

Food Consumption Patterns among Undergraduates: Evidence from the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

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Abstract—Understanding youth's food behaviors is essential for preventing health issues, promoting lifelong health, and advancing sustainability. This study delved into the food behavior of students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, using a mixed-method research design. We sampled 250 students via stratified random sampling, collecting quantitative data through survey questionnaires and qualitative insights through four focus group discussions. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Our findings revealed significant associations ($p < 0.05$) between monthly food expenses and residence location, which impacted food satisfaction during university life. Notably, students in university hostels allocated more money to food compared to those in private boarding houses or living off-campus. Communal eating practices, especially between main meals, were linked to higher food expenditures among undergraduates. Gender disparities in food purchasing habits emerged, with more female students in university hostels consuming canteen foods due to limitations in access to food outside. However, frequent hostel canteen users expressed higher levels of food dissatisfaction than faculty canteen users. While no significant gender-based relationship with meal skipping was observed, lunch was the most commonly missed meal for both genders, often due to time constraints and financial limitations. These findings highlight the influence of living context and socio-economic factors on students' eating behaviors. Researchers and policymakers can utilize this understanding to foster healthier diets among university students. Targeted interventions, such as enhancing on-campus dining facilities to offer affordable, diverse, and healthy food options, and providing financial support, can foster a positive food culture at universities.

Keywords—Dietary practices, eating behavior, food expenditure, meal skipping, undergraduates, Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of medical sociology, health is defined as the holistic well-being of an individual, encompassing their physical, mental, intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions [1]. While numerous elements influence one's state of good health, socio-cultural aspects related to an individual's dietary choices play a pivotal role in determining their health. Consequently, a person's eating habits undergo transformations influenced by a multitude of factors, including age, gender, educational background, ethnicity, income, as well as environmental and cultural influences [2]. The progress of any nation or society is contingent upon the comprehensive physical and psychosocial well-being of its youth population, as they constitute the vital workforce driving this advancement. Within this youth demographic,

students pursuing higher education, particularly university students, hold a prominent and vital position.

Understanding undergraduates' food behaviors is essential for promoting lifelong health, preventing health issues, and advancing sustainability. Therefore, this study delved into the food behavior of students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya. The dietary choices and habits of university students are of particular interest due to their formative role in shaping lifelong health practices and their potential impact on broader sustainability goals. Moreover, as undergraduate students are at a critical stage in their lives where habits and behaviors are established, investigating their eating behaviors can shed light on key factors influencing dietary choices [3]. Furthermore, this research can help design targeted interventions to encourage healthier and more sustainable food choices. The specific focus on students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya, offers valuable insights that may inform policies and practices within the academic community and beyond.

However, limited sociological research has been conducted in Sri Lanka on the food behavior of the young population, such as university students. This knowledge gap makes it imperative to explore the food behaviors and eating patterns of this demographic, particularly within the unique context of Sri Lanka, where socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors significantly influence food choices. Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' food behavior, their attitudes toward food choices and eating patterns, as well as the challenges they encounter when fulfilling their nutritional needs during university life.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method research design to investigate the food behavior of 250 students at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different academic years, with their voluntary participation.

Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, focusing on food behavior, and socio-economic conditions. Additionally, we conducted four focus group discussions to gather qualitative insights into the factors influencing students' food choices. Quantitative data underwent descriptive statistical analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-22), while thematic

analysis was applied for qualitative data. Throughout the study, research ethics were maintained, and data privacy and confidentiality were upheld, respecting the voluntary participation and the option to withdraw from the study the respondents

III. RESULTS

A. Food Behavior of the Undergraduates

This study revealed that the average monthly expenditure on dietary needs by students in the Faculty of Arts is approximately LKR 10,600. Furthermore, it found no significant difference in food expenditure between genders. However, female students exhibit a higher level of attention to their dietary choices compared to males. Additionally, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test results indicated a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) between students' food expenditure and their place of residence. Tab. 1 shows that students residing in university hostels allocate more funds for their food consumption compared to those in private boarding houses or living off-campus.

TABLE 1. MONTHLY FOOD EXPENSES BY RESIDENCE

Place of residence	Monthly food expenditure)Rs.(
University hostels	11555.75
Boarding houses	10279.74
own house	5813.98
At a relative's house	4667.67

^aField data. (2023)

The study's findings demonstrate that monthly food expenditures are notably higher among students residing in university hostels, particularly among females. The following qualitative data shed light on the reasons behind this trend "Previously, students were able to cook their food inside the hostel room or in the common kitchen. However, this practice was discontinued due to the high cost of electricity bills. Consequently, we now have to purchase food from the hotel canteen, which we find doesn't provide good value for the money spent. When we could cook, we could prepare one-pot meals and eat adequately. However, with the current arrangements, even the portion size is insufficient. We feel hungry again after a few hours and end up spending money on snacks or quick eats. As a result, our overall food costs have increased, and we need to think twice before eating, even when we are hungry" (3rd-year, female student).

Furthermore, qualitative data revealed that communal dining habits and social interactions within university hostels contribute to the increase in food expenditures to some extent. Additionally, a noticeable pattern emerged concerning the relationship between one's place of residence and food expenditure. Correlation analysis indicated a moderate negative correlation (Pearson Correlation -0.282 & $P < 0.05$), suggesting that as the distance from the faculty to the residence increases, monthly food expenses tend to decrease. This phenomenon can be attributed to the diminishing sense of social interaction and camaraderie associated with the

university as one moves farther away from the campus. This observation aligns with theoretical perspectives within sociology, including the concept of conspicuous consumption. According to this notion, individuals make consumption choices not solely driven by practical needs but also influenced by their social environment [4]. It is evident that the vibrant social atmosphere on the university campus substantially influences students' food expenses.

B. Gender Differences in Food Purchasing Habits

Another intriguing discovery emerged from the chi-square test, revealing that female students exhibit a higher tendency to use hostel canteens compared to their male counterparts. This preference may be attributed to the limited access female students have to off-campus dining options, leading them to opt for the most accessible choice. Such a situation is primarily a consequence of the challenges that hinder female students from frequently exploring beyond the university campus, particularly due to concerns related to safety and transportation. Fig. 1 illustrates the gender-based food purchasing patterns.

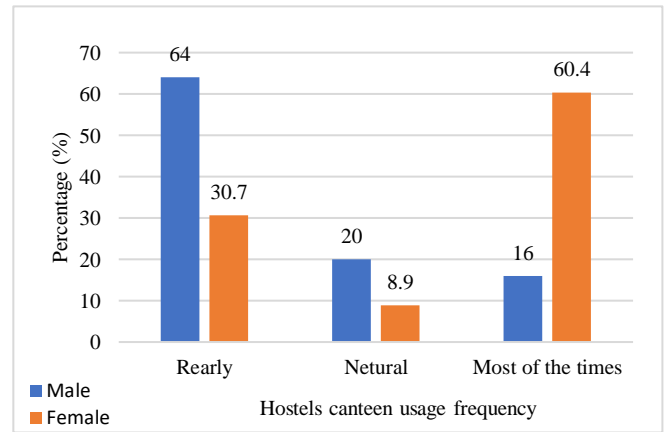


Fig. 1. Food purchasing patterns by gender

Additionally, this study has uncovered a substantial contrast in food satisfaction levels among frequent canteen users. This contrast is visually represented in Fig. 2, which displays the satisfaction levels of students who are regular patrons of hostel canteens.

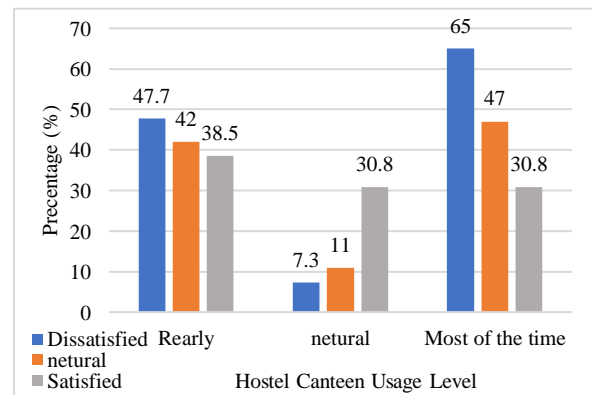


Fig. 2. Satisfaction levels among different categories of hostel canteen users

The chart clearly illustrates a considerable 65% dissatisfaction rate among individuals who frequently dine at

hostel canteens. Expanding on the earlier analysis, it becomes evident that a notable level of food dissatisfaction is prevalent among those who regularly consume canteen food. Importantly, this group predominantly comprises female students. Consequently, it can be inferred that female students who are frequent customers of hostel canteens experience a pronounced degree of food dissatisfaction. This aligns with research on gender disparities in food access and food security, where women often face challenges related to access, affordability, and quality of food. The dissatisfaction rate among regular canteen users underscores the limitations faced by female students in terms of food access and quality. These findings are consistent with sociological discussions on food inequalities and the social determinants of food security.

C. Meal Skipping Patterns Among University Students

A well-established body of prior research consistently underscores the prevalence of meal skipping as a prominent behavioral trend among university students, a phenomenon reaffirmed by the findings of this study [5]. These results illuminate the tendency among students to skip breakfast and lunch more frequently, with dinner being the least skipped meal. Consequently, the primary determinants of meal skipping appear to revolve around issues related to effective time management, compounded by financial constraints.

Notably, these findings also reflect the adverse impact of Sri Lanka's prevailing economic challenges on university students, where the ability to maintain regular meal schedules is notably affected. However, it is essential to highlight that, according to the Mann-Whitney U test analysis, while a correlation between gender and meal skipping emerged, it is equally vital to emphasize the absence of a statistically significant relationship ($P > 0.05$). Hence, the factors influencing meal-skipping behavior are observed to be consistent across all students within the faculty.

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study shed light on the food behaviors of undergraduates within the Faculty of Arts, adding to the growing body of sociological research on food consumption patterns and their implications. Several significant aspects related to food behavior, expenditure, and sociocultural factors are highlighted, prompting comparisons with analogous studies in different contexts to deepen our understanding of the sociological implications.

A consistent theme resonating with existing research is the influence of economic challenges on food expenditure. The average monthly expenditure of LKR 10,600 serves as a poignant indicator of the financial constraints students encounter. This echoes findings from diverse settings, such as studies involving college students in Western nations, where economic limitations frequently lead to reduced food budgets [6]. It is evident that the economic landscape significantly shapes the dietary behavior of university students, emphasizing the universal impact of financial considerations on food choices.

Moreover, the research illuminates the substantial impact of students' living circumstances and socio-economic factors on their dietary habits. These insights have far-reaching implications for both researchers and policymakers, providing a foundation for enhancing the dietary practices of university students and promoting their overall well-being.

Primarily, this study underscores the paramount importance of tailored interventions designed to cultivate a healthier food culture within university environments. Offering accessible, diverse, and nutritionally balanced food options within on-campus dining facilities is pivotal in encouraging healthier eating habits among students. These initiatives not only cater to the diverse needs and preferences of the student body but also create an environment where making nutritious food choices is convenient and appealing.

Furthermore, recognizing the financial constraints that many students grapple with, providing financial support or assistance programs can alleviate the burden of food expenses. This approach further contributes to fostering a positive food culture by ensuring that students have access to the essential resources required for maintaining a balanced diet.

In summary, this research provides valuable insights into the intricate interplay of factors influencing students' dietary behaviors. By implementing policies and initiatives that account for the living context and socio-economic considerations of university students, it is possible to cultivate a food culture that supports their well-being and holistic development. These efforts can yield enduring benefits for the health and sustainability of university communities, ultimately leading to more informed dietary choices and an elevated quality of life for the students.

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