

# Drivers of Adolescents' Food Choices: Exploring the Influence of the School Food Environment

**Madusha Karunanayaka**

Department of Applied Nutrition  
Wayamba University of Sri Lanka

**Co-authors:** Thalwaththa T., Rajapaksha I.P.,  
Madurangi A.P.H., Indramali O.S., Perera T.,  
Mohotti J., Hunter D. and Silva K.D.R.R.



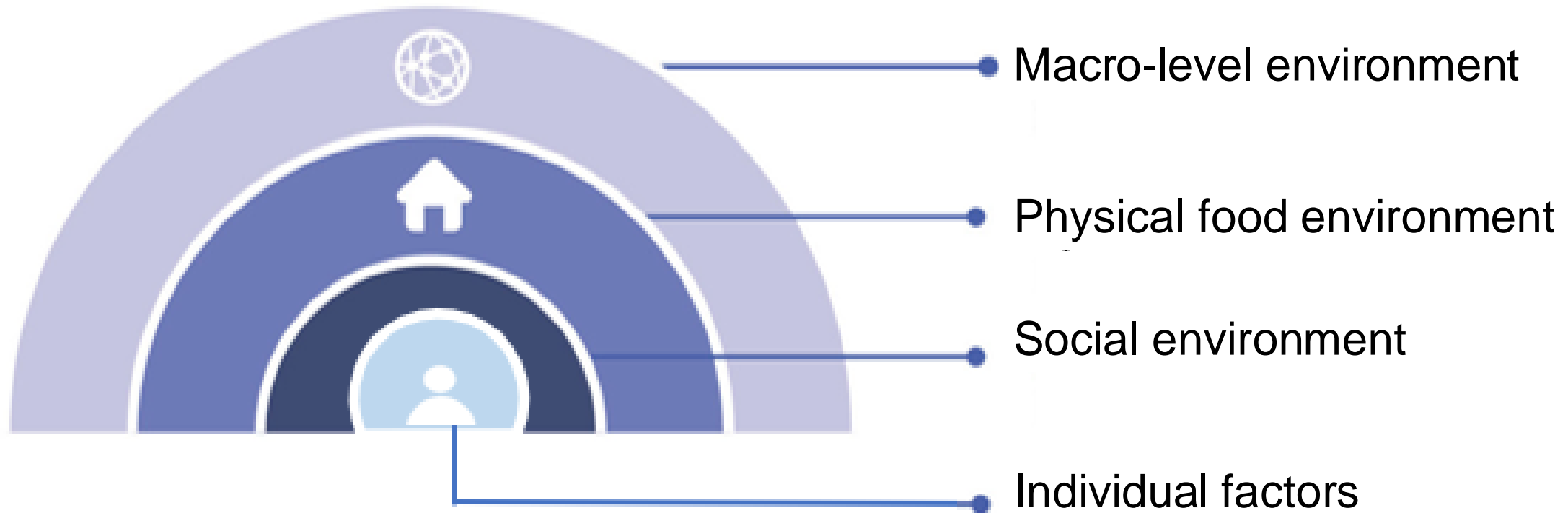
# Background

- Adolescents' food choices are influenced by a complex interplay of factors
- School Food Environment (SFE) is a critical setting where adolescents make daily food choices, shaping their dietary behaviors



**School Food Environment:** “All the spaces, infrastructure and conditions inside and around the school where food is available, obtained, purchased and/or consumed.” (FAO, 2022)

# Background Cont..



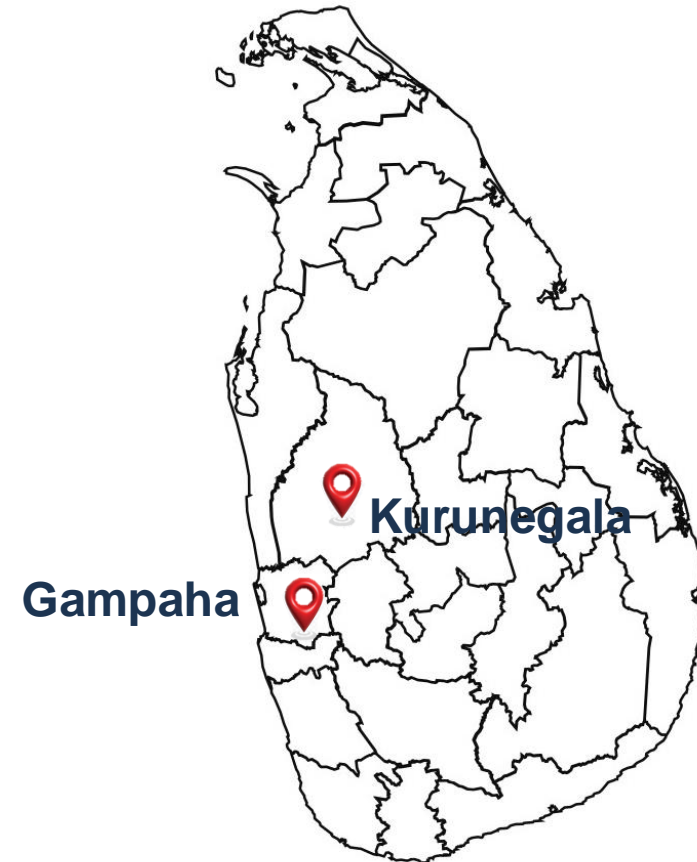
**Different dimensions of the SFE that influence adolescents' food choices**

## Objective

- To identify key drivers within the school food environment that influence adolescents' food choices

## Methods

- Mixed-methods approach
- Utilized across 18 schools in Sri Lanka
- Study locations: Kurunegala and Gampaha



# Methods Cont..



**In-depth interviews with principals (n=15)**



Perceptions of principals on different dimensions of the SFE on adolescents' food choices



**Focus group discussions with student (n=12)**  
Students aged 12 -14



Students' perceptions regarding food choices within their school environment



**Survey with students**  
400 students aged 12-14



Students' food choices and practices while at school

# Current school food environment observations



School Canteen



Nearby Food Outlet



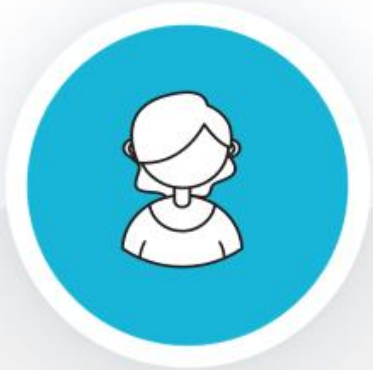
Peer influence



School Garden

# Findings

## In-depth interviews with principals



### Theme 1

#### Individual factors

- Food desirability
- Affordability



### Theme 2

#### Social factors

- Peer & home influence



### Theme 3

#### Physical factors

- School canteens
- School gardens
- Nearby food outlets



### Theme 4

#### Macro-level

- Food related school policies
- Food marketing

# Findings Cont..

## Focus group discussions with students

1

Adolescents' food choices are largely based on **personal preference**

"If the food doesn't taste good, it's hard to want to eat it. Even if it's healthy, I just don't like the taste"  
(participant 2)

2

Adolescents are highly influenced by their **peers** when it comes to food choices

"When my friends choose something, I often end up picking the same thing."  
(participant 12)

3

**Media** is a channel of **food marketing** & is one of the dominant influencers of food choices

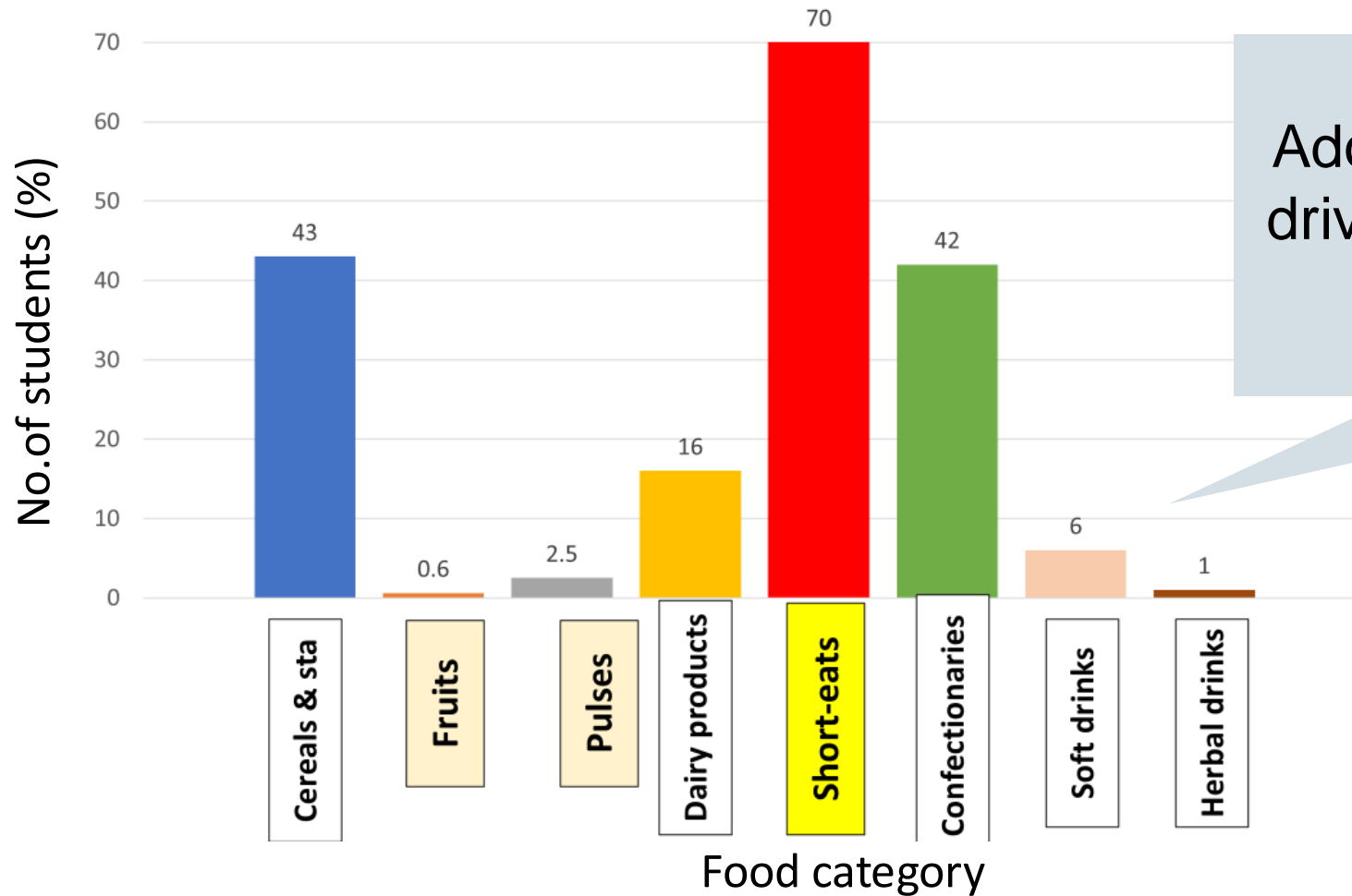
"Seeing ads for certain soft drinks makes me want to try them, especially ads of cricketers." (participant 22)



# Findings Cont..

## Student Survey

### Students' food choices from school canteen



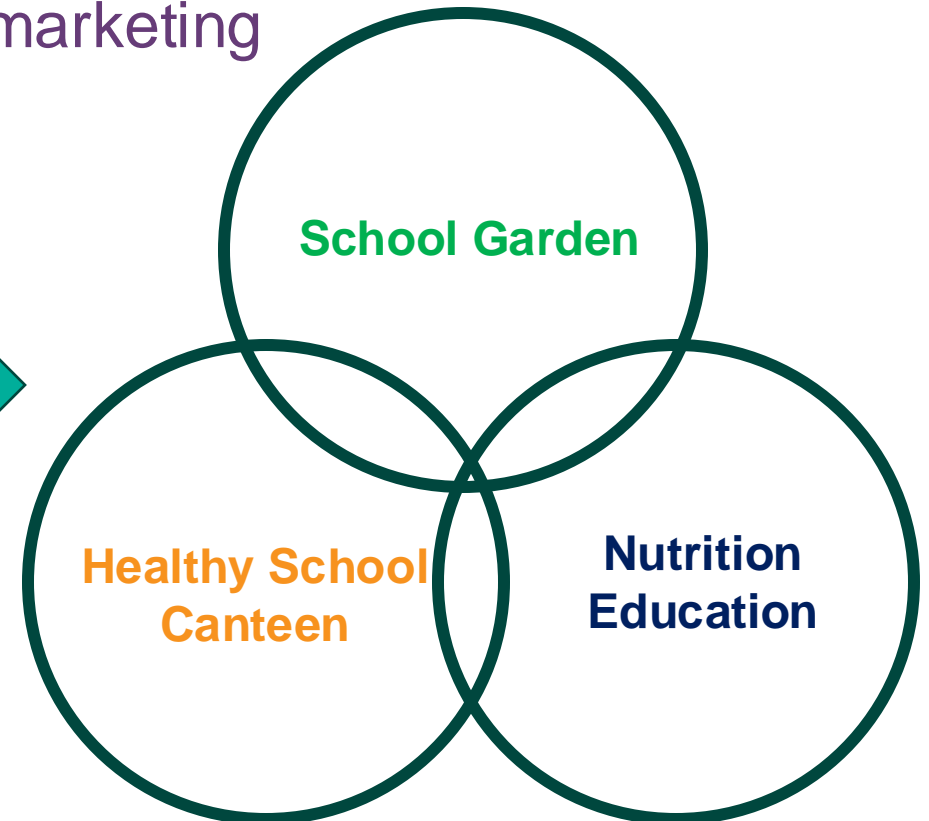
Adolescents' food choices primarily driven by **taste** (92%), **price** (88%), and **appearance** (81%)

# Conclusion & Study Implications

- Key drivers of adolescents' food choices were individual preferences, affordability, peer influence, availability of school canteens and nearby food outlets, school gardens, and the influence of media and food marketing

## What's Next?

Creating a healthy school food environment that encourages healthier dietary behaviors among adolescents



***Thank You!***



Supported by a grant from the Nestle Foundation for the study of problems of nutrition in the world, Lausanne, Switzerland