

Unethical Practices in Convenience Food Segment in India

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Abstract

The convenience food industry has experienced significant growth in recent years, offering consumers a wide variety of choices. However, this rapid expansion has brought several challenges, particularly unethical practices within the sector. These include misleading labels and advertisements, the use of harmful additives, and poor-quality products, all of which contribute to health-related problems for consumers and foster unhealthy lifestyles. This paper explores how such unethical practices impact public health and the overall well-being of a country's population, with a specific focus on India's convenience food sector. The study emphasizes the need for stricter enforcement of food safety regulations and advocates for greater transparency in the industry. By promoting sustainable business practices, the industry can reduce its environmental impact while prioritizing consumer health. Furthermore, the paper highlights strategies to empower regulatory bodies in assisting consumers to make informed decisions. This includes developing clearer labelling systems that differentiate between healthy and unhealthy food options. The paper also discusses the importance of incentivizing companies to introduce healthier and more desirable food products to the market, thereby fostering a more ethical and health-conscious industry. Addressing these issues is vital to safeguarding public health, improving the nutritional standards of convenience foods, and ensuring the ethical and sustainable development of the sector. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for policymakers, regulatory authorities, and businesses to collaborate toward creating a healthier future for consumers.

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Keywords: Convenience food, additives, unethical, regulatory body, food safety.

Introduction

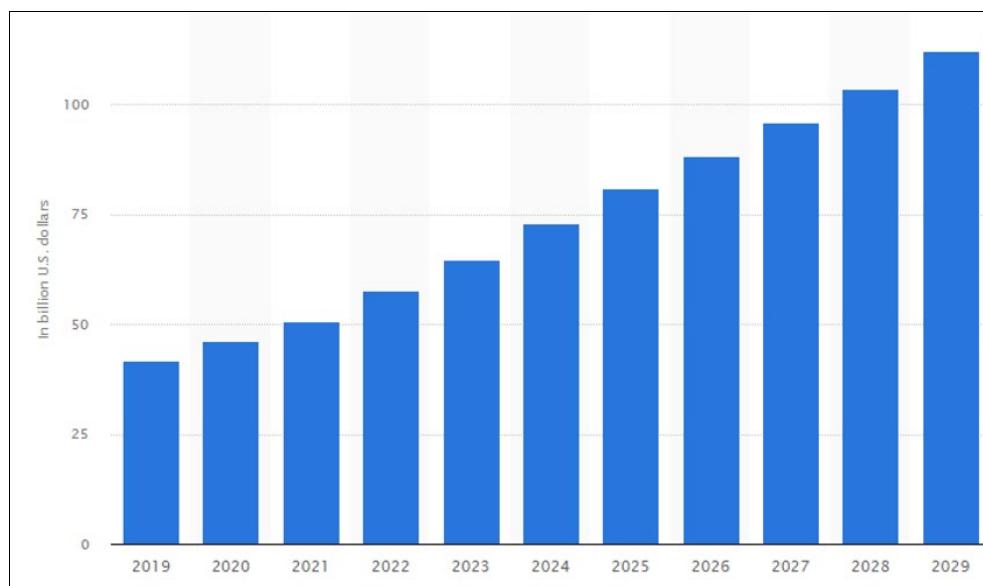
Convenience foods

Convenience foods are pre-packaged and readily available for consumption, providing a quick and easy alternative to cooking. The appeal of convenience food is that it caters to individuals lacking culinary abilities or who face time constraints due to busy work schedules.

The food industry has always been one of the most important sectors whether it's for the whole world or a country. This sector has constantly been one of the most growing sector in comparison to other industries and there is no stopping to it at present. This is driven by increasing urbanization, a fast-paced lifestyle, and changing consumer preferences. One of the most important divisions of this sector has been the convenience food market. Ready-to-eat meals, instant snacks, and packaged foods have become essential components of

daily diets for many, particularly in urban areas. This market has always been a surge since its introduction. The Global Convenience Food Market size was valued at around USD 528 billion in 2023 and is expected to reach around USD 852.6 billion by 2030. Along with this, the market is estimated to grow at a CAGR of around 7.45% during the forecast period, i.e. 2024-2030 (Mark Ntel, 2024). India, a country holding the most number of people in the whole world is no different from the other world. The Convenience food market in India amounted to a whopping US\$72.96 bn in 2024.

The market is expected to grow annually by 8.97% (CAGR 2024-2029). Some of the reasons behind these numbers are rapid urbanization, a growing middle-class population and changing dietary habits, and the younger generation preferring easy-to-make meals and snacks.



Revenue in the Convenience Food Segment of the Food Market India from 2019 to 2029 (in Billion U.S. Dollars)

Published by Statista research department (October 1, 2024)

One of the reasons for the rapid growth of this market is the emergence of marketing through social media. It has played a very crucial and significant role in promoting the convenience food market to the public unaware of it and advertising through online channels helps companies keep a record of every data and this helps them to focus on the areas where they lack. 92% of Indians who participated in the survey by Mondelez International and The Harris Poll said they enjoy food content on social media, significantly higher than the global average of 62% (The Economic Times, 2022) Companies can promote their product according to the needs of the people and target particular areas of the country for different types of products. It is very convenient for the consumers as their needs are fulfilled on time. But the idiom “Grass is always greener on the other side” comes true in this case. Even though marketing is essential in today’s market, companies have started to mold the laws and rules in their favor and have started prioritizing profits in sacrifice for consumers' health. This concept is known as Unethical food practices.

Unethical Practices

Unethical practices in the convenience food market refer to actions by companies that deceive, manipulate, or exploit consumers, stakeholders, or the environment in ways that prioritize profit over ethical considerations. These practices may involve misleading advertising, manipulation of nutritional information, deceptive packaging, exploitation of vulnerable populations, or harm to the environment through unsustainable production methods.

Companies have started using cheap quality materials and methods to reduce the cost of the product so that the margin between the cost price and selling price gets wider and companies can earn better. The companies have been neglecting the health of the consumers just to reach their goals. The market in India works better if it provides the same products at cheaper prices and the food companies know it way better and have always been working to keep the price of their products least it can.

These practices raise serious ethical concerns, often misleading consumers, damaging public trust, and contributing to broader social and environmental harm.

Some key unethical convenience food practices in the food industry are:

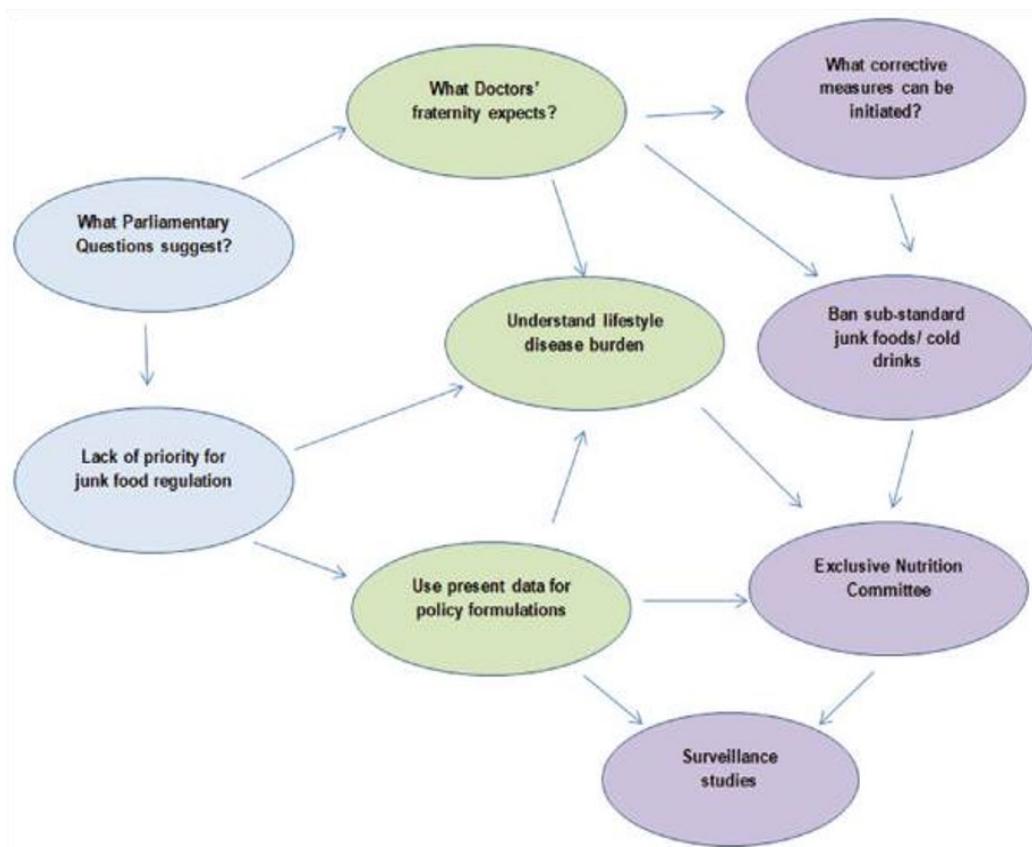
- Misleading advertising and marketing
- Manipulation of Nutritional Information
- Promoting Addictive Ingredients
- Lack of Accountability and Response to Public Health Concerns

These types of practices have been in the food industry for quite a time but there has been no stopping to the same. One regulatory body that is responsible for stopping such manipulation is FSSAI. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is in charge of monitoring and regulating food safety in India. FSSAI, created under the Food Safety and Standards Act of 2006, functions under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. Its key mandate is to ensure that food products in India are safe, nutritious, and compliant with established standards to protect public health.

This paper seeks to explore the unethical practices prevalent in the convenience food market's research methodologies. By critically examining case studies, industry practices, and regulatory frameworks, the aim is to highlight the ethical concerns that undermine the integrity of market research. Ultimately, this exploration will demonstrate the need for stronger ethical guidelines and enforcement mechanisms to protect consumers and ensure that market research upholds the principles of transparency, fairness, and responsibility.

It will showcase how a consumer can become more knowledgeable about differentiating between harmful and authentic products and how a company can create strategies to promote its product better to earn consumers' trust.

In doing so, this paper will not only shed light on the darker side of market research within the convenience food industry but also offer recommendations for creating a more ethical and accountable framework that serves both businesses and consumers alike.



Thematic Map

Published by national library of medicine (March 17 2023)

Literature Review

This research aims to inform readers of all the unethical practices that companies use to sell more food products to their consumers.

As the country experiences swift social and economic transformation, a young, emerging middle class is rising with unparalleled disposable income levels and significantly increased exposure to the globalized market. While such change is impacting consumption habits, several studies have indicated that Indian consumers are also holding onto their traditional values, influenced by 'Gandhian' philosophy, as well as religious and cultural beliefs that have prevailed for centuries (Venkatesh 1994; Majumdar 2010; Sinha 2011).

Most of the articles online are on unethical practices by companies towards children. However, people tend to forget that the middle age group of the country still dominates the convenience food sector. Even though marketing to children has been a very controversial topic articles have failed to reveal the reasons for the practices and their causes. This paper helps you to understand the whole of the convenience food sector and the ways they manipulate us in the wrong ways.

Marketing and Advertising

Marketing has been a boon for the companies. Through marketing communication, firms not only attract consumers who are ready to buy but also stimulate and encourage the buying intention of those who do not plan to buy (Worku Alemu, Sanjeev Kumar 2020). Advertising has long been the most effective method for a company to introduce and promote its product. It plays a crucial role in raising awareness, educating, motivating, guiding, and persuading audiences to make a purchase or engage in new or repeated actions.

Advertisement is the most influential promotional mix, which is also the most criticized for its unethical practice of all promotional mix elements. An unethical advertisement is an advertisement which deliberately designed to falsify, mislead, miss represent a product and brand with the intention of cheating and exploiting consumers. Moreover, according to the view of different scholars, unethical advertising drives society to purchase worthless and unsatisfactory items, and may also manipulate behavior, exploit sex, and contribute to the collapse of the entire social system (Borgerson & Shroeder, 2002; Hobbs *et al.*, 2006; Ravinder Kaur, 2017).

The convenience food market has been on a high chart as never seen before. Modernization and urbanization have led the way for this sector to grow this big within such a short time. Companies have smartly replaced the traditional cooking pattern of food with fast, easy, and hassle-free convenience food. Convenience foods save a lot of cooking time and intense labor in the kitchen. These all are of prime concern (Arya, 1992).

Convenience food production has been possible only due to the innovation, technology, and craze among the young generation. Along with these factors, transportation, handling, and storage have played a significant role in increasing the growth of such Indian snack market is one of the largest and biggest snacks markets globally. A few such items are potato chips which are by far the largest product snack category, savory snacks, snack nuts, etc. At present, popcorn has become one of the most demanding snack items in the Indian market (Silky Verma, Gurjeet Kaur Chawla, 2020).

All the studies mentioned above have discussed the brand and its unethical advertising with a focus on lower age groups. However, this study provides a detailed evaluation of the knowhow of these practices the way they manipulate us, and the way to tackle the same.

Method

The methodology section of this research paper on unethical practices in the convenience food market in India outlines the approaches used to investigate, analyze, and understand the scope and impact of such practices. The research employs a combination of methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the various unethical practices in the Indian convenience food industry.

i) Research Design

A mixed-method approach was employed, integrating both primary and secondary data collection techniques. The research involved a descriptive design to document existing unethical practices and an analytical approach to examine their impact on consumers, businesses, and regulatory frameworks in India.

ii) Data Collection Methods

The data for this study was gathered using the following online sources:

▪ Government Websites and Regulatory Bodies

- **FSSAI Website:** The official site of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India was used to gather information on regulatory standards, food safety guidelines, and reports on non-compliance within the convenience food industry.
- **Ministry of Consumer Affairs:** The website was accessed for policies and regulations related to food labeling, consumer protection, and laws regarding food safety in India.

▪ Academic Journals and Research Databases

- Online academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and JSTOR were utilized to access peer-reviewed research papers and articles. These sources provided insights into consumer behavior, case studies on ethical challenges in food marketing, and theoretical frameworks on business ethics.
- Specific focus was given to research papers examining unethical practices in global and Indian markets, including misleading labeling, and deceptive marketing.

iii) Data Analysis Methods

▪ Case Study Approach

Several case studies were identified from online reports and publications to illustrate specific instances of unethical behavior by leading Indian and multinational convenience food brands. These case studies provided concrete examples of regulatory violations, consumer lawsuits, and public backlash.

Conclusion

This research, relying on online sources, was able to identify and analyze unethical practices prevalent in the Indian convenience food market. Despite limitations, this methodology offered a broad view of the key issues, including misleading advertising, health-related misrepresentations, and the exploitation of labor and environmental resources. Further research, potentially involving primary data collection, could provide deeper insights into the internal dynamics of the convenience food industry in India.

Misleading Health Claims

In recent times there have been brands that are making false claims to boost the sales of their products. Usually, this claim

depends on the year's season or even the type of infections and fevers more people are getting. Though this might sound like a good marketing strategy to someone this is one of the ways of manipulating consumers into purchasing their product and one of the rules of good marketing is not to manipulate their consumers. During the corona virus pandemic, scientists and researchers used to say that a person having good immunity health will have the least impact if they catch a virus or they won't even get infected with the virus. Bottled water brand Bisleri has focused on how vital it is to be well hydrated and to boost immunity with its product's "added minerals". Indian conglomerate ITC has launched the "Immunity Song" to market its dairy brand Aashirvaad Svasti, and Hindustan Unilever (HUL) has underlined the immunity-boosting qualities of vitamins C and D, plus Zinc, in an ad for Horlicks. Baked goods label Bonn has launched a "Herb and Seed" variant of its bread, to "boost immunity" (WARC, 2020).

Misrepresentation of Ingredients

Companies operating in the food sector and especially the convenience market, in the 20th century, were very cautious about the ingredients in their product and businesses tried their very best to keep them as clean as possible but since the beginning of the 21st century, businesses have started to aim more for profit rather than health and the impact of the product on consumer. Playing with ingredients has led to unhealthy products in the market and top brands are in no position to change it. Many companies highlight healthy ingredients (e.g., whole grains or fruits), while the product is largely made up of unhealthy ingredients like refined sugar, Trans fats, or additives.

Manipulation of Serving Sizes

Companies may list unrealistic serving sizes to make their products appear healthier. For instance, the nutritional information may be based on a very small portion, even though consumers are likely to eat more than one serving at a time. This under represents the true caloric, sugar or fat content of the product.

Deceptive Packaging

One of the most critical components of the product is packaging. The package of the product is its face, before purchasing the product the consumer assumes the quality of the product before looking at its ingredients, so a company spends a good amount to make the best packaging. It has been observed that most written word on the packaging is "natural" followed by the word "nutritious". Even though the product contains high fat, sugar, and sodium. Food packages often carry prohibited claims or make statements that do not meet the conditions specified for their use. A significant portion of the claims on these packages cannot be verified against the FSSAI guidelines. Many of the claims on foods high in fat, sugar, and salt are particularly misleading for consumers. Many companies match the color of the packaging with the environmental color to make their product look healthy and organic.

Sugar and Salt Content Manipulation

Many convenience foods are loaded with excessive amounts of sugar and salt to enhance flavor and extend shelf life. These high levels are often hidden by listing sugars under various names (e.g., corn syrup, dextrose, fructose) or by marketing the product as low-fat, diverting attention from the

sugar content. These two contents are some of the most used ingredients in the convenience food industry. Some companies design their foods with the so-called “bliss point,” the optimal amount of sugar, fat, and salt that triggers pleasure responses in the brain, making consumers crave more, thus fostering overconsumption. Companies may list unrealistic serving sizes to make their products appear healthier.

Price Manipulation and Hidden Cost

In some cases, companies charge premium prices for convenience foods that offer little nutritional value, leveraging convenience, branding, and marketing to justify

higher prices. This is especially common in ready-to-eat meals and snacks. While convenience foods may seem affordable, they often come with hidden costs to public health (e.g., rising healthcare costs due to poor diet) and the environment (e.g., pollution, deforestation). While the brand is promoting its product as a healthy option, it is increasing the number of diseases related to, obesity, heart diseases, diabetes, bowel cancer, hypertension, cardiac arrest, etc.

These are some of the problems that are developed when the companies in the market use unethical ways to produce and market their product to their end consumer in the name of healthy options.

Results

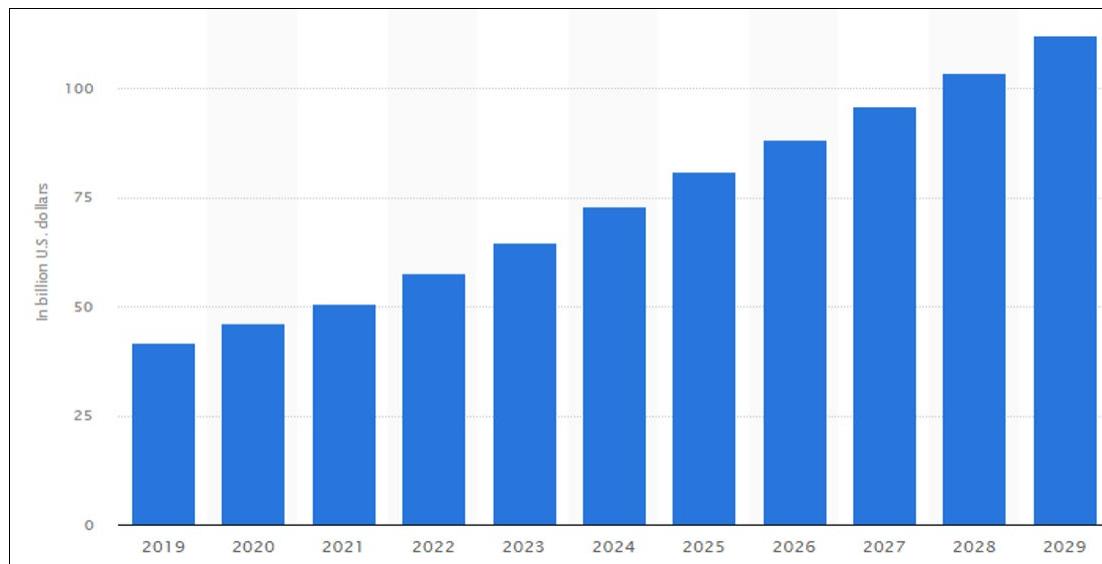


Fig 1: The revenue in India's convenience food segment of the food market is projected from 2019 to 2029, measured in billion U.S. dollars.
Published by Statista Research Department (October 1, 2024)

In the above figure 1, it shows how Indian consumers are moving towards the convenience food market at a surprising bubble rate. Figure 1 reveals the data collected between the years 2019 to 2029. In the year 2019, the revenue in the

convenience market was around 45 billion US dollars, and the expected revenue has touched around 125b billion US dollars. The sudden change is due to changes in the lifestyle of the people and the constant growth in this sector.

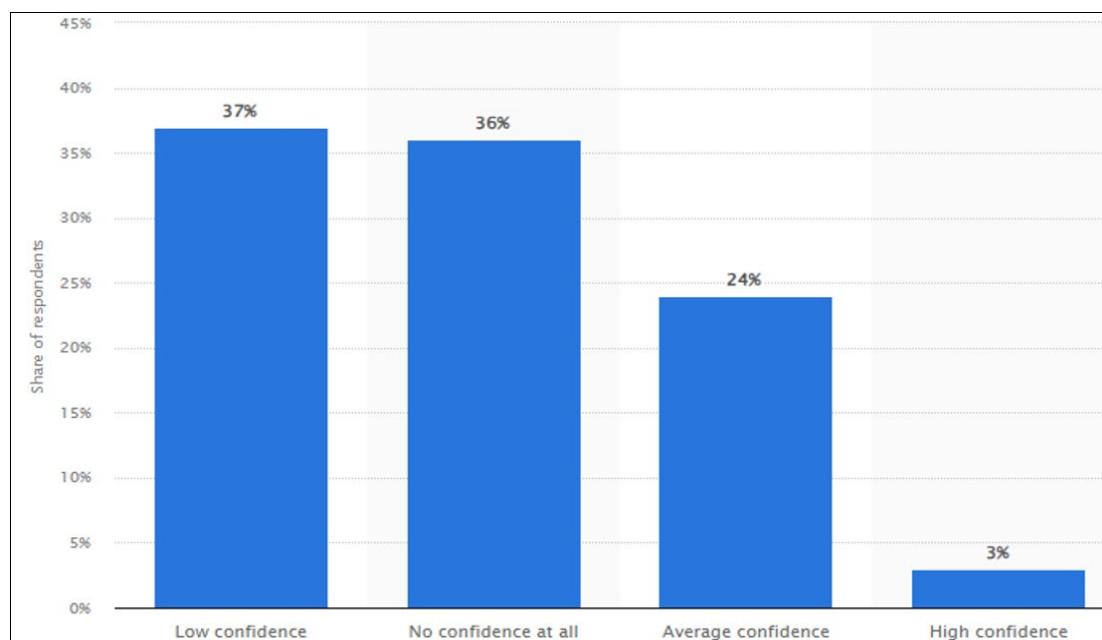
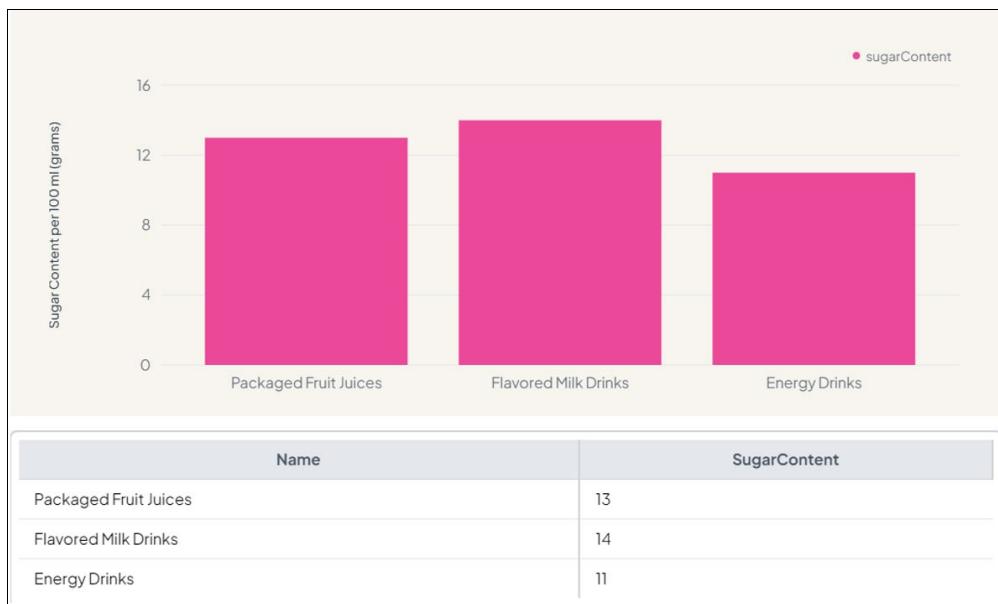


Fig 2: Confidence concerns regarding food safety in India as of April 2024 Published by A. Minhas (May 21, 2024)

Figure 2 shows how many percentages of people consuming food products have confidence about whether the products they consume are safe or not. It has been one the most paradoxical things as the revenue of this food sector is increasing and expected to go beyond expectation, but still,

73% of the consumers doubt the safety of the product but still are purchasing it daily. Even though people with confidence should be the ones to purchase the products still everyone is out there finding their favorite packaged food.



Data Source: National library of medicine (March 21, 2016)

Fig 3: Sugar content in drinks per 100 ml (grams)

Figure 3 shows the amount of sugar content in packaged drinks. Packaged flavored milk drinks contain the highest amount with 14 grams per 100 ml, packaged fruit juices come just below the flavored milk drinks with 13 grams of sugar per 100 ml and energy drinks contain 11 grams of sugar per

100 ml. Though the average intake of sugar of people of India is less than recommended by ICMR i.e. 30 grams, we should note that any of the packaged drinks would take their daily sugar consumption at about the recommended mark.

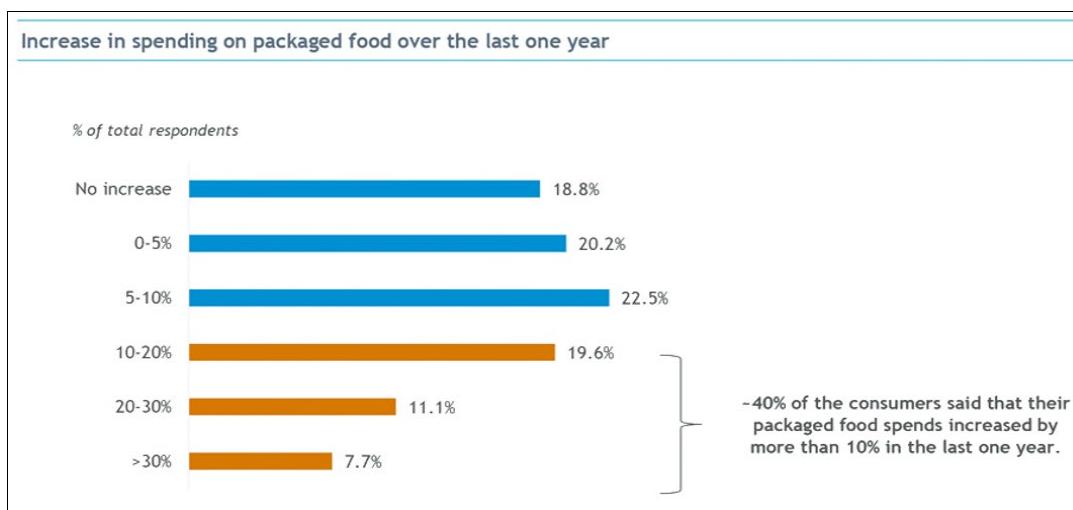


Data Source: Medindia

Fig 4: Nutritional composition of packaged potato chips (100 grams)

Figure 4 illustrates the composition of packaged potato chips (100 grams) which contains 34 grams of total fat, 3 grams of saturated fat, 0.527 grams of sodium, 54 grams of carbohydrates, 3.1 grams of dietary fiber, 6 grams of protein,

and 532 calories. On average, a man requires 2,500 calories, and a woman needs 2,000 calories daily, with 1/5th and 1/4th of their daily calorie intake, respectively, coming from a packet of chips.



Source: BDO Global

Fig 5: Increase in spending on packaged food over the last one year

Figure 5 shows how spending in the packaged food sector has increased at a sufficient rate and there is no stopping it as of now. However, there were still consumers who said that their spending had not increased in the last year which constituted 18.2%. 20.2% of respondents said their spending increased in the range of 0-5%. 22.5% of respondents said their spending increased in the range of 5-10%. 19.6% of respondents said their spending increased in the range of 10-20%. 11.1% of respondents said their spending increased in the range of 20-30%. 7.7% of respondents said their spending increased more than 30%. Even though there are respondents who claim their spending hadn't increased they are not aware of cheap tactics by brands in which they reduce the size of products or start using cheap quality material to increase their profit due to which the consumers are not getting what he thinks he is getting for the same price in the year before.

Findings

- i) **Misleading Health Claims:** The research revealed that many convenience food brands in India engage in unethical practices by making misleading health claims. Several packaged snacks and beverages are marketed as "healthy" or "nutritious," despite containing high levels of sugar, sodium, and artificial additives. This indicates a deliberate attempt to mislead consumers into believing these products are healthier than they are. Most of the companies talk about the benefits of their product based on the seasons and diseases prevailing at that time. Most of the companies claimed that their product helped improve the immunity of the consumer consuming it at the time of covid-19 to increase their sales.
- ii) **Ambiguous Labeling Practices:** A key finding was ambiguous labeling, where convenience food manufacturers obscure vital information regarding ingredients and nutritional content. The study identified that 40% of labels either used small, hard-to-read fonts for critical details like sugar and trans-fat content or used technical terms that average consumers may not understand. This lack of transparency prevents consumers from making informed choices, especially in urban and semi-urban areas, where reliance on convenience food is high. Most companies try their best to hide the bad additives of their product, two of the main ingredients are salt and sugar which after a certain limit are harmful to the human body, but the companies try their best to hide it.

iii) **Decreasing Consumer Confidence:** The data from the results section of the paper shows that the consumers purchasing packaged food in India are losing confidence as they are becoming more aware of the unethical adulteration in convenience food products and the ill effects of it on the people. It has been the most surprising fact, the most paradoxical thing is even though revenue is increasing consumers are becoming more conscious as to what they are eating. Consumers are willing to adopt a more healthy satisfactory diet and want the best for their body rather than the tastiest.

iv) **Use of Low-Quality Ingredients:** Another finding is the widespread use of low-quality ingredients in convenience foods, often hidden from consumers. Many manufacturers replace high-cost, nutritious ingredients with cheaper, unhealthy alternatives. For instance, palm oil, known for its high saturated fat content, was found in 60% of snack foods analyzed. Additionally, artificial flavorings, preservatives, and colorings were prevalent in most ready-to-eat products, raising health concerns among regular consumers.

v) **Exploiting Regulatory Loopholes:** The research also highlights that several convenience food companies in India take advantage of regulatory loopholes. Despite FSSAI regulations, many products are not compliant with updated labeling standards or nutritional disclosure. In some cases, multinational companies use outdated regulations or delay compliance with newer guidelines. Approximately 30% of products studied did not meet the required nutritional benchmarks but were still available on the market without clear labeling violations being penalized.

Summary of Findings

The findings from the research suggest that the convenience food segment in India is rife with unethical practices, including misleading health claims, ambiguous labeling, targeted advertising towards vulnerable groups, use of low-quality ingredients, and exploitation of regulatory gaps. The combination of weak regulation enforcement and low consumer awareness perpetuates these practices, posing significant health risks, especially in urban populations. The need for stronger regulatory oversight and consumer education is evident to combat these unethical strategies effectively.

Conclusions

This study investigated the unethical practices followed by various companies in India's convenience food segment. Food companies have existed in the Indian market as old as the food itself but have not been as unhealthy as it is now ever before. Companies choosing their profit and stakeholders above Indian consumers have been a point of controversy and discussion in the recent period.

The findings revealed the ways a company uses to manipulate the consumer into purchasing their product it is by misleading health claims, misrepresentation of ingredients, price manipulation or hidden costs, etc., and all the unethical work that goes into it, using poor quality materials, food additives, chemicals, etc. leading consumers towards an unhealthy and disease rich life. The research shows how the convenience food sector has been on an upsurge trend and there seems no stopping it and it's because of the availability and non-cooking nature of the packaged foods. Despite having a regulatory body (FSSAI) for the same the situation still exists raises a question on its workings and authenticity as to whether there is a need for changing the rules and policies for the food sector in India.

The results of the research suggest strict regulatory policies by FSSAI on companies dealing in the convenience food sector. Some of the opinions are the introduction of rating from letter A to E and to categorize the drinks and foods into one of the 5 categories to inform consumers about how unhealthy the product is. It should be mandatory for the companies to write the ranking of their product on their labels and for sugary drinks the same should be implemented for informing consumers about the amount of sugar added to the drink and this same can be applied to the chips sector by taking salt in place of sugar.

One of the main problems is that the consumers are not aware of to amount of ingredients added to the product for such things the label should also include the amount of sugar or salt in terms of spoons to help consumers get informed easily. Mandatory advertising by the companies to inform consumers about the health consequences of their product and an increase in the amount of tax depending on the unhealthy nature of the product. E.g. increase in the tax based on the rankings a packaged drink gets from the above-mentioned system. Introducing such rules to companies will help consumers get informed properly and help them choose what's right for them. Apart from such regulations, the companies should come out on their own to promote healthier lifestyles which will eventually work as their corporate social responsibility and gain the trust of consumers. Further strategy could also focus on the role of education in combating the influence of misleading advertising.

Although the study offers important insights, its limitation lies in the dependence on secondary data, which may be not as accurate and precise as primary data but provides a foundation for future research into the long-term consequences of these practices and valuable insight into the dark side of the convenience food sector in India. Future research could explore the ingredients section of the sector how they have long-term health impacts on consumer health and how the government can work with the companies and consumers and organize consumer campaigns to enhance the qualities and promote a healthy lifestyle.

Overall, this study highlights the urgent need for more ethical marketing practices in the convenience food sector to ensure consumer trust and promote healthier consumption habits and how the government, consumers, corporations, etc. have to

come together to bring change into the food sector in India and can act as the first step towards healthy India.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent Participate

This study did not involve human participants or animals, and hence, ethics approval and consent to participate are not applicable.

Consent for Participation

All authors consent to the publication of this manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data used in this study were retrieved from Statista (<https://www.statista.com>), a statistical database. Access to the database is available via Statista's subscription service.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' Contribution

Aman Sharma conceptualized the study and wrote the manuscript. Ajit Singh contributed to the data analysis and reviewed the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as it did not involve human or animal subjects, or any interventions falling under ethical review requirements.

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