

Adolescent Food Habit : A Sociological Approach

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Abstract

Food habits in general are influenced by socio-cultural background, religious beliefs and customs, and individual taste. The concept of food has undergone a radical transformation in recent years to the point to assign to food. Research into food choice investigates how people select the food they eat. Factors that guide food choice include taste preference, sensory attributes, cost, availability, convenience, cognitive restraint, and cultural familiarity. Among Indian adolescents, some of the patterns are common but very few information is available in the sociology research. Present study was carried out among school students, with the objective to assess their trends of food habits, food preferences, and dietary pattern, socio-cultural and other characteristics in KOTA city region, Rajasthan.

Key words : *Adolescent, Food, Food culture, Kota, Sociology.*

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Introduction

Adolescent is a grey area in the spectrum of life falling between childhood and adulthood. It is an age of transition when an individual experiences rapid growth and development, both physical and psychological and changes from being a child to an adult.

The behaviour affecting food and drink choices seems to change as the children become adolescents. As already mentioned, few youth meet the official recommendations for nutrition. The consumption of fruits and vegetables often declines when entering adolescence, while the consumption of unhealthy food types increases.

Food & Social Demography

Binkley (2006) in his research titled “The effect of demographic, economic and nutrition factors on frequency of food away from home” has used a model explaining visits to table service and ready-to-eat restaurants that are estimated with nutrition variables added to standard demographic measures, wherein nutrition factors have less impact on table service. However the frequency of consumers very conscious of nutrition factors is significantly very less to table service and Ready-To-Eat restaurants vis-à-vis others. Manchester and Clauson (1995) in their work titled “Spending for food away from home outpaces food at home” have analyzed how food expenditure has significantly increased on eating out. Nayga and Capps (1986-1998) in their study titled “Determinants of food away from home consumption: An Update” identified several socio economic and demographic characteristics of individuals who have consumed food away from home using 1987-1988 national food consumption survey. The analysis was performed using logit analysis. The significant characteristics have been race, ethnicity, employment status, food stamp participation, seasonality, household size, age, income and frequency of consumption. (R M Nagya – 1992)

Food choice

Food choice is the subject of research in nutrition, food science, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and other branches of the natural and social sciences. It is of practical interest to the food industry and especially its marketing endeavours. Social scientists have developed different conceptual frameworks of food choice behavior. Theoretical models of behavior incorporate both individual and environmental factors affecting the formation or modification of behaviors. Social cognitive theory examines the interaction of environmental, personal, and behavioral factors.

Research into food choice investigates how people select the food they eat. An interdisciplinary topic, food choice comprises psychological and sociological aspects (including food politics and phenomena such as vegetarianism or religious dietary laws), economic issues (for instance, how food prices or marketing campaigns influence choice) and sensory aspects.

Taste preference

Researchers have found that consumers cite taste as the primary determinant of food choice. Genetic differences in the ability to perceive bitter taste are believed to play a role in the willingness to eat bitter-tasting vegetables and in the preferences for sweet taste and fat content of foods. Epidemiological studies suggest that non-tasters are more likely to eat a wider variety of foods and to have a higher body mass index (B.M.I.), a measure of weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared.

Environmental influences

Many environmental cues influence food choice and intake, although consumers may not be aware of their effects (see mindless eating). Examples of environmental influences include portion size, serving aids, food variety, and ambient characteristics (discussed below).

Food variety

As a given food is increasingly consumed, the hedonic pleasantness of the food's taste, smell, appearance, and texture declines, and an effect commonly referred to as sensory-specific satiety. Consequently, increasing the variety of foods available can increase overall food intake. This effect has been observed across both genders and across multiple age groups, although there is some evidence that it may be most pronounced in adolescence and diminished among older adults.

The collective effects of modernization, urbanization, and globalization have greatly impacted common dietary practice over the last few decades. Addition of fast foods in the regular diet has been so popular that in many countries traditional diets are often being replaced by 'modern' westernized fast foods. The prevalence of increasing fast food consumption is mostly seen in the developed and developing countries where fast food has become an inseparable part of regular diet. 'Fast food' is rapidly losing its Western connection in terms of its growing availability around the world. The idea of 'fast food' has been so much assimilated with the social life, transcending its boundaries of just eating phenomenon Fast foods, with new tastes and looks are invading the developing countries and inspiring a new interest among the consumers. Fast foods are convenient, attractive and are often associated with a sense of smart urbane feeling in the non-Western countries. The so called

fast paced lifestyle of developed/developing nations may be seen as the main motivating factor in the rise of fast food industries. The reasons for fast food consumption have been well studied in contemporary sociological research. However, there have been limited sociological research studies conducted to understand the psychology behind human eating habits and fast food consumption. There is literature that focuses on human food intake processes and examines why individuals are prone to certain properties of taste of foods but most of the time they signify general eating processes, rather than social or cultural patterns for making food choices.

Kota city, from where data is collected, formerly known as '*Kotah*', located in the southeast part of northern Indian state of Rajasthan. (Wikipedia-2017) It is located Around 250 kilometres, south of the state capital, Jaipur, situated on the banks of Chambal River. With a population of over 1 million, Kota is a major coaching hub of the country for competitive examination preparations and has a number of engineering and medical coaching institutes which comprises most of the students in the youth group. (*Anjali Puri-2015*)

Food habits in general are influenced by socio-cultural background, religious beliefs, customs, and individual taste. But among teenagers and youth, there may be some added reasons for adopting fast food culture. Among urban adolescents in India, some of these patterns are also likely to be common but very little information is available in the sociology literature. Therefore, this study was carried out among school & college going urban adolescents, with the objective to assess their trends of food habits, food preferences, and dietary pattern, socio-cultural and other characteristics in KOTA city region, Rajasthan.

Materials And Methods

Descriptive Observational Interview Schedule Based Study was conducted in period of Nov'2013 to June'2017 among school going adolescents of 14 to 19 years of age group. The sample size of 400 was obtained at 95% confidence level in fast food users among study subjects. The subjects were interviewed in Hindi language, but later on translated in English as per need of study. It contained structured questions on food frequency intake of fast foods, vegetables and fruits per week. The list of common food stuffs labeled as fast foods was also mentioned in the questionnaire so as make this concept very clear to all participants. Other questions such as years of fast food consumption, source of information, reasons for consumption, awareness about its health hazards, amount spent in a week on fast foods and parental consumption of fast foods were also enquired.

Statistical Analysis

Data was entered and analyzed using SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, ver 11.0

Chi-square test and one-way ANOVA was used to test association p- value d' 0.05 was considered as statistically significant association.

Results & Discussion

The response rate in this study was 83.3% with 400 participating subjects. Mean age of boys was 16.5±0.9 years while that of girls were 15.4±0.6. Almost all children 292 were eating fast foods. Age of initiation of fast food consumption was answered by 216 participants. Among them majority 126 were consumers since past 2 to 5 years. Commonest source of information about fast foods was television commercials 193 followed by friends 161 and parents 62. As many as 64 participants said that they preferred fast foods over usual meals. Reason for consumption was stated by 128 participants. Reasons for non-consumption of fast foods stated by non-users were following parental advice stated by four, tendency of addiction stated by two and one each reported reasons like being aware of its ill effects, spicy to taste, not fresh foods and having fallen ill following consumption. Awareness of harmful effects of fast food consumption was noted in 186 students. The various harmful effects reported were it contains harmful coloring agents 5, contains harmful food additives preservatives 12, are not fresh foods 28, contains high fat content, causes rapid weight gain, same frying oil being used repeatedly is bad for health 2 (1.1%) and poor in nutritive value as stated by two participants. There was no association of awareness of hazards of fast food usage with age of the participants (p=0.443).

141 of the total fast food consumers felt that there was a need to control their present fast food consumption practices. The reasons stated were associated health hazards 78, tendency to cause weight gain 61, parental pressure to quit 6, waste of money 6 and is very essential to develop effective intervention for promoting healthy eating and minimizing life style problems like obesity during adolescence which is a critical phase of developmental.

Our study is higher as compared to fast food consumption reported by in a study done in China 97.5% students, 98% in a study of Lucknow, India and by all students in a study done in Jammu Kashmir, India However, in several other studies done worldwide, fast food consumption was seen between 30.3% to 93.5% children who were lower than our observations. These findings infer that fast food consumption was predominant among children in these settings.

However, frequency of fast food usage almost every day varied from 3.7% to 70% of students in other studies in comparison to 14.4% reported in this study. (Masse LC, de Niet-Fitzgerald JE, Watts AW, Naylor PJ, Saewyc EM – 2014) Consumption of fast foods thrice a week was reported ranging from 6.9% to 43.3%

students elsewhere in comparison to 7.5% students in the present study (Steiner-Asiedu M, Jantuah JE, Anderson AK – 2012). This meant that pattern of fast food consumption was not as bad among students in this settings as reported elsewhere. Hence timely interventions in the form of early identification of fast food usage, focusing attention on frequent users by appropriate school and family based interventions might help to promote healthy food choices and avoidance of faulty eating habits.

In a study done in Chandigarh, 58.8% of the adolescents preferred fast food items over regular meals which were higher than the findings of this study. Similar observations were made in other studies where young consumers rather than paying attention to the dietary value instead prefer tasty and attractive food. (Musaiger A, Kalam F – 2008), (Larson NI, Neumark-Sztainer DR, Story MT, Wall MM, Harnack LJ, Eisenberg ME – 2008), (Jain A, Dhanawat J, Kotian MS, Angeline – 2008). The preference over home diet among some students reported in this study indicate how tempting and pleasing these food stuffs are and is not easy for health educators to convince children to give up fast foods. Moreover a good number of students feeling bored of home foods indicate the need for familial support and nutritional counselling required at homes.

In a study done in Saudi Arabia, 88.2% ate fast foods at restaurants in comparison to 61.6% in this study (Abuzaid OII -2012). As majority of students were eating fast foods outside school and home environment it would be difficult to monitor their habits. Hence awareness generation about its health hazards and self-motivation to adopt healthy eating behaviour appears to be the best solution to this problem.

Television was the commonest source of information about fast foods in this study which was similar to observations made in a study done in China where children received information from advertisement on television (67.9%) followed by parents (9.02%) and newspapers or magazines (6.7%) (Zhu SP, Ding YJ, Lu XF, et al. - 2008)

Studies have also found that youngsters who watch more television are more susceptible to unhealthy eating habits and unhealthy conceptions about food substances compared to others who watch minimally (Signorielli N, Lears M – 1992). This is because the current food advertising rarely promotes healthy choices and rather promotes frequent consumption of unhealthy foods making it even difficult for most parents to promote healthy eating at home advertisement guidelines related to quality of food products in mass media needs formulation and strict implementation. (Sharifirad G, Yarmohammadi P, Azadbakht L, Morowatisharifabad MA, Hassanzadeh A. Therefore - 2013).

Peer influence stated as a reason for consumption was also mentioned in

other studies done in USA (Larson NI, Neumark-Sztainer DR, Story MT, Wall MM, Harnack LJ, Eisenberg ME – 2008) and Iran (Sharifirad G, Yarmohammadi P, Azadbakht L, Morowatisharifabad MA, Hassanzadeh A – 2013). This is because fast food selling joints are epicentres for socializing with peer group among adolescents when away from their families and a less restricting environment in comparison to schools (Fung T, Anyan WR – 1997), (Trusswell AS, Hill ID – 2002). Easy availability of fast foods at any time of the day as reason for fast food usage stated by few in this study was also mentioned in other studies (Vaida N -2013), (Denney-Wilson E, Crawford D, Dobbins T, Hardy L, Okely AD- 2009), (Fung T, Anyan WR – 1997). In a study done in Jammu Kashmir, India, influence of media was a cause for eating fast foods in urban areas among 80% respondents which was much more than our findings (Vaida N - 2013). The television advertisements on fast foods are known to mislead the viewers and discourage the concept of healthy foods.

In this study half of the respondents spent less than Rs. 50 per week on fast foods which was lesser than that reported in the study done in Jammu Kashmir, India where majority of the adolescents spent Rs. 20-50 per day (Kotecha PV, Patel SV, Baxi RK, et al - 2013). Parents need to be very careful in not giving liberal pocket money to children.

Dietary habits are therefore largely determined by familial and cultural factors rooted in childhood and adolescence period (Stacy Brethauer, Sangeeta Kashyap, Philip Schauer - 2017). Fast foods which are presently gaining popularity in nuclear families as working parents have less time for meal preparation at home could hence be detrimental in the long run as children pick up these faulty habits early in life (Kotecha PV, Patel SV, Baxi RK et al. - 2013)

Conclusion

Fast food consumption was reported by most students. Commonest source of information was from television advertisements. Therefore, legislations to regulate marketing of fast foods need to be more stringent. Statutory warning about hazards should also accompany television advertisements promoting fast foods. More than half of the fast food users said that they were eating it because of being bored with home food. Therefore, the views of children on factors at home which affect their desire to eat healthy foods need to be understood and addressed appropriately.

In spite of good number of participants being of health hazards of fast foods, the need to control its usage was felt by about 70 %only. There is thus a need for nutrition counseling to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice about healthy eating behavior. This would also solve the problem of overweight among children which was found significantly more among fast food users in this study.

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