

Food, City and Young Globavores: Perceptions of Pakistani Urban Youth about Food Choices and Healthy Eating

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the views of Pakistani urban youth on food choices and healthy eating with an aim to identify the factors that influence their eating behaviors. Focus group discussions were conducted with socioeconomically diverse youth residing in Lahore city in Pakistan. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample of participants between 18 to 24 years of age. The participants highlighted family and peer influence, media exposure, popularity of international food chains, price increase and dining out trends as significant factors that determined their food choices and eating behaviors. It is found that despite having adequate knowledge about the implications of unhealthy food consumption, urban youth are less likely to practice healthy eating patterns. The paper recommends that preventive healthcare behavior should be promoted among youth through media, educational institutions and the Health Ministry.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid prevalence of obesity has become a serious public health concern in both developed and developing countries because it gives rise to several chronic diseases including diabetes and cancer (Calle and Thun 2004; Ng et al. 2014). Although obesity is affecting the people of all age groups, its occurrence among children and adolescents has grown at an alarming rate (Bustillo et al. 2016). Over the past few years, several studies have been conducted to comprehend the sociocultural, interpersonal, and psychological factors contributing to obesity and the associated health risks among children and adolescents (Karimi-Shahanjarini et al. 2010; Amiri et al. 2011). Although the causes of this emerging epidemic are complex, the evident changes in the food choices and dietary patterns of adolescents across the globe have been identified as one of the most significant factors contributing to growing rate of obesity (WHO 2014; El-Kassas and Ziade 2016; Raposo et al. 2016). Due to increasing food-related health risks, the

shift in the dietary patterns of youth has become an important subject of public health debate (Murimi et al. 2016).

Different studies indicate that the changing patterns of consumerism under the growing influence of urbanization and modernization also tend to change the food choices and dietary behaviors of individuals in the contemporary world (Adair and Popkin 2005; Kaushik et al. 2011). The shift in dietary patterns is mediated through the global environment that promotes the consumption of high-energy foods through media advertisements for commercial purposes (Seubsman et al. 2011; Faraday et al. 2016). Commercial food promotion via media unsurprisingly affects young people more than their elder counterparts (Boyland and Halford 2013). Food preferences involving use of high salt, high sugar, and high fats reflect the eating behaviors that mostly result in obesity and other health risks (Stevenson et al. 2007; Costa et al. 2016). Urban youth are more likely to be influenced by these emerging global food trends, such as Western-style fast food (Davis and Carpenter 2009; Nyberg et al. 2011).

An important aspect of the youth dietary patterns is their subjective understanding of healthy eating, which plays a significant part in shaping their food choices. Several studies indicate that young people's health concerns may differ considerably from their parents and rec-

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ommended nutritional guidelines of the health professionals (Stevenson et al. 2007). For instance, various studies on dieting behavior find that adolescents view dieting as a healthy eating behavior (Nichter 2009). It is therefore important to examine youth's perception about healthy eating and understand factors that influence their food choices in order to identify the barriers to healthy eating among them (Karimi-Shahanjarini et al. 2010). Academics argue that different perspectives about what healthy eating means may have different implications on food choices and eating behaviors among youth (Stevenson et al. 2007).

Furthermore, different studies have highlighted the risk-taking behavior of youth as another barrier to healthy eating among them (Platania et al. 2016). Mostly, taste is given priority over the nutritional value of food while making food choices (Banna et al. 2016; Murimi et al. 2016).

It is found that despite a high level of awareness about the health hazards associated with unhealthy food consumption, young people prefer the food that potentially contributes to obesity (Seubsman et al. 2011).

Like other developing countries, the ever-escalating influence of globalization and modernization trends has evidently changed the food preferences and dietary patterns of Pakistani youth, especially in the urban areas (Zafar 2013; Ismail 2016). The popularity of Western-style food such as fast food and soft drinks is rapidly increasing the prevalence of obesity and associated health risks among younger segment of the Pakistani population (Yakoob 2012; Hashmi et al. 2013). Although there is a significant body of literature on food choices and healthy eating among youth across the world, little research has been conducted to understand the propensity of Pakistani youth towards unhealthy food consumption.

This paper attempts to explore the diverse views of Pakistani urban youth regarding the factors that influence their food choices and eating behaviors. More specifically, this paper focuses on the processes of globalization and modernization resulting in the reconsideration of food preferences among Pakistani youth. Additionally, this paper investigates the awareness of youth about the risk factors associated with unhealthy dietary patterns. The findings of this paper would help the concerned departments such as the Ministry of Health to take eminent

measures to discourage the unhealthy food intake among youth by creating awareness among them about significance of healthy eating.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researchers employed qualitative methods to explore the views of youth about food choices and healthy eating. Interpretive approach was used to have a deep insight of the research topic under consideration (Silverman 2013). Twelve focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with the youth (male and female) residing in Lahore city. Using an inductive approach, a theory was developed through analysis of the data collected during fieldwork (Mason 2002).

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted at two universities, two colleges, and four eating spots including KFC, Pizza Hut, Lahore Broast and Bundu Khan. Both private and public sector educational institutions were selected in order to include students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Students ranging from those studying for bachelors to master's degrees were included in the FGDs. In order to incorporate urban youth not enrolled in colleges or universities, FGDs were arranged at the eating spots mentioned above. Six FGDs were conducted with each of the male and the female participants. The participants were divided into various groups comprising of five to eight participants in each group. In total, eighty people between 18-24 years of age participated in the research.

A discussion guide was designed comprising of the questions to be explored. The questions revolved around the food choices of urban youth, their eating behaviors, the dynamics of their dietary changes, their awareness about healthy and unhealthy eating and emerging trends of consumerism. Two pilot FGDs were conducted with the youth groups to check the workability of the tool. Pilot FGDs helped identify the repetition of certain ideas in discussion guide. Some of the questions were rephrased after the pilot FGDs. A trained moderator and a note-taker facilitated the researchers for conducting FGDs. All of the FGDs were conducted in

Urdu language, and the duration of each session ranged from 60-90 minutes.

Ethical Considerations

Consent of the participants was acquired for their inclusion in the research. They were informed about the purpose of research and the possible use of data collected through FGDs. Time and place for conducting the FGD was decided beforehand keeping in view the convenience of the participants. Prior to conducting FGDs, the participants were informed about expected duration of conversation. The researchers ensured the confidentiality and privacy of data obtained from the participants during the process of data collection and data analysis. FGDs were conducted in separate rooms at colleges, universities and eating spots. While analyzing data, names of the participants were changed by giving them the alternate names in order to ensure their anonymity (Mason 2002; Silverman 2013).

Data Analysis

A digital voice recorder was used to acquire uninterrupted and comprehensive details of the conversation during FGDs. Additionally the field

diaries were used by the note-takers for taking notes of discussion. All the FGDs were transcribed and translated from Urdu to English using the Express Scribe software. Transcriptions were carefully read in order to comprehend the basic codes and potential themes. The researchers developed a set of standard rules for coding procedure to achieve inter-coder agreement. One of the team members prepared a code list using four FGDs and assigned a name and a concise definition to each code. This list helped other researchers code the remaining eight transcripts. Coded data was grouped in different categories in order to develop major themes and sub themes for analysis, as shown in Table 1. Thematic analysis technique was used to analyze data.

FINDINGS

The participants highlighted various factors that played a significant part in determining their food choices and developing an understanding of healthy eating. The factors included family and peer influence, the popularity of international food chains, price increase and dining out trends. Taking into consideration the aims of this paper, 150 codes were developed from 25 themes. In order to facilitate the analysis of data, the findings of the paper were analyzed under the following

Table 1: List of themes, sub- themes and codes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Major codes</i>
The dynamics of dietary change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role of family • Role of peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food choices defined in childhood change through the adulthood. • Family plays primary role, mostly positive, in defining dietary behaviours in childhood. • When independent, at a young age, individuals are less conscious about healthy eating. • Dietary preferences learnt from families tend to change after contact with peers.
Emerging trends and food preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Globalization of food • Rapid increase in prices • Dining out - a status symbol • Role of media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is decline in traditional food preferences due to globalization of food. • Soft drinks, snacks, and fast food become popular through promotional characters and fun themes in media. • There is shift in food preferences due to increase in prices of fruits. • Dining out is becoming fashionable, cultured and a status symbol.
Awareness about healthy and unhealthy eating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate knowledge of unhealthy eating and risk factors • Dissatisfaction over eating behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive dine out, overeating, dieting, eating junk food, and skipping meals have undesirable health consequences. • Despite knowing the health risks of eating fast food, it is difficult to practice healthy eating behaviour.

major areas of the dynamics of dietary change, emerging trends and food preferences, and awareness about healthy and unhealthy eating.

The Dynamics of Dietary Change

Almost all of the participants considered that their dietary patterns underwent various changes with time. They were of the view that the individuals' eating behaviors and food choices defined in childhood change through the adulthood.

Role of Family

The majority of participants highlighted the role of family in defining their childhood dietary behaviors. They discussed that the family, especially the mothers, are mostly concerned about the health of their children and encourage them to avoid unhealthy food. However, when independent to make food choices, many participants stated that they were less conscious about healthy eating. During FGDs, one of the participants said, *"When I was in school, my mother used to give me a lunchbox filled with healthy homemade food. It had meat, vegetables and fruits. When I joined college, there was no trend of taking a lunchbox along. Girls used to eat from the canteen. Since then, I started eating junk food and did not really care about healthy eating."*

Conversely, a few of the participants emphasized that they learned unhealthy eating behaviors in their childhood from their parents, who were not too conscious of healthy food choices. One of the FGD participants mentioned, *"My parents were fond of spicy fried stuff. We never had lots of fruits to eat but our fridge used to be full of spicy frozen eatables. I got bad dietary habits from parents. Now being aware of its consequences, I am careful about what I eat."*

The findings indicate that parenting and family mostly play a positive role in inculcating healthy eating behaviors among youth. However, at times the young people develop unhealthy eating habits because of their prevailing family trends.

Role of Peers

The research found that the peer group is another important agent of socialization that constructs the dietary habits of youth. Dietary pref-

erences of young people that they learn from their family change when they come in contact with peers. One of the FGD participants mentioned, *"My mother is always concerned about my diet at home. But I developed the habit of eating junk food after being inspired by my friends at the hostel, who used to visit fast food places frequently. In contrast to my family, I am now in love with junk stuff."*

The young people who lived away from their families considered that the peer group had more influence on their dietary preferences as compared to their parents. Many participants highlighted peer pressure as an important factor that determined their food choices in the group. It was repeatedly mentioned during FGDs, *"When with friends, choosing something to eat is mostly a collective decision. This is how friendship works in our society. You are not free to make an independent choice about food, it sounds weird."*

The research found that the young males are more likely to be influenced by their peers in terms of their food preferences. Compared with their female counterparts, they spend more time with their peer group and have more opportunities to eat out. One of the female participants mentioned, *"Although girls also dine out with friends, boys do it more often. They would stay out late night, for which the girls are usually not allowed."*

Emerging Trends and Food Preferences

The participants discussed a number of different emerging trends including popularity of international food chains, media advertisements, rapid increase in prices and dining out that played a significant part in changing their dietary behaviors.

Globalization of Food

During FGDs, the participants explained how the rapid expansion and increasing popularity of international food chains in urban Pakistan has changed the consumption patterns of youth. Especially, the Western-style fast food and Chinese cuisines are easily affordable and accessible nowadays. One of the participants said, *"If I do not want to eat what is cooked at home, I go for other options like a pizza or burger. It is a matter of a phone call nowadays and they would drop it at your doorstep."* Similarly, a student living in the suburbs of Lahore city highlighted,

“Pizza is no more a foreign food. You find it even at small bakeries of town. It is very popular among youth and cheap as well.”

Almost all of the participants were of the view that fast food is not healthy because it causes different health problems such as obesity, high cholesterol, hypertension, ulcers, acidity and food poisoning.

Rapid Increase in Prices

During FGDs, the majority of participants talked about the nutritional value and significance of eating fruits. However, it is increasingly becoming unaffordable to buy fruits due to the rapid increase in prices in Pakistan. A participant mentioned, *“Nowadays, eating fast food is cheaper than eating fruits. Use of essential fruits is decreasing in our diet due to inflation.”*

Some of the participants argued that fruits are not as fresh and pure as they were in the past and therefore eating fruits is no longer their priority. One of the FGD participants stated, *“Artificial ways of producing and storing fruits have affected their quality and freshness. Shopkeepers mostly sell frozen fruits, produced with help of chemicals, which have no taste.”*

Dining Out-A Status Symbol

During FGDs, the participants consistently mentioned that dining out with friends and family is becoming a status symbol in urban Pakistan. One of the participants living in a posh neighborhood of Lahore stressed, *“Dining out is considered as fashionable and cultured. Even parents want their children to be educated about such trendy things.”* Consequently, urban youth are becoming more and more inclined to eat out and prefer non-Pakistani food. Another participant mentioned, *“When dining out with family and friends, we prefer to eat non-desi food because we can have traditional food at home as well.”*

As mentioned previously, young males dine out more than their female counterparts. However, a strong realization occurred among the majority of the participants that the trends of eating out pose serious health hazards. They repeatedly expressed their concerns about the quality of food cooked and sold at restaurants, especially in terms of hygiene and the quality of oil used for cooking.

Role of Media

Media advertisements and TV commercials were highlighted as other important factors that influence the food choices and eating behaviors of youth. The majority of participants attributed the popularity of soft drinks, snacks and fast food among youth to the advertising of such products through promotional characters and fun themes in media.

They furthermore explained how the media is negatively influencing their health behaviors by promoting the usage of preserved food items and cooking ingredients in homes. A participant emphasized, *“Commercial ads of local spicy powders like Shaan and National have introduced the cooking trends that are not good for health. It makes cooking easy but is poisonous for the stomach.”*

Awareness about Healthy and Unhealthy Eating

An overwhelming majority of the participants had adequate knowledge of the risk factors associated with unhealthy food consumption. When questioned about their understanding of healthy and unhealthy eating behaviors, the participants talked about a number of factors that have positive consequences for health. The factors mentioned by them included intake of nutritious food such as fruits, meat, milk, homemade food, avoiding spices, and eating fresh, low fat and hygienic food. Excessive dining out, over-eating, dieting, eating junk food, and skipping meals were considered to have undesirable health consequences.

Dissatisfaction over Eating Behaviors

While discussing the healthy consumption patterns, an overwhelming majority of the participants showed dissatisfaction over their eating behaviors, choices and routine. Having an inclination towards junk food, they were concerned about its negative consequences on their health. One of the participants mentioned, *“Despite knowing the health risks of eating fast food and using soft drinks, I am unable to practice healthy eating habits. I don’t know it’s due to family trends or availability of delicious food that makes me lose self-control.”* One of the university students mentioned, *“Burgers sold*

at our university canteen are prepared in an unhygienic way. Ingredients used are germ-infected and not that fresh. Despite knowing that, students can't resist, it is so delicious." This shows how despite of being aware of the health risks associated with unhealthy food consumption, the urban youth are less likely to adopt healthy eating behaviors.

Female participants were found to be more conscious about the health hazards associated with fast food and other unhealthy eating options. Many of them mentioned the fear of being fat as the major motivator to stop them from eating snacks, pizza, burgers, and other fast food items. One of the female participants highlighted, *"I am a fast food lover but the dream of being skinny forces me to have self-control. In my age, appearance is the most important concern for a girl."*

DISCUSSION

In line with previous researches, the findings of this paper show that there are a number of different factors that shape individuals' food choices and eating behaviors. The factors include family, peer groups, media exposure, urbanization, status symbols, and food prices. Food preferences and eating behaviors of the youth change over time with age, their exposure to new life opportunities, and emerging trends of eating (Deliens et al. 2014; Murimi et al. 2016).

The findings of this paper complement previous researches (Banna et al. 2016; Platania et al. 2016) by highlighting the role of family in influencing the dietary patterns of the youth. The primary responsibility to socialize children about healthy eating lies with parents, especially the mothers. In response, children and adolescents are expected to show conformity to parental regulations concerning food choices and healthy eating (Mahdi 2003; Stevenson et al. 2007). The findings also indicate that the parents are considered as role models for children and influence their eating behaviors by practicing healthy or unhealthy eating habits. Hence, the family environment tends to have both positive and negative impacts on the eating habits of the youth (Brown and Ogden 2004; Epstein et al. 2006). Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence that shows a positive influence of healthy eating practices within the family on the food choices and eating behaviors of the youth (Banna et al. 2016).

On the other hand, it is argued that although parental control over dietary habits encourages healthy eating in the short run, it may prevent the development of self-efficacy among adolescents (Stevenson et al. 2007; Deliens et al. 2014). Stevenson (2007) stressed that the parents are rarely able to promote a perception among adolescents about healthy eating outside the home environment. Similarly, the findings of this paper suggest that independence from parental control mostly results in less healthy eating practices among the youth.

The peer group is one of the important agents of socialization in terms of shaping eating habits and food preferences among youth (Salvy et al. 2007; Bargiota et al. 2013). Various studies found that the peer norms and social conditioning of food consumption in friendship groups strongly impact the food choices and eating behaviors of the youth (Karimi-Shahanjarini et al. 2010; Ali et al. 2015). The findings of this paper support the previous researches and suggest that when eating with friends, group approval is an important factor in food selection, mainly to assimilate with peers. This research furthermore found that young people are more likely to eat unhealthy food while dining out with friends, whereas they eat healthier food within the family environment (Herman et al. 2003; Shepherd et al. 2006). An overwhelming majority of the participants were exposed to unhealthy food choices through peers as soon as they began to establish their independence from parental control.

Academics have highlighted the role of media in determining the food choices of young people (Boyland and Halford 2013; Faraday 2016). In USA, around USD 1 billion is spent annually on youth-oriented advertisements, especially on television (Story and French 2004). Studies show that the majority of these advertisements promote unhealthy food products (Kelly et al. 2010; Faraday 2016) and suggest dietary patterns that do not correspond to recommended nutritional guidelines. In line with previous researches, the findings of this paper indicate that the media, especially television, strongly influences the food choices of youth. Soft drinks, spicy food, snacks, and fast food become popular among youth mainly through the media. Moreover, media advertisements for the promotion of cooking pounders and spices such as *National* and *Shaan* are negatively influencing the cooking culture of local families.

Different studies suggest that despite being well informed about the negative consequences of unhealthy food consumption, adolescents are less likely to practice healthy eating habits (Mirmiran et al. 2007). Creating awareness about the advantages of healthy dietary patterns may not be sufficient to sensitize the youth to practice healthy eating. They generally do not consider healthy eating to be a priority (Croll et al. 2001). The findings of this paper also illustrate that the participants had adequate knowledge of the health hazards associated with unhealthy dietary behaviors. Due to their inclination towards junk food, a majority of them showed discontent with their food choices. However, regardless of being aware, the participants were less conscious of practicing healthy eating habits.

Cost is another important determinant of food choices and eating priorities (French 2003; Deliens et al. 2014). There is increasing evidence around the world showing that price is the fastest growing reason for food preferences (IFICF 2011). Various studies have recommended price reduction in healthy food items as effective strategy to encourage their purchase among youth (Kaushik et al. 2011). Complementing previous researches, the findings of this paper highlight that the increasing cost of fruits has resulted in its low consumption among youth. On the other side, as compared to fruits, fast food is becoming increasingly popular among youth due to its affordability (Ismail 2016).

Multiple food choices due to the globalization of food are among the significant factors of dietary changes emerging across the world, especially among youth (Bargiota et al. 2013). The globalization of food has resulted in a decline of intercultural differences that is eroding the popularity of traditional food in different societies (Taylor et al. 2005). The variety of cheap food available outside the home has led to the decline of household cooking practices (Kaushik et al. 2011). This research also found that the international fast food chains are rapidly expanding and becoming popular among the youth. Pakistani urban youth have started preferring easily accessible and affordable non-traditional food to homemade food that has increased the health risks among them. Correspondingly, the title of this paper "Food, City and Young Globavores" refers to the increasing inclination of urban youth in Pakistan towards global food trends, espe-

cially the Western-style food such as fast food and soft drinks.

Academics have discussed eating out, especially in urban settings, as an expression of taste and social status (Warde and Marten 2000). Similarly, in urban Pakistan, dining out with friends and family is increasingly becoming a fashionable and cultured eating behavior that reflects the social standing of the individuals. Different food venues in town, for example coffee shops, are popular among the youth because of the modern environment and food. However, the research participants were well aware of the health hazards associated with eating out and expressed their concerns about the quality of food sold at restaurants.

The findings of this paper indicate that the food choices and eating behaviors differ across the male and the female participants. In line with previous researches (Deliens et al. 2015; Banna et al. 2016), female participants were found to be more conscious about the health risks of unhealthy food. Owing to their concerns about the importance of physical appearance as females, they avoid the food options that tend to cause obesity (Karimi-Shahanjarini et al. 2010). It was furthermore found that the young females dine out less than their male counterparts due to their lesser mobility in public sphere.

CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that there are several factors that influence the food choices and dietary patterns of urban youth in Pakistan. Traditionally, the institution of family plays a significant role in determining the food preferences of young males and females in Pakistani society. However, the family socialization is not generally able to promote a strong perception among youth about healthy eating outside the parental control. Peer pressure has been highlighted as an important factor that provokes the unhealthy changes in eating behaviors of young males and females, particularly in the absence of parental norms of food intake outside home environment.

The paper also underlines the increasingly detrimental role of media in promoting the unhealthy dietary habits through advertisements of soft drinks, spicy food, snacks and fast food. Additionally, the globalization of food has increased the propensity of Pakistani urban youth towards easily accessible and affordable junk

food that has resulted in escalated health risks among them. Increasing dining out trends with friends and family is another motivational factor behind adoption of unhealthy dietary behaviors among Pakistani youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A comparative research should be conducted to examine the food preferences and eating behaviors across urban and rural youth of Pakistan to further widen the scope of research in this area.
2. There is a need to conduct more research dealing with different age groups of research participants in order to have a comprehensive picture of changing food choices and eating trends under the increasing influence of globalization and media in contemporary Pakistani society.
3. The paper recommends that preventive healthcare behavior should be promoted among the masses, especially youth, through media, educational institutions, NGOs and the Ministry of Health.
4. Measures should be taken at legislative and policy levels to respond to the WHO's set of recommendations about the marketing of unhealthy food.

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