

‘People eat two or three packets a day’: how instant noodles took over the world

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High-salt, processed noodles have become a favourite cheap meal, especially in developing countries, but nutritionists warn of the health costs

When a customer steps into Titilayo Taiwo’s noodle shop for breakfast, she knows exactly what to reach for from the small table where piles of ingredients are arranged. Among the scores of regulars at the street-side venue in Muhsin, a low-income suburb of Lagos, is Remilekun Oguntoye, 23, who waits for her usual order: two packs of noodles with a fried egg and some fish.

“In the seven days of the week, I can eat it up to five days,” says Oguntoye, who does not like cooking and sees noodles as a fast, filling alternative. “With the number of times I eat [noodles], I should be an ambassador by now.”

The two 70g packets consumed by Oguntoye in one sitting would equate to about 2,352mg of sodium - 118% of the [World Health Organization’s recommended daily intake](#).

The popularity of instant noodles is spreading quickly in developing countries: in [Africa](#), South America and parts of Asia where noodles are not part of traditional diets. This has come with concerns about their link to the rise of non-communicable diseases, particularly those related to the heart, because of the high levels of salt they typically contain.

Yet consumers who are attracted by their affordability, moreish taste and convenience are often unaware of the related health problems because of weak regulations around labelling.

“It is quite a popular meal, and people rush it a lot,” says Taiwo, who sells three boxes worth of the packet noodles to her customers on an average day.

Between 2018 and 2022, Nigeria - which was already by far Africa’s largest consumer of instant noodles - saw a 53% jump in demand, from 1.82bn servings to 2.79bn, according to data from the Japan-based [World Instant Noodles Association](#). While countries such as Kenya had a far smaller existing customer base, demand there during the same period grew by 160% from 50m to 130m servings. It also rose by 150% in Colombia, and 110% in Egypt.

Affordability and convenience have been key to the food’s persistent global growth, especially during times of crisis such as the Covid pandemic and [cost-of-living crisis](#). Last year, 121.2bn servings were eaten, a 2.6% increase on the previous year, according to the World Instant Noodles Association.

The popularity of Korean pop culture has also boosted demand for Korean foods in richer countries and among the middle classes in developing countries. According to [data released by South Korea in November](#), the country exported a record \$785m (£618m) instant noodles in the first 10 months of this year - up almost 25% up on the same period last year.

Instant noodles contain higher levels of salt than ordinary noodles to help improve texture and reduce cooking time. In addition, salt is heavily present in the seasoning sachets provided.

Millennials in Nigeria grew up eating noodles. They were sold the two-minute cook time.
No dish in Nigeria cooks as fast

[A 2017 study](#), which analysed the contents of 765 instant noodle products in 10 countries, found a wide range in salt levels, from 35% to 95% of an adult's daily salt intake. Instant noodles in middle-income countries had a notably higher salt content than in high-income countries.

In [Nigeria](#), the market is dominated by the Indonesian brand Indomie, which has established its own urban culinary culture there. Nigeria was the first African country to have Indomie factories and the brand's sellers all have a distinctive kiosk, found on every street, in almost every suburb.

Although Indomie noodles quickly became a staple in Nigeria with the younger generation thanks to a successful marketing campaign, they were not the first brand to enter the market: Maggi is a Nestlé-owned product, popular in India.

"Maggi noodles tried to win adults over, and they failed woefully and packed up. Indomie saw this error and took a different strategy," Opeyemi Famakin, a popular food critic in Nigeria, told the Guardian. "Go for the kids. Catch them young so they grow with you and, by default, become loyal. Millennials in Nigeria grew up eating Indomie. They [were] also sold the two-minute cook time. No dish in Nigeria cooks as fast as two minutes."

Advertising has also been key in India, where demand is still growing rapidly despite the country being an established market, consuming less than only China, Indonesia and Vietnam.

Maggi may have failed to capture the Nigerian market but is almost ubiquitous in India, according to Nupur Bidla, who researches the nutrition of food products as a member of the Indian organisation [Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest \(Napi\)](#).

"It's available to the last mile: available in the villages, in remote hill areas ... you might not find vegetables up there, but you'll find Maggi," says Bidla.

A recent [report by Napi](#) into ultra-processed foods claimed that advertising for Maggi noodles "deliberately conceals important information" such as very high sodium levels - a [70g packet](#) contains about a third of a person's recommended sodium intake.

The report also says that the brand's marketing tactics rely on using children in advertising and appealing to the emotions, which Bidla says combines with the [addictive nature of salt](#) to get children hooked.

She says that while noodles can cost 10 to 15 rupees (9-14p) in urban areas, that can drop to five rupees in rural areas to ensure their appeal.

"All of their ads include children or celebrities and there's a fun and happiness element included. They attach aspiration to Maggi. There was a commercial in the past where a rural mother trying to reward her child does it with a bowl of Maggi," says Bidla.

"What appeals is that you are not able to forget the taste. We know these foods are hyper-palatable and it's natural that once you have something salty or sweet, you want to have it again. They have

designed it like that.”

A Nestlé India spokesperson said: “We believe that all our products can be part of a balanced diet that includes plenty of vegetables, fruits, pulses and whole grains. It is important to us to provide information and services to help people make informed food choices. To support this, we provide nutrition guidance to consumers through online platforms such as [AskNestlé](#). Furthermore, Nestlé India voluntarily includes on its front of pack guideline daily amount (GDA) labelling that provides transparent nutrition information.”

The spokesperson added: “We follow the guidelines provided by India’s central consumer protection authority on advertising to children.”

Indomie have been approached for comment.

Barry Popkin, a US-based nutrition professor who campaigns against ultra-processed foods, says the smell, from artificial additives, is part of the appeal and helps hook people on the noodles.

“I see college students using them walking down the street all the time in the US. It’s a very popular product, but we’re nothing [compared with other countries]. In China, Asia and Africa, the amount that people consume is really high. It’s not just China, it is countries that never had the noodle tradition. If you look at the sales trend, it’s amazing,” he says.

“It’s one of the most unhealthy ultra-processed foods because of the amount of sodium and kinds of fats. The fact that people are eating two or three [packets] a day - it’s no wonder hypertension is skyrocketing.”

Outside the University of Nairobi campus, the many noodle kiosks attract a ready supply of students, looking for a cheap and fast meal. The shops stay open long past dinner time, and popular brands push their product with [market pop-ups](#) and kid cook-outs.

Lenox Oyanga, a second-year student who consumes instant noodles weekly, says he was not very aware of health issues related to them, and would prioritise his student budget anyway.

“It does concern me, but I can adjust my lifestyle down the line,” he says. Difficult economic times in the country, he believes, would push many to “save their money over their health”.

And with a pack of noodles selling for 35-50 Kenyan shillings (18-26p), it’s easy to see why they are attractive for a student on a budget. Bundle deals drive the price even lower, and the amount consumed even higher.

Brian Chiaji, a tuck shop worker, says: “I stock five boxes every week - each has 20 packs [of noodles] - and they usually all go.”

Oyanga’s university friend, Albert Bahati, 19, says instant noodles have become more widely available than ever in kiosks, minimarts and large supermarkets.

“They are everywhere, meaning that people are consuming it at a high rate,” he says. “Before, it wasn’t as available and seemed like something for the rich, but now it’s the opposite.”

Caroline Kimeu in Nairobi

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