported to have had great taste to get accustomed to junk. 31% of the respondents were well knowledgeable on the consequences of junk.

(Keshari, 2016) This paper analyses the trending nature of fast-food consumption among the children in India. The significant findings revealed that more than 60% of the studied population of 16 and 18 years spent their entire pocket money on fast foods. Comparatively in the age group of 17 and 19 years more than 50% and 41.66% of the kids spent their pocket money on junk and fast foods.

(Village square, 2022) In a collaborated survey by Sambodhi Panels and the Transforming Rural India Foundation, nearly 4000 adolescent boys and girls of rural India of age 10-19 years are surveyed. Nearly 50% of the adolescent population were consuming junk foods like chips, chocolate and ice cream for about 2 to 3 times daily in a week. Another 40 % of the population agreed that they ate foods like instant noodles twice a week. Approximately 30% of the adolescent consumed soft drinks twice a week.

Methodology

The study relies on secondary data collected from scholarly articles, relevant government and non-government publications and original researches. A thematic analysis is done to classify the patterns and trends of consumption of junk foods with their impacts and factors influencing. The collected data among diverse groups is generalised due to heterogenous nature of the population. Though the content analysis is perfectly plotted, regional sensitivity and varying quality of data is inevitable. The chosen secondary data may vary with the present ongoing trends.

Findings and Interpretation

The analysis of secondary data lists the below mentioned factors as significant luring mechanism for consumption of junk food among the children of rural India,

Accessibility – Even the petty shops in nook and corners of the villages have packaged and junk foods placed in the forefront. Anyone visiting such shops with their children are force to buy some kind of packeted foods due their children's demands.

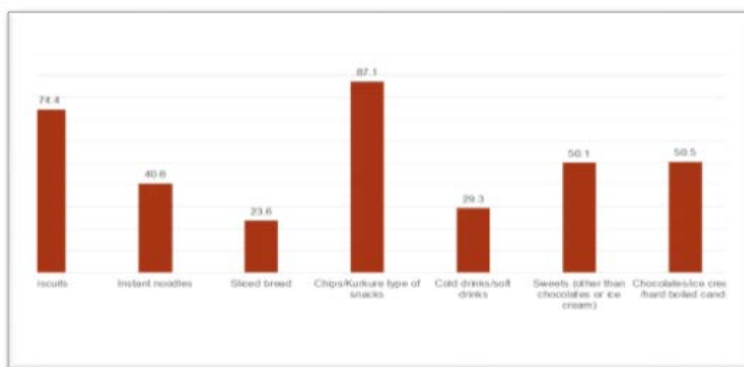


Figure 1.0 Graphical representation of Percentage of children (Below 18 years of age) consuming unhealthy food in Rural India (at least once in the past 7 days) (Villagesquare, 2022)

Attractive advertisements and colourful packaging – Celebrities who vouch for unhealthy eateries play a significant role in making rural India a consumeristic market. Also, attractive packaging has an equal role in selling of such junk products in large scale.

Lifestyle and awareness – Daily wage labour and farming are the prime occupation of most of the rural population across India. Such jobs demand intensive labour and working hours. Hence “Junk foods” are the most time friendly and cost friendly snacking option they can satisfy their kids with. Moreover, digital revolution has not penetrated deep into villages and people lack in depth knowledge about the prevailing health impacts of junk foods.

Lack of Regulation – Absence of strict regulation for maintaining safety standards for eateries in general is another crucial factor in worsening the health situations of rural India. Their nativity is taken as an advantage where many cases of selling expired snack products in villages is constantly being reported even today.

Widespread prevalence of junk foods in rural India are undoubtedly increasing the burden of malnutrition. Below are the impacts of junk food that has to be significantly highlighted:

Malnutrition and Underweight Children – The problem of malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies among children is catalysed by the widespread consumption of junk food in rural India. Government Initiatives such as Mid-day meals and Poshyan Abhiyan try to compensate the nutritional deficiency of rural school going kids.

Increased health care costs – Vitamin deficiencies due to absence of balanced meals can lead to reduced immunity, prolonged curing of viral and bacterial infections. Junk foods are the major contributors to poor dental health of children.

Rising mental health issues – High sugary and high salty foods can contribute to nerve damages and influence mental and cognitive abilities of kids in longer run. The damages can be observed in their daily day to day behaviour.

Conclusion

Junk foods are a prominent concern for countries across the globe. India being a country of vast young population, it is necessary to nurture a healthy manpower for the future. Both the regulators and the governments should involve in this pertinent issue to come up to with safety standards and control mechanisms for snacking industry in India. Multi-faceted, approaches, public awareness campaigns are needed to regulate this widespread prevalence of unhealthy eating habits. As majority of the young population is from rural India, setting the rural territory in right path might be a huge contributing factor for a healthy and successful future of India.

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