

**FOOD MARKETING STRATEGIES TO CHILDREN AND  
ADOLESCENTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIAN AND  
AMERICAN WEBSITES AND THEIR INFLUENCE**

*Executive summary Report of*  
**MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT**  
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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT**

## **ABSTRACT**

Fast food has proven to be a comprehensive force in the lives of both Indian and American young people. What people eat or don't eat has always been determined by a complex interplay of social, economic, and technological forces. During a relatively brief period of time, the fast food industry has helped to revolutionize not only the diet, but also landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture. Recent studies done by Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in India indicate that the incidence of juvenile diabetes is on the rise in cities, around 20% of school-going children in India are overweight.

Most junk food falls into the categories of either 'snack food' or 'fast food'. Burgers, french-fries, pizzas, colas and energy drinks are some of the more popular Western junk food. Samosas, kachoris, bread pakodas, packaged bhujia, instant noodles, momos, tikkis and bhaturas top the list of Indian junk food. Earlier this year CSE had tested 16 major brands of junk foods and found most of them loaded with high levels of trans-fats, salts and sugar. While excess salts and sugar are a cause for concern, the real terror is in the trans fats. There is enough global evidence to suggest that more and more young people are succumbing to problems of the heart at a much earlier age. At an age when they should have been at their productive best, they are losing productive life by eating this junk.

Despite all the noted facts there are few more multiple factors influence eating behaviors and food choices of youth, one potent force is food advertising. The digital innovation and social networking in the areas of marketing has also influenced the consumption patterns to a great extent. This allows individuals and businesses to interact with one another and build relationships and communities online. The companies with social channels can interact with customers directly. That interaction can be more personal to users than traditional methods of outbound marketing and advertising. Social networking sites act as word of mouth or more accurately, e-word of mouth. In summary, the proliferation of the products, digital Innovation and online promotions have become a concern to parents as fast food has been an inescapable and more readily an essential need to the society.

Keeping all these factors at the backdrop, an attempt was made to compare the online marketing strategies of fast food companies both in India and USA. Ten websites of fast food

companies namely Star bucks, Subway, Burger King, McDonalds, California Pizza Kitchen, KFC, Papajohns, Pizzahut, Donkin Donuts and Domino's from each country i.e., both India and USA were chosen for analysis. Further a survey on 423 children and 12 Focus Group Discussions on children and adolescents in Hyderabad, Vijayawada and Tirupati were conducted. The study investigated the associations between the online marketeering strategies and food choices and a better understanding of these determinants would be useful in developing nutrition interventions in order to achieve healthy dietary patterns among children and adolescents. The results show the association between the exposure to online promotional activity besides parents role in consumption of fast food among children.

### **NEED FOR THE STUDY**

Food marketing to children is global, omnipresent and invasive. The major food companies are developing and implementing a new generation of marketing techniques to attract children and young people in developing countries and these bear a marked resemblance to those used in developed markets. In short, food is marketed not as a commodity but as a cultural good (Jing, 2000). Some of these practices are inherently unfair, others raise serious privacy concerns, and still others are deceptive.

Food and beverage marketing to children in America represents a direct threat to the health prospects of the next generation with a lack of evidence available regarding the influence of marketing on adolescents' food choices and consumption. Indian children have recently attracted considerable attention from marketers because the market for children's products offers tremendous potential crossed Rs. 5000 crore and is rapidly growing (Kaur, Pavleen and Raghbir Singh, 2006). The purpose of this study is to further establish a stream of literature that deals with the new consumption and marketing dynamics emerging in multicultural market places.

The increasing globalization process has altered the international competitive dynamics in the food industry. Attracted by mere size and growth potential of emerging economies' food sector, a number of multinational food enterprises (MNFEs) have already entered or are in the process of entering into India. Strategic alliances between local food enterprises and multinational food companies have also increased manifold in the recent past. The rapid growth of the internet and proliferation of digital media are transforming how corporations do business with young people in the twenty-first century. The quintessential "early adopters" of new

technology, children and teens are eagerly embracing cell phones, I-pods, and a host of new digital tools and quickly assimilating them into their daily lives.

Further the explosion of digital culture in recent years has dramatically changed the playing field and the rules, especially for children and teenagers and companies marketing fast food, snack food, and soft drinks are at the forefront of the game. This expansion of digital media in children's lives has created a new "marketing ecosystem" where marketers find an opportunity to remain in constant contact with children (Jeff Chester & Kathryn Montgomery, 2011). Children in the West have been reported to wield a lot of influence in purchase decisions for children products such as snacks (Ahuja and Stinson, 1993), toys (Jensen, 1995) and indirect purchase influence while shopping for costly products (Halan, 2002). In a focus group study with boys and girls in the age group of 13-15 years in India, it was estimated that they were able to influence 50 percent of the decisions in the family.

Children in the United States are growing up in environments saturated with marketing for fast food, snacks, and sugary beverages. Today, one in three teens is either overweight or obese, which puts them at higher risk for serious and even life-threatening health problems. In India also statistics on children's health point to a disturbing trend that children are being robbed of their childhoods not only at an emotional level but physically as well. Their health concerns are similar to those of the adult population in many respects. Because children's choices about what to eat and when are largely shaped by food and beverage marketing and these industries are now reaching our kids through a multitude of interactive devices and platforms, pushing products onto young consumers who lack the information and capacity to understand the consequences of their decisions.

As part of their promotional strategy many food companies dedicated space on company websites or product sites to advertise the promotions. In addition, the increasing promotion efforts in-store, in print, at schools and through other media, let alone the advent of internet, have further diversified the marketing channels aimed at children and complicated the mapping of them. Similar to packaging and store displays, website content prominently displayed copyrighted images from the cross-promoted films and television programs. Frequently, websites featured an interactive component tied to the cross-promotion, such as an online game featuring the licensed character or an opportunity to win an instant prize related to the promotion. Some

websites incorporated the licensed characters into free downloads offered at the sites, such as wallpapers, screensavers, coloring pages, and e-cards. In some cases in USA, media companies allowed movie trailers and extra footage to appear on food company websites advertising the cross-promotion.

Hence children and children's market is of great interest to marketers worldwide because of their increasing spending capacity, and their direct and indirect influence in purchase decisions in the family. There is evidence from research reviews that food marketing influences children's food preferences, purchases and consumption (Cairns et al., 2009, Institute of Medicine, 2006 and Livingstone and Helsper, 2004). Globally, there is a nutritional imbalance in the types of foods that are promoted to children. Since more than two-thirds of web-sites in USA for children and adolescents use advertising as their primary revenue source, a concern has arisen about marketing products in cyberspace, including marketing of food and beverage. Such techniques are designed to appeal specifically to children, who may not even be aware that they are being exposed to sophisticated marketing strategies (Weber et al., 2006). Hence, food marketing has been identified as an important target for intervention in the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity (World Health Organization, 2006).

Since most of the food companies are global in nature, the study makes an attempt to understand how food marketing companies employ new media platforms to reach children of different cultural backgrounds. Whether food companies use strategies to reach children in USA and India independently or are the companies develop strategies to correspondent to the socio, economic and cultural conditions and food habits of children of India? The outcome of the study would help to understand the marketing strategies adopted by multinational companies to attract children and results will have policy implications.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The study attempted to compare the marketing techniques of company' websites of fast food companies in India and United States of America. The comparison essentially explores the differences and commonalities in online marketing techniques adopted by global fast food companies. Based on the analysis of the comparison, a survey will be conducted on children to find the association between online marketing techniques and food choices, buying behavior and

change in lifestyle of children in India. Based on research results, a book will be published to inculcate healthy eating habits among children.

*Research Objective I : Cross Comparison of online marketing techniques adopted by Fast food companies in India and USA.*

*Research Objective : 2. To find out the association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies and children's food choices in India.*

*Objective 3. To find out the association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies in India and purchasing habits of children in India.*

*Objective 4. To find out the Association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies and obesity among children in India.*

**The study addresses the following specific issues.**

1. Comparative analysis of online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies on India and US websites.
2. Association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies and children's food choices in India.
3. Association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies and purchasing habits of children in India.
4. Association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies and change in lifestyles among children in India.
5. To publish a book titled Fast-food -Selling Obesity to create awareness among children.
6. To develop a website for creating awareness on health consequences of fast food consumptions to promote healthy food habits among children.
7. To develop strategies to protect health of children from harmful marketing tactics without compromising on their ability to participate in contemporary media culture.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study has adopted both quantitative and qualitative methods. The contents of websites of fast food companies in India and USA were analyzed to understand the online

marketing strategies. Further a Survey and was conducted to understand the association between online marketing strategies and its impact on consumption of fast food among children.

*Research Objective I : Cross Comparison of online marketing techniques adopted by Fast food companies in India and USA.*

The marketing techniques adopted by various food marketing companies on popular websites in India and USA were analyzed. The study has adopted the marketing techniques suggested by Calvert sl (2008) to analyze the contents of online marketing strategies of fast food companies.

### **SAMPLE AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS OF WEBSITES**

Ten popular web sites of fast food companies which have their outlet both in India and in US were chosen for analysis thus making the total sample of 20 websites. They are Star bucks, Subway, Burger King, McDonalds, California Pizza Kitchen, KFC, Papajohns, Pizzahut, Donkin Donuts and Domino's in India and USA. For each site, the homepage and all pages linked directly to the homepage were analyzed. The analysis was carried during 1/1/2016 to 26/4/2018.

The contents of fast food websites in India and USA were analyzed in terms of

1. Advergame- Sponsored video games with embedded brand messages by food marketers to target children.
2. Celebrity endorsement - Popular personalities like actors, sports persons, musicians etc., endorse the food products.
3. Character merchandising – Use of popular fictional characters to promote the product.
4. Claims about nutrition or fitness - Use of health claims to promote the product.
5. Clubs - Product is promoted through interactive methods.
6. Premiums/ discounts – Free gifts and discounts when buy a product
7. Product placements- Products or brand logos are included in highly visible scenes of video games.
8. Repetition of the message- Repeating the same commercial message multiple times.
9. Spokescharacters - Animated brand characters created by food companies to build product awareness and brand loyalty.

10. Sweepstakes - Organize contests that offer the chance to win toys or prizes with the purchase of a product.

11. Viral marketing - The promotion of products by word of mouth on electronic platforms.

*Research Objective* : 2. To find out the association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies and children's food choices in India.

*Objective 3.* To find out the association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies in India and purchasing habits of children in India.

*Objective 4.* To find out the Association between exposure to online marketing techniques adopted by fast food companies and obesity among children in India.

To achieve the research objectives 2, 3 and 4, a survey and FGD's was conducted on children

#### **HYPOTHESES:**

1. Children whose parents' education is low would consume more fastfood than children whose parents have higher education.
2. Children from higher income would consume more fast food than children from low income groups.
3. Children with greater exposure to online marketing activities of fast food would be more likely to have consumed fast food.
4. Children with greater consumption of fast food would be more likely report change in lifestyle.

#### **SAMPLE AND METHOD OF STUDY FOR SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

A survey was conducted on children in the state of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The researcher has chosen the quota sampling method to choose the sample for the study. The researcher has chosen a city i.e. Vijayawada and a semi urban area, Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh and a cosmopolitan city Hyderabad from the state of Telangana to draw children from different geographical regions. Children were selected from a private school and a Government school in

Hyderabad, Tirupati and Vijayawada for both Survey and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs). Twenty four students giving equal representation to both boys and girls were drawn from each class of 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> classes in all the three places for survey. The sample in each school is 72 and 144 children were drawn from each place making a total sample of 432.

The permission to conduct study was obtained from the respective school principals. The self-administered questionnaires were distributed to students chosen in each class. The questionnaire was in English and was pretested in a group of 10 students before its usage in the study. It contained multiple choice 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 anxiety consumption of fast foods were also enquired.

Two FGDs were conducted in each school supplement the data collected from Survey. Each FGD has 12 children taking 2 boys and 2 girls from each class of 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>. Two schools were chosen from Hyderabad, Tirupati and Vijayawada. The total FGDs conducted for the study were 12. Children who showed interest voluntarily to participate were chosen for FGD. The survey and FGDs were carried between Nov, 2017 and Dec, 2018. Each session for Focus Group Discussion & surveys took around 45minutes.

*Objective 5:* Publish a book based on research results with illustrations for children to explain the facts about the fast food and online marketing strategies to create awareness among children and promote healthy food choices.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

1. **The analysis of 20 websites** launched by fast-food companies in India and USA shows the use of various marketing techniques like use of advergames, character merchandising, claims about nutrition or fitness, clubs, premiums/ discounts, product placements, repetition of the message, spokes characters, sweepstakes and Viral marketing to promote fastfood. Celebrity endorsement was not found both in India and USA.
2. The use of Advergames on Websites for promotion of fast food is high in USA (50%) in comparison with India (30%). Fast food companies adopted different genres like memory, puzzle, shooter and casual type for Advergames both in USA and India.
3. Though majority of fast-food websites both in India and USA have used different kinds of spokescharacters, no statistically significant differences were noticed. In India, McDonald promoted their products using Angry Birds cartoon character as character- merchandising to attract children. They used angry bird's names as captions for their products.
4. Fastfood companies in USA have changed their fictional characters very frequently to attract kids. Companies have also promoted their products using movies' fictional characters on their websites. Subway promoted Disney "Moana" 3D Movie and Boss baby 3D animated movie through their website.
5. The data shows statistically significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) between India and USA in display of "nutrition claims" or fitness information by the Fast Food Companies. All the fast-food companies in USA and 50% in India have displayed nutritional information of each product on their websites. It was noticed that in India, Subway, Burger King, McDonald, KFC, Pizza hut have provided a detailed nutritional information on their websites. But surprisingly McDonald and Burger did not provide any nutritional Information regarding "kids menu" or "Happy Meal" anywhere on their websites.
6. There is a significant difference between India and USA in display of nutritional information as per the serving size of food product ( $p < .05$ ). All the fastfood companies in USA have provided detailed information about the nutritional values but in India only 50% of companies did display for nutritional data the serving size of the product.

7. There are statistically significant differences between Indian and American companies ( $p < .05$ ) about presentation of Food Facts. All the fast food companies in USA have displayed Food Facts on their websites whereas 60% of Indian websites displayed food facts.
8. The display of nutritional calculator was significantly different in India from USA ( $p < .05$ ). Almost all the Fast Food Companies in USA have provided nutritional calculator to their customers on their websites and no Indian Fast Food Company has provided Nutritional Calculator to their customers
9. All the companies in USA and only KFC only in India have displayed information about total calories in their Nutritional Information Display on their website ( $p < .05$ ).
10. Display of on cholesterol content in Fast Food shows significant differences ( $P < 0.05$ ) between USA and India. Only McDonalds in India have displayed Cholesterol information but in USA except Dominos Pizza, all other companies have displayed information about cholesterol percentage in fast food on their websites.
11. In India, only Dominos pizza has started a club and offered special promotional offers to their registered customers only. The information on offers were directly informed to their customers through their registered emails. In USA only KFC has started a club called “Colonel’s club”. The customers get some special offers and updates of KFC to their email if they become a member of a club.
12. Majority of fast food companies both in India (90%) and USA (80%) announced special discounts on their websites.
13. The proportion of repeating messages was significantly different in India from USA ( $p = 0.046$ ). Ninety percent of Indian websites repeated details of new products, variety of products and offers where as only 50% of American companies did the same. In India, except Starbucks all other companies have repeated the same message related to new product launching, special offers and discounts more than once.
14. The fast food companies have used the same Spokescharacters both in India & USA in their websites and video games.

15. *The analysis indicates that 10 fast food brands under the study have widely used three major social media websites: YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. All these companies tried to get their messages viral using social media.*
16. In India, Statistically significant differences between USA and India were noticed in using youtube channel for promoting the brands ( $P < 0.05$ ). All the fast food companies in USA run exclusive channels on youtube for promoting their products in the form of videos and advertisements.

## **FINDINGS FROM SURVEY**

1. More than half of the participants (53.2%) were girls and 46.8% were boys in the study. 38.2% of the children were studying 8<sup>th</sup> class, 38.9% were in 9<sup>th</sup> class and 22.9% were in 10<sup>th</sup> class. The less percentage of children from 10<sup>th</sup> class were included in the sample as many school principals did not allow 10<sup>th</sup> students to participate in the survey due to board exams. The children were chosen equally from three different geographical regions i.e. Hyderabad, a metropolitan city (32.9%), Vijayawada, a city (33.8%) and Tirupati, a semi urban town (33.3%). The children were chosen from both government schools (47.7%) and private schools (52.3%).
2. It was found during the research that, 69% of participants eat branded fast food and 31% eat food in restaurants or street food or homemade fastfood. The frequency distribution of preference for fast food shows that 35.6% eat 2 times a week, 29.2% eat 1 or 2 times in 15 days, 23.8% eat once in a month and 11.3% of children eat fast food quarterly. The data also indicate that 28.9% of children frequently visit fast food websites and 71.1% visit occasionally.
3. Heavy purchase of fast food was noticed among 14 & 15 years age group of children and low purchase was noticed among 12 years cohort (56%). The moderate purchase was also noticed among 13- 15 years age group.
4. Parental consumption of fast food was found to influence fast food consumption among children and adolescents. Nearly 43% of children mentioned that parents accompany them to

fast food restaurants, 20.4% stated as both friends and parents, 17.1% mentioned as friends and around 10% mentioned that they consume fast food in parties.

5. The various reasons mentioned by children for fast food consumption were spiciness of food, attractive promotions, convenience, customization of food products, a variety choices, gatherings, game zones, hygienic and status symbol.
6. Statistical difference between boys and girls was noticed when measured the effects of fast food consumption on lifestyle ( $p = 0.001$ ). 33.2% of boys and 20.4% of girls have stated that their lifestyle is changed completely due to their fast food consumption.
7. Statistically significant association between the age of the participants and change in food choices due to their engagement in online promotional activities was noticed. Nearly fifty percent of adolescents (14-15 years) have agreed that their lifestyle was changed and 48.8% of 12 years children mentioned a moderate change. But surprisingly children of all the age groups stated that their lifestyle has changed.
8. More than half of the participants in the study (53.9%) reported that they sometimes skip breakfast /lunch/dinner and 45.4% of children skip fruits and vegetables sometimes. The other changes noticed among children were dependency on instant food (56%), interests in different tastes (39.4%), increase in gatherings often (31.3%), increase in social media activities often, (28.2%) and experienced often irregular sleep patterns by 30.6% of children.
9. Nearly 50% of participants in the study mentioned that they were unable to resist eating fast-food though they were aware that it is unhealthy, 30% mentioned that they know the standard calorie intake per day and 36% used nutritional calculator while consuming fast food. But interestingly, 93.5% of children stated that fast food is not healthier than homemade food.
10. Participants mentioned that consumption of fast food leads to obesity (21%), weight gain, sleeping disorders, week memory put together (33%) and weight gain, diabetics and health disorder (18%). Though children were aware of health disorders, 42% of children in the study never tried to reduce the intake of fast food, 16% could not resist and 42% succeeded in reducing the frequency of consumption of fast food.

11. 65.8% participants in the study stated that their parents worry about their fast food eating habits.
12. Parent's education has bearing on the level of online promotional activities of children ( $p > .05$ ). The children whose parents had education up to 10<sup>th</sup> were low viewers (34.7%), more than 50% of children whose parents had intermediate education were moderate viewers and heavy viewing (32%) was noticed among children whose parents had graduation or post graduate.
13. The parents education has a bearing on the level of purchase of fast food among participants ( $p .05$ ). The low (33.9%) and moderate (43.9%) purchases were made by children whose parents studied 10<sup>th</sup> class than children whose parents were postgraduates. The change in food habits and lifestyle due to fast food consumption was high among children (48.2%) whose parents had either graduation or post graduation. On the whole less change in noticed among children whose parents studied only 10<sup>th</sup> class.
14. Parents education has a bearing on participants opinion on resisting fastfood consumption knowing it as unhealthy ( $P=.037$ ). The children whose parents education is intermediate (63%) and UG & PG (50%) mentioned that they were not able to resist fast food though they know it is unhealthy than children (46%) whose parents studied 10<sup>th</sup> class.
15. The result show statistically significant differences between children' parents education and their opinion on the consequences of fast food consumption ( $p=.000$ ). One fourth of children in the study opinioned that the obesity/weight gain and a week memory and sleeping disorder are some of the health consequences of fast food consumption.
16. The level of purchase of fast foods among participants has a bearing on the income level of the parents ( $p=.04$ ). The level of purchase is increased as the income level increases.
17. The parents anxiety about children's fast food consumption is associated with parents income level ( $p=.20$ ). More than 50% of parents belonging to 2,50,000 income group showed high anxiety levels. All the parents irrespective of income level showed moderate level of anxiety about children's fast food consumption.
18. The study shows statically significant association between the internet usage and level of the purchase of fast food among participants ( $P=0.000$ ). The low fast food consumption was noticed among children who spent less time on internet (34%) than who spent more time on

internet (24.2%). Similarly level of purchase is higher among moderate and heavy internet users (41% & 21.2% respectively) than the low internet users (14.3%).

19. There is an association between internet exposure and ability of children to resist fast food. Majority of low internet users than moderate and heavy users mentioned that they were able to resist fast food consumption..
20. Results show statistically significant association between the level of exposure to online promotional activities and level of purchase ( $p=.000$ ). The level of purchase is low among low viewers (56.6%) than moderate (18.5 %) and heavy viewers (16%). The high level of purchase was (51%) noticed among heavy viewers of online promotional activities than moderate (29%) and low viewers (4.4%).

### **FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Twelve focus group discussions were conducted. Across focus group discussions, mixed attitudes about healthy eating, low perceived risk of being or becoming obese, and limited knowledge about the health consequences of obesity may contribute to the rising prevalence of obesity among youth.
2. Female participants expressed more positive attitudes toward consuming healthy foods. Most children reported learning what foods were healthy and unhealthy from their parents or text books.
3. Many children mentioned that they go to restaurant for birthday parties or along with parents and eat fast-food. The fast-food is very tasty and feel like going again and again is the opinion of many children. In contrast, several male participants associated healthy food with tasting bad. There were no differences in opinion about obesity while girls desired to include more healthy foods.
4. More boys than girls were spending more time online, playing online games thus exposed to online promotional activities of fast-food. Male were exposed to Advergaming and In-game advertising on fast-food than girls. The most important reasons for children's likes were taste and appearance..
5. After taste and parents, factors such as TV advertisements, online promotions, peers, and visiting food court in shopping malls as status symbol are among important factors that influenced food patterns.

6. Fast food consumption and undesirable eating patterns have been found to be associated with lack of health knowledge on negative health outcomes including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, obesity and some cancers among children in the study.
7. Girls than boys felt fastfood consumption might to lead to overweight but were not aware of unhealthy eating habits which are likely create health problems and persist into late adolescence or adulthood.
8. TV advertisements were mentioned as an important influential factor by children followed by online offers and parties.
9. Majority of children are not especially concerned about health outcomes and that health is not a priority for them. Although most children believed that parents were good choosers, they preferred to choose foods by themselves.
10. Many children are attracted to spokes-characters and viral marketing. They make decisions on new products based on the comments on social media.
11. About half of our participants believed that customization of food helps them to choose a nutritious food. Some of the children responded that schools or shops around the schools should avoid selling fast food.
12. An exclusive lesson on food and nutrition in text book may be included for school going children for creating awareness on unhealthy aspects of fast food and for promotion of healthy habits.