

The Impact of Fast Food on Adolescents and Their Preferences Among Residents of the Suhareka Municipality

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Abstract

Introduction – This study investigates the phenomenon of fast food consumption among adolescents aged 16-18 years (high school students in the municipality of Suhareka), focusing on their knowledge and attitudes toward this issue.

Objective – The aim of this study is to gain insights into adolescents' knowledge, negative habits, attitudes, and opinions regarding fast food consumption.

Methodology – This research was conducted using a physical questionnaire.

Sample – A total of 147 adolescents participated physically in the study. The first two questions gathered demographic data, including gender and age. The third question inquired about their fast food consumption habits, while the last six questions explored their behaviors and opinions on the negative effects of fast food consumption.

Results – The findings indicate that 55% of respondents were female, and 45% were male, showing a slight percentage difference between genders. Regarding age, 52% were 14-16 years old, while 48% were 16-18 years old. Unfortunately, a significant percentage of adolescents reported consuming fast food.

Conclusions – Based on the results of this questionnaire, adolescents demonstrated a reasonable level of knowledge regarding fast food consumption. However, a larger percentage indicated that they are fast food consumers. Additionally, some respondents expressed a desire to acquire more knowledge about the negative effects of fast food consumption during the survey.

Keywords – Ast Food Consumption, Attitudes, Knowledge, Age,

I. INTRODUCTION

Research on the knowledge of factors and relevant understandings involved in shaping certain food preferences and eating behaviors in children has been conducted to emphasize the topic and provide pediatricians with practical tools to understand the background of eating behaviors and manage children's nutrition for preventive purposes. This paper includes several adolescents to explore their preferences for fast food and their knowledge of the negative impacts that such foods may have on their health. Additionally, it includes some parents who demonstrate their food habits at home and whether they offer a range of healthy food choices, acting as positive role models for their children. Parental food habits and feeding strategies are among the most dominant determinants of children's eating behaviors and food choices. The objective of this research is to identify the factors and knowledge that adolescents possess regarding malnutrition due to fast food consumption, how these food preferences lead to overweight or obesity, and the significant impact they have on both physical and psychological health. Globally, young adolescents, particularly those in low- and middle-income countries, are experiencing a food transition characterized by a dramatic shift in dietary patterns away from their traditional diets. Various research findings have shown that the number of factors promoting fast food consumption appears to

outweigh the inhibitory factors, and that various individual and social factors have influenced fast food consumption among adolescents.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The consumption of various types of fast food is increasingly rising worldwide, both in developed and developing countries. Due to changes and transitions in lifestyle and dietary habits, a growing number of individuals from different age groups, particularly adolescents and young adults, are inclined towards fast food consumption. Fast food is a common component of Western-style diets and is energy-dense, low in nutrients, high in refined grains, sodium, and sugar, and low in fiber and micronutrients. It is well-known that fast food consumption is associated with poor dietary habits (e.g., higher consumption of soft drinks and sugary snacks and lower intake of fruits and vegetables) and unmet nutritional needs. Failure to meet nutritional requirements during adolescence can result in growth delays, impaired organ remodeling, and micronutrient deficiencies. Such unhealthy dietary habits in youth are thus associated with an increased risk of obesity, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, and cancers in later adulthood (Das JK, 2017). Nutrition provides essential nutrients and energy. Nutrients are vital for human health, and other components continue to be identified in foods, with their health properties becoming better understood. The relationship between nutrients, foods, and dietary patterns has significant implications, especially for the prevention and development of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases (e.g., heart attacks and strokes), cancers, chronic respiratory diseases (e.g., chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma), and diabetes. Food preferences continue to change throughout life, influenced by biological, social, and environmental factors, which are the main determinants of food choices and diet quality (K.J, 2018). Following an ecological model of food choice development, it is essential to consider the pioneering theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner, as it has the potential to influence new directions and developments in Child and Youth Care. This ecological systems theory states that human behavior depends on the interaction of various environmental factors and personal characteristics, such as genetics, gender, and age (Bronfenbrenner, 2019).

FOOD PREFERENCES

The recognition of tastes and aromas develops before birth during fetal development, as the fetus swallows amniotic fluid, which is flavored by the mother's diet, including aromatic ingredients such as garlic, anise, and onion. There is significant interest in prenatal programming of taste preferences, as it may influence the early acceptance of nutrient-rich foods. In the early stages of life, most children prefer sweet and salty flavors. Sweetness is a powerful psychobiological stimulus for many animal species, especially for humans of all ages. Sweetness clearly enhances the enjoyment of foods and beverages, stimulating intake (Asano M, et al, 2016).

Bitter tastes, such as those found in certain vegetables, are often rejected upon first experience but can be accepted with increased exposure. Taste perception may vary among individuals depending on variations in taste receptor genes. After birth, breastfed infants are still exposed to tastes from their mother's diet. In contrast, formula-fed infants learn to prefer its unique taste profile and may find it more challenging to accept a diverse diet later on (Hetherington M.M, et al, 2015).

Regardless of early feeding methods, children can learn through repeated exposure and dietary variety if caregivers focus on the child's readiness to consume a food rather than solely on facial expressions made during feeding. Introducing a variety of fruits and vegetables and limiting exposure to non-essential foods from an early age are essential strategies for improving the quality of the child's later diet (Gahagan S et al., 2012).

FACTORS INFLUENCING MAIN REASONS FOR CONSUMING FAST FOOD

The main reasons for consuming fast food are: 1) fast food is tasty, 2) fast food restaurants are easily accessible, 3) there is a greater variety of fast food options compared to home-cooked meals, providing people with numerous choices, 4) the affordability of fast food and its easy availability give adolescents a sense of independence, and 5) going out for fast food with friends is a fun activity, especially for teenagers.

However, there are several factors that discourage them from primarily consuming fast food: 1) there are numerous concerns regarding the health risks associated with consuming fast food, 2) negative attitudes towards the ingredients used in fast food, as well as reports on such ingredients, are widespread, 3) most parents consider fast food a threat to health, and 4) adolescents are concerned about their appearance and believe that consuming fast food will ultimately lead to obesity.

Social norms and friendships were expressed as motivating factors for consuming fast food, with reports that individuals eat fast food unwillingly just to fit in with their friends. Fast food is globally popular, featuring unique and appealing names for dishes on menus, giving adolescents a sense of modernity and belonging to a higher social class.

The consumption of fast food is common in some families, as parents in these families belong to the service class and do not have enough time to prepare and cook traditional meals (Askari Majabadi H, et al., 2016).

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Recent reviews have concluded that most studies find a possible link between eating disorders and depression, where it can be both a cause and a consequence of obesity. In a clinical sample of obese adolescents, a higher lifetime prevalence of anxiety disorders was reported compared to non-obese controls (Britz B, et al., 2000).

Symptoms of Eating Disorders: Characteristics associated with eating disorders appear to be common among obese adolescent populations, especially among girls. Several studies have shown a higher prevalence of eating-related pathologies (i.e., Anorexia, Bulimia, Nervosa, and Impulse Control Disorders) among obese children and adolescents (Decaluwxe V, et al., 2003).

Emotional Issues: The psychological impact of being overweight/obese in children has been reported, with various levels of psychosocial effects resulting from their weight status. Being younger, female, and having an increased perceived lack of control over eating seemed to exacerbate psychosocial consequences (R., 2008).

CAUSES OF OBESITY IN ADOLESCENCE

The rise in obesity results from an imbalance between energy intake and expenditure, characterized by a positive energy balance closely associated with adopted lifestyle choices and dietary preferences. However, there is increasing evidence that an individual's genetic background is significant in determining the risk of overweight. The ecological model suggests that the risk factors for childhood obesity include food intake and physical activity, where the influence of such risk factors is moderated by factors such as age and gender. Environmental factors such as school policies, demographics, and parental work demands further impact eating behaviors and activity levels (Davison KK, et al., 2001).

III. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Today, adolescents lack sufficient knowledge or information regarding the negative effects of fast food. This lack of awareness drives their curiosity and interest in this type of food. In the municipality of Suhareka, young people and adolescents have shared various insights and opinions concerning the study of fast food. This research is based on data collected through questionnaires administered in three high schools: “Jeta e Re” Gymnasium, “Skender Luarasi” Technical School, and “Abdyl Rama” Vocational School in Suhareka. The consumption of fast food has rapidly increased, with adolescents expressing that fast food offers a variety of tastes and enjoyment, providing an opportunity to fit in with their peers. They also face pressure from social media, which promotes fast food as a quick solution due to their limited time availability. Implementing counseling or treatment programs for adolescents would be a suitable solution to this issue, and parental education plays a significant role in addressing these challenges.

IV. METHODOLOGY

For this research, physical questionnaire methods were employed in the schools of the Suhareka municipality. The questionnaires included both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The questions specifically addressed the topic of fast food consumption among adolescents, allowing us to assess their knowledge in this community.

Sample: To gather information from adolescents, we focused on several high schools in this municipality, specifically: “Jeta e Re” Gymnasium, “Skender Luarasi” Technical School, and “Abdyl Rama” Vocational School. In respect of their privacy and rights, the questionnaire remained anonymous.

Procedure: Initially, the opinion and permission of the mentor were obtained for the preparation of the questionnaire, considering it a good and practical approach. At the same time, it made it easier for adolescents to communicate with us and express their

thoughts since no one was obliged to disclose their name, surname, or place of residence. Each participant expressed a willingness to complete the questionnaire voluntarily.

Instrument: The questionnaire was developed based on the phenomena and concerns currently affecting our youth.

Demographic Questions: Each adolescent participating in this research was identified by a number, providing only gender and age.

Data Analysis and Presentation: All data were calculated as percentages (%) and presented in the form of tables and graphs for the responses of the adolescents.

Participants: A total of 147 adolescents participated in this study, where their knowledge regarding the negative health effects of frequent fast food consumption was examined.

V. RESULTS ANALYSIS

Demographic Data

The demographic data are as follows: Among the participants, 93 students (63%) belong to the age group of 14-16 years, while 54 students (37%) fall within the age group of 16-18 years.

Age Group Number of Students Percentage

14-16 years 93 63%

16-18 years 54 37%

Table 1. Respondents by Age Group.

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
14-16 age	93	63%
16-18 age	54	37%

Respondents by Gender

The respondents by gender showed that 66 students belong to the male gender (45%), while 81 students are of the female gender (55%).

Gander	Number	Percentage
Female	81	55%
Male	66	45%

Respondents by Fast Food Consumption : The respondents regarding fast food consumption reported that 78 students are regular fast food consumers (53%), while 54 students consume fast food occasionally (37%), and 15 students do not consume fast food at all (10%).

Table 3. Respondents by Fast Food Consumption

<i>consumption.</i>	Number	<i>Percentage</i>
Yes	78	53%
No	15	10%
<i>sometimes.</i>	54	37%

The respondents regarding fast food consumption reported that 63 students consume fast food due to taste/satisfaction (48%), while 24 students consume fast food due to socio-economic status (18%), and 45 students consume fast food to fit in socially (34%).

Table 4. Respondents by Reasons for Fast Food Consumption

Reasons	Number	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Taste</i>	63	48%
Socio-economic	24	18%
<i>Society</i>	45	34%

The respondents regarding fast food consumption reported that 61 students are exclusively fast food consumers (42%), while 28 students consume healthy food (19%), and 58 students consume both (39%).

In this study, questions were posed to uncover adolescents' knowledge about fast food consumption, their reasons, and opinions.

Survey Format

Out of 147 adolescents, 75% believe that fast food consumption is harmful, while 11% think it might be harmful, and 9% do not think so.

Do you think fast food consumption is harmful?

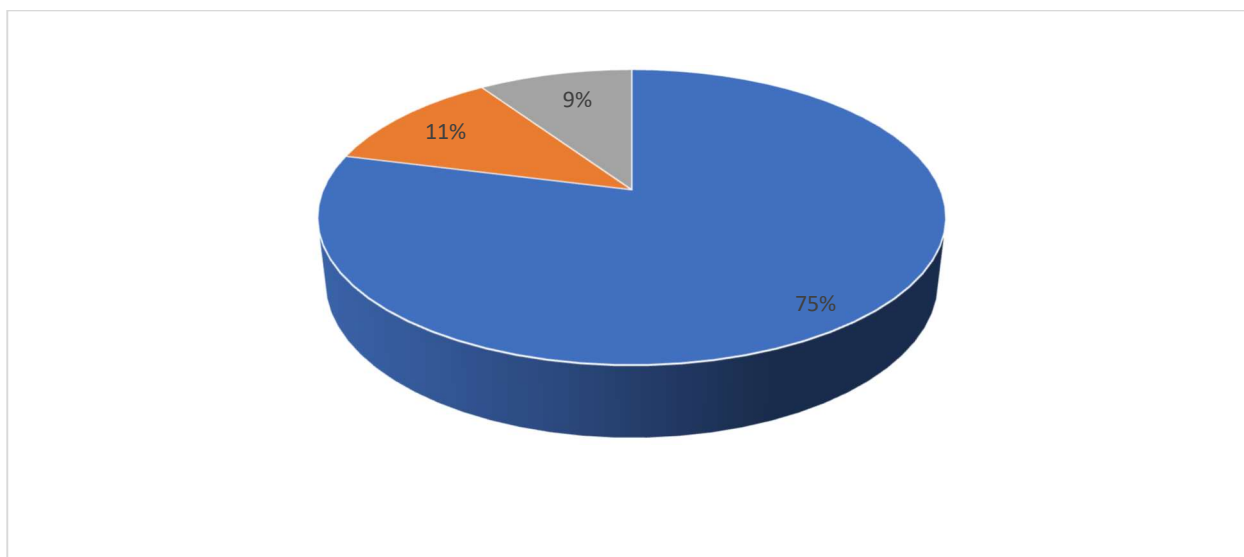


Figure 1. Harmful effects of fast food consumption.

Out of 74 adolescents, 53% have been consuming fast food for 3 to 4 years, 26% have been consuming it for 1 to 2 years, and 21% have been consuming it for less than one year.

If yes, how long have you been consuming fast food?

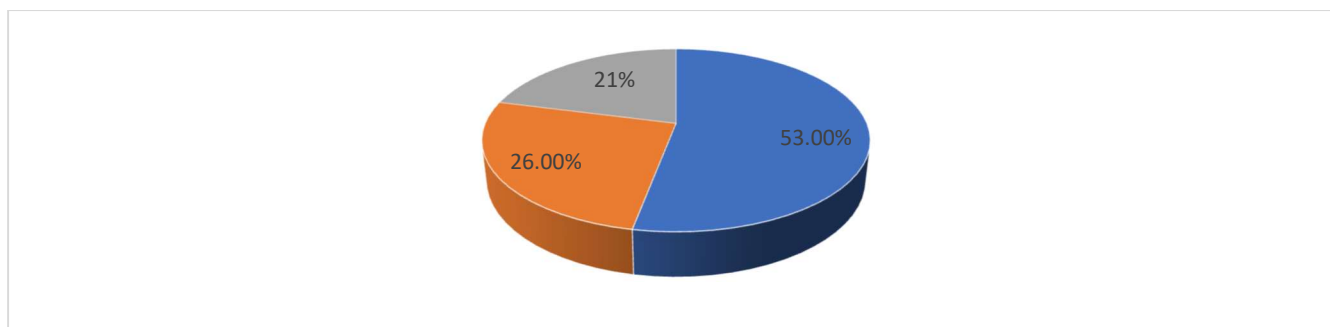


Figure 2. Duration of Fast Food Consumption

In this aspect, family education plays a crucial role. One of the reasons adolescents are influenced to consume fast food is due to their parents. In the survey, it was reported that 47.4% of parents are fast food consumers, while 35.6% are not, and 17% consume fast food occasionally.

Are your parents fast food consumers as well?"

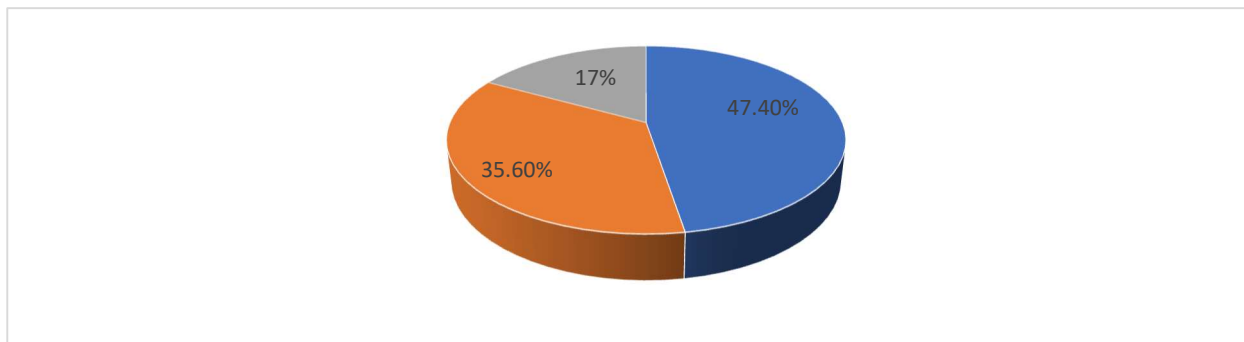


Figure 3: Graph on Parents' Fast Food Consumption

Do you think that fast food consumption causes addiction?"

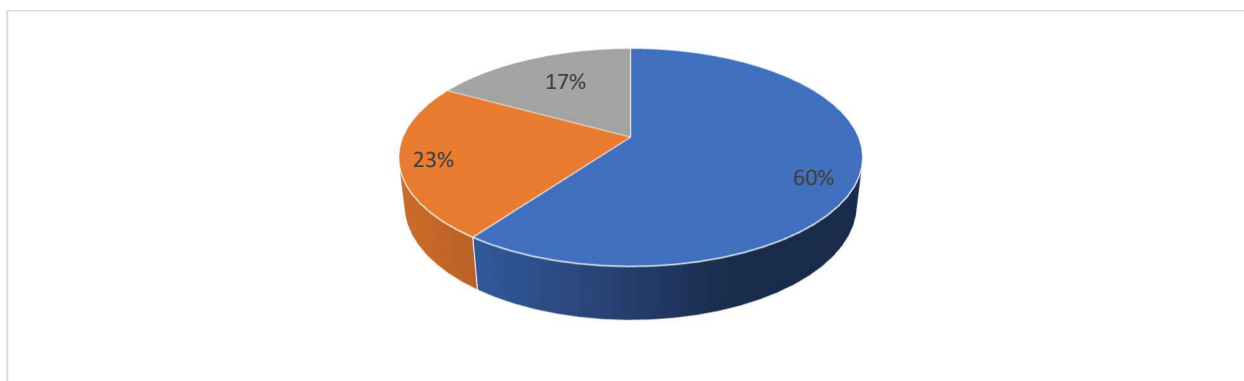


Figure 4: Causes Addiction

During communication with adolescents regarding this question, I heard their opinions that fast food consumption brings great pleasure during eating due to the flavors, as well as to adapt to society. Some mentioned the diseases it causes, which include skin cancer, stomach cancer, stomach pain, and obesity. These were the reasons why they would stop consuming fast food.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the research and the results obtained, it was found that 70.4% of adolescents in the municipality of Suhareka are consumers of fast food. This is a very high and concerning percentage, considering that the majority of adolescents in our region favor fast food so much, despite their knowledge of the harms it causes to their health and the diseases that may arise as a result.

During the evaluation, I had the honor and pleasure of discussing with high school students, where I received various opinions and provided necessary advice regarding the avoidance of fast food consumption and the prevention of the negative effects that this type of food carries.

After analyzing and reporting the questionnaire, I concluded that a majority of adolescents are aware that fast food is harmful, but concerning the significant side effects, they are not sufficiently informed to avoid these harmful habits, which may lead to dependence.

To address this issue, I recommend the following:

Educational Programs: Develop educational programs in schools that emphasize the importance of healthy eating and the consequences of excessive fast food consumption.

Parental Involvement: Engage parents in these programs, encouraging them to create a healthy food environment at home.

Informative Campaigns: Organize informative campaigns to raise awareness about health and the risks associated with fast food through social media and school activities.

Encouragement of Healthy Alternatives: Schools and other institutions should provide healthy alternatives in cafeterias, promoting fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results regarding fast food consumption among adolescents are concerning, indicating a pressing need for increased awareness and education about its effects. To address this issue effectively, the following recommendations are proposed:

Comprehensive Educational Programs: Schools should implement comprehensive educational programs focused on nutrition and the health risks associated with fast food consumption. These programs should include interactive workshops and seminars led by healthcare professionals and nutritionists. By incorporating real-life scenarios and hands-on activities, students can better understand the long-term consequences of their dietary choices.

Incorporation of Nutrition Education into the Curriculum: Integrating nutrition education into the school curriculum can provide students with the necessary knowledge about healthy eating habits from an early age. This can include lessons on reading nutrition labels, understanding food groups, and the importance of balanced meals. Teachers should be trained to deliver this content effectively, making it engaging and relevant to students' lives.

Parental Involvement and Communication: Engaging parents in the educational process is crucial. Schools should organize workshops and informational sessions for parents, highlighting the significance of their role in promoting healthy eating at home. Encouraging open discussions between parents and their children about food choices can help adolescents develop a critical understanding of their dietary habits and the potential risks associated with fast food consumption.

Creating Healthy School Environments: Schools must ensure that cafeterias offer a variety of healthy meal options, emphasizing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins. By limiting the availability of fast food and sugary snacks, schools can create an environment that promotes healthier eating habits among students. Collaborating with local farms or markets to provide fresh produce can further enhance the nutritional quality of school meals.

Regular Workshops and Seminars: Conducting regular workshops and seminars on the health impacts of fast food can keep students informed and motivated to make healthier choices. Inviting guest speakers, such as nutritionists and dietitians, to share their expertise and experiences can make these sessions more impactful and relatable.

Peer Support Programs: Establishing peer support programs where students can share their experiences and strategies for healthy eating can foster a sense of community and accountability. Encouraging students to advocate for healthier food choices within their social circles can amplify the message and inspire positive changes in dietary behaviors.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Finally, it is essential to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these programs regularly. Gathering feedback from students, parents, and educators can provide valuable insights into the impact of educational initiatives and inform necessary adjustments to enhance their effectiveness.

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