

Abstract

Food choice decision-making among school-going adolescents amidst the nutrition transition in urban Accra, Ghana

By:

Krystal K. Rampalli, PhD, MPH

University of South Carolina

Arnold School of Public Health

Department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior

Background

Ghana, like many other nations, is experiencing a significant nutrition transition due to food systems changes that is occurring alongside a rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Adolescents, who form a large segment of the population, are key consumers whose food choice decision-making processes are poorly understood by the health and nutrition community. Local and multinational food and beverage companies are aware of and tend to implement promotional content that directly targets adolescent consumers using sociocultural messages and tactics that resonate with this population group.

Objectives

The first research aim sought to understand how adolescents conceptualize healthy and unhealthy foods, food portion sizes and purchasing behaviors. The second research aim sought to uncover perspectives by these same students regarding body image. Findings from this work will aid in public health efforts to develop interventions and policies to mitigate diet-related NCDs as this population ages into adulthood.

Methods

The Measurement, Evaluation, Accountability, and Leadership Support for NCDs (MEALS4NCDs) Project measured the nature and extent of unhealthy food marketing to support public sector actions to create healthier food environments for Ghanaian children. In July-August 2020, 48 interviews with male and female students (14-17 years old) in six districts across the Greater Accra Region of Ghana were conducted in schools. Interviews were done in English, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded with NVivo 12 using a thematic analysis.

Results

Students had rudimentary knowledge of nutrition, mostly derived from school curricula. However, their food choices were predominantly driven by attitudes and beliefs held by those in their social networks, cost considerations, and health claims on advertisements and how they believed the consumption of certain foods would enhance their physical or cognitive performance. Students did not fully understand what portion control and mindful eating was, though they recognized the importance of moderation and balance in food consumption. Younger students and female students felt more body image dissatisfaction and desire to change their current weight status. Body image aspirations were important in food choice decision-making; students alluded to people who they sought to emulate. Students discussed tensions with

elders about types and quantities of food to eat and the body sizes that their elders wanted them to be versus what they wanted to look like.

Conclusion

The results from this study suggest the need for tailored interventions and programs that utilize social network and social marketing techniques using celebrities and media platforms that cater to the beliefs and attitudes of this population group. Education to improve media and nutrition literacy, including how to identify deceptive marketing tactics, could potentially be integrated into the school curriculum along with body positivity messaging to promote healthier diets among this population.