

# A Preliminary Study on Students' Behaviour, Knowledge and Perceptions towards Fast Food Consumption

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## Abstract

The use of fast food among university students has risen owing to its convenience and price, prompting worries over health and academic performance. Although many studies have investigated the health implications of fast food, there is a paucity of research about its influence on students' knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours in higher education settings. This research examines students' perspectives, knowledge, and behaviours about fast food eating at the Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. A quantitative descriptive study using structured questionnaires examined the determinants affecting students' fast food consumption. Research demonstrates that flavour, affordability, and convenience substantially affect intake, although knowledge of nutritional value is relatively minor. Students acknowledge health hazards but persist in consuming them owing to established lifestyle practices. This research underscores the need for focused nutrition education and university regulations to promote healthy dietary practices among students.

**Keywords:** Fast Food Consumption, Health Implications, Higher Education Students, Nutritional Awareness, Student Eating Habits.

## Introduction

Fast food has become a ubiquitous aspect of life for many, particularly university students managing demanding schedules, limited finances, and elevated academic pressures. Its appeal arises from its speed, affordability, and accessibility, making it a viable choice for students often in transit. The growing reliance on fast food is becoming alarming for kids' long-term health and well-being.

Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) indicate a rise in the quantity and calorie density of foods consumed in the United States from 1976-1980 (NHANES II) to 1999-2002 (NHANES III). Studies show that between 1971 and 2011, the average weight and body mass index (BMI) significantly escalated, with the proportion of overweight Americans rising from 42.3% in 1971 to 66.1% in 2011 (Cohen et al., 2015). Many

college students find it challenging to allocate time for cooking or eating nutritious meals. Consequently, 23% of college students reportedly consume fast food daily, and 50% consume at least three fast food meals each week (Abraham et al., 2018).

The transition to urban living in Malaysia has resulted in significant alterations in dietary practices. A significant number of students increasingly depend on fast food, often without fully comprehending the potential health ramifications. Although prior research has shown the connection between fast food and issues such as obesity, cardiovascular illness, and subpar academic performance, there is a paucity of insight into students' perceptions and knowledge of their dietary choices. What motivates their decisions? What are their sentiments on such choices? These enquiries need careful examination, especially within the academic environment where enduring habits are established.

This research examines students not only as consumers of fast food but also as people whose choices are influenced by a combination of information, perceptions, habits, and social contexts. Thus, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the student experience with food by examining these elements in depth. It provides essential insights that may assist universities and health educators in guiding students towards making improved, well-informed dietary choices.

Objectives of the study are to:

1. Identifying the factors that encourage students to consume fast food.
2. Assessing their level of knowledge regarding its nutritional value.
3. Analysing their perceptions of fast food consumption.

This study is important as it provides a better knowledge of how university students negotiate their dietary decisions under academic pressure, time limits and contemporary lives. This study offers significant insights that might help universities, health educators, and legislators to create sensible and student-friendly initiatives by investigating the disparity between what students know about nutrition and how they really act. It not only serves to highlight the health dangers of fast food but also the social and environmental elements influencing dietary choices. Most significantly, it allows students to speak up and inspires a more educated, helpful way to advocate for better living in higher education environments.

### **Literature Review**

A literature study gives a thorough picture of earlier studies and helps one understand the elements affecting fast food intake among university students. This chapter investigates the effects of fast food, the main factors influencing consumption, students' nutritional awareness, and theoretical models clarifying their eating patterns. Fast food carries significant health hazards even if its flavour, cost, and convenience appeal to many people (Min et al., 2018). Research shows that too much fast food fuels obesity, heart illnesses, and other metabolic problems (Ishak et al., 2022). Urbanisation and changing lifestyles in Malaysia have swiftly increased fast food consumption, hence a public health issue of great importance.

Multiple variables impact students' fast food intake, including taste preferences, pricing, accessibility, and marketing methods. Social and cultural elements influence things

as fast food is usually connected with contemporary living and social events (Reddy & van Dam, 2020). The ease of fast food makes it a popular option among university students with demanding academic schedules. Although many students are aware of the health concerns of fast food, their consumption habits may not necessarily reflect this knowledge. Studies show that despite knowing the dire health consequences, students consume fast food because of time limits and habitual eating patterns (Man Hong & Yee Ming, 2023). This gap between knowledge and behaviour underlines the necessity for comprehensive nutrition education initiatives. Fast food intake, often connected to obesity, high blood pressure, and poor scholastic performance, is an aggressive marketing tactic, primarily via social media, dramatically affects students' eating practices (Poti et al., 2014). Fast food restaurants attract young customers through branding, discounts, and promotional offers, supporting lousy eating habits.

Two theories, which are Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and Planned Behaviour (TPB), offer an understanding of students' fast food intake. TPB discusses how attitudes, subjective standards, and perceived behavioural control impact eating choices (Neighbors et al., 2013). SCT underlines the effect of personal, social, and environmental variables, stressing the significance of observational learning and reinforcement in eating decisions (Acuff et al., 2019). This chapter examines the growing trend of fast food consumption among university students and its accompanying health consequences. Key influences include convenience, price, and marketing, whereas nutritional understanding does not necessarily transfer to healthy eating habits. Theoretical models such as TPB and SCT assist in explaining students' food decisions, giving a platform for treatments that foster healthy eating patterns.

### **Methodology**

A preliminary and pilot study examined the validity and reliability of the research instruments used to investigate students' fast food eating patterns at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). These evaluations confirmed the efficiency of the questionnaire in gathering essential data while reducing possible biases. The preliminary research includes a small-scale evaluation of the survey instrument to improve question clarity and organisation. Experts in nutrition and education assessed the questionnaire to guarantee content validity, indicating that the questions adequately measured students' opinions, knowledge, and actions about fast food intake. This procedure made modest adjustments, strengthening the instrument's comprehensibility and relevancy. Pilot research was undertaken with 30 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Vocational Education (Catering) program, reflecting the wider study population. The selection of this group was based on their exposure to food-related knowledge and behaviours, making them acceptable respondents for assessing the survey instrument. The research utilised a basic random sample strategy to ensure fair data collection.

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 27.0 was used to evaluate pilot research data, specifically analysing the reliability of the questionnaire using Cronbach's Alpha. A high Cronbach's Alpha score demonstrated great internal consistency, supporting the instrument's dependability for the full-scale investigation. The correlation between items and overall scores verified the content's consistency and efficacy. The findings from the preliminary and pilot investigations validated the appropriateness of the research instrument for the main study. The questionnaire revealed reliability and validity, collecting reliable data

on students' fast food eating habits. These results enhance the methodological basis of the study, helping future research in nutrition and behavioural sciences. Recent research by Darnton (2023) has revealed that, when it comes to Likert scale design, four-level scales may offer advantages over five-level and seven-level scales. For instance, owing to their lengthy completion durations, response style bias, and lack of reliability, five- and seven-point Likert scales are commonly blamed for compromising the validity of findings.

### Results and Discussion

The pilot research was performed among 30 final-year students from the Bachelor of Vocational Education program at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) to analyse their demographic features and fast food eating habits. This study aims to examine the reliability and validity of the research instrument before the primary investigation. The data gave insights into the students' nutritional patterns, revealing significant trends in fast food consumption.

Table 1

#### *Demographic Analysis of Respondents*

| Demographic                                | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) | Cumulative Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------------------|
| <b>Gender:</b>                             |               |                |                           |
| Male                                       | 10            | 33.3           | 30 (100.0)                |
| Female                                     | 20            | 66.7           |                           |
| <b>Age:</b>                                |               |                |                           |
| 20 – 22                                    | 1             | 3.3            | 30 (100.0)                |
| 23 – 25                                    | 29            | 96.7           |                           |
| <b>Year of study:</b>                      |               |                |                           |
| Year 4                                     | 30            | 100/0          | 30 (100.0)                |
| <b>Program:</b>                            |               |                |                           |
| BBC                                        | 19            | 63.3           | 30 (100.0)                |
| BBF                                        | 11            | 36.7           |                           |
| <b>Frequency of fast food consumption:</b> |               |                |                           |
| Daily                                      | 2             | 6.7            | 30 (100.0)                |
| 2-3 times a week                           | 16            | 53.3           |                           |
| Weekly                                     | 6             | 20.0           |                           |
| Once a month                               | 3             | 10.0           |                           |
| Rarely                                     | 3             | 10.0           |                           |

The demographic analysis (Table 1) found that the sample had more female participants (66.7%) than men (33.3%). Regarding age, most students (96.7%) were between 23 and 25 years old, while just a minor number (3.3%) were in the 20-22 age range. All individuals were in their fourth year of study, assuring homogeneity in academic experience. Additionally, pupils were from two academic programs, with 63.3% enrolling in the BBC program (Bachelor of Vocational Education (Catering)) and 36.7% in the BBF program (Bachelor of Vocational Education (Creative Multimedia)).

Fast food consumption trends among students varied, with a large majority eating it regularly. The research indicated that 6.7% of respondents ate fast food daily, while more than half (53.3%) consumed it twice to three times per week. This suggests that most students depend on fast food as a regular diet. Meanwhile, 20% of students reported consuming fast

food regularly, and 10% had it just once a month. Another 10% of respondents said they seldom or never eat fast food. These data imply that although a small fraction maintains a modest consumption, most students eat fast food at least once a week, with many doing so numerous times each week.

The increasing frequency of fast food intake raises worries about its possible influence on students' health. Previous studies have connected excessive fast food consumption to health concerns such as obesity, cardiovascular illnesses, and poor academic performance (Mohammadbeigi et al., 2018). The outcomes of this pilot research underscore the need for additional exploration into the variables impacting students' food choices, including convenience, price, and nutritional knowledge. Understanding these characteristics may help build successful measures to encourage healthy eating habits among university students.

#### *Analysis of the Factors that Encourage Students to Consume Fast Food*

Table 2

*Factors Influencing Students' Fast-Food Consumption Behaviour*

| No.                       | Items                                                                          | Mean        | SD    |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| 1.                        | I choose fast food because it is convenient and saves time.                    | 3.50        | 0.900 |
| 2.                        | I prefer fast food because it fits my budget.                                  | 2.90        | 1.062 |
| 3.                        | I like fast food because it tastes better than home-cooked meals.              | 2.50        | 1.009 |
| 4.                        | My friends and family influence my decision to eat fast food.                  | 2.60        | 1.037 |
| 5.                        | The availability of home delivery services encourages me to consume fast food. | 2.67        | 0.922 |
| 6.                        | I choose fast food because it is accessible near my campus/residence.          | 3.13        | 0.900 |
| 7.                        | I eat fast food because advertisements and promotions attract me.              | 3.00        | 0.871 |
| 8.                        | I prefer fast food for socialising with friends.                               | 2.67        | 0.922 |
| <b>Total Average Mean</b> |                                                                                | <b>2.87</b> |       |

The research from Table 2 indicates the most significant and least important variables that encourage students to consume fast food. The highest-rated factor, with a mean score of 3.50, is convenience and time-saving advantages. This implies that students prefer fast food owing to their hectic schedules, making it a convenient and accessible dinner alternative.

Additionally, accessibility near campus/residence also has a significant influence, with a mean score of 3.13, showing that students are more likely to eat fast food when it is widely accessible. Conversely, the least important element is the preference for fast food over home-cooked meals, with the lowest mean score of 2.50. This shows that although students eat fast food regularly, it is not always because they prefer its flavour over home-cooked meals but rather owing to external factors such as convenience and proximity.

In summary, time efficiency and accessibility are the greatest drivers of fast food consumption among students, whereas personal taste preference is the least relevant element. This understanding might be valuable for establishing healthy eating tactics, such as promoting quick and nutritious food options on campus.

#### *Analysis of the Student's Knowledge of Nutritional Value and its Impact on Fast Food Consumption*

Table 3

*Students' Knowledge of Nutritional Value and Its Impact on Fast-Food Consumption*

| No.                       | Items                                                                                               | Mean        | SD    |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| 1.                        | I am aware that fast food is high in calories and fats                                              | 3.77        | 0.430 |
| 2.                        | I know that frequent fast food consumption can lead to health issues like obesity or heart disease. | 3.70        | 0.651 |
| 3.                        | I understand that fast food contains high levels of salt (sodium).                                  | 3.73        | 0.521 |
| 4.                        | I think fast food is often low in essential nutrients like vitamins and minerals.                   | 3.53        | 0.730 |
| 5.                        | I am aware of healthier alternatives to fast food.                                                  | 3.73        | 0.450 |
| 6.                        | I can identify which fast food items are more nutritious.                                           | 3.67        | 0.547 |
| 7.                        | I understand that consuming fast food in moderation can be part of a balanced diet.                 | 3.73        | 0.450 |
| 8.                        | I learned about the nutritional value of fast food from online resources or health professionals.   | 3.60        | 0.675 |
| <b>Total Average Mean</b> |                                                                                                     | <b>3.68</b> |       |

The investigation on Table 3 of students' knowledge of the nutritional value of fast food showed various degrees of understanding. The highest-rated statement, with a mean of 3.77, indicates that students are most aware that fast food is heavy in calories and fats. This implies that most respondents realise the possible health concerns connected with eating fast food, which may impact their dietary choices. Such knowledge is vital as it exposes students' comprehension of bad dietary components that lead to obesity and other health concerns.

On the other hand, the statement with the lowest mean score, 3.53, corresponds to students' comprehension that fast food is generally lacking in vital elements, including vitamins and minerals. While still relatively high, this implies a significantly reduced understanding of the nutritional deficits of fast food. This might mean that although students are mindful of fast food's high-caloric content, they may not fully evaluate its lack of nutritional value, which could affect their eating patterns.

Overall, the average mean of 3.68 demonstrates a typically high degree of knowledge among students regarding the nutritional downsides of fast food. However, fast food consumption remains common despite this information, showing that awareness alone may not modify behaviour. Other influencing elements like convenience, taste preference, and accessibility may still substantially affect students' nutritional choices.

*Analysis of the Student's Perceptions of their Fast Food Consumption*

Table 4

*Students' Perceptions of Their Fast-Food Consumption*

| No.                       | Items                                                                                | Mean        | SD    |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| 1.                        | I feel fast food is a necessary part of my lifestyle due to my academic commitments. | 2.73        | 1.048 |
| 2.                        | I believe eating fast food is a convenient solution when I am busy.                  | 3.07        | 0.907 |
| 3.                        | I think fast food consumption reflects modern student life.                          | 2.53        | 1.008 |
| 4.                        | I feel guilty after eating fast food frequently.                                     | 3.43        | 0.728 |
| 5.                        | I perceive fast food as more of a treat than a regular meal.                         | 2.50        | 1.137 |
| 6.                        | I believe fast food companies care about students' health and preferences.           | 2.73        | 1.015 |
| 7.                        | I think my fast food consumption habits affect my overall health and well-being.     | 3.47        | 0.860 |
| <b>Total Average Mean</b> |                                                                                      | <b>2.92</b> |       |

Students' views of their fast food intake indicate illuminating patterns in their attitudes and awareness (Table 4). The highest-rated impression, with a mean of 3.47, is the opinion that fast food intake impairs general health and well-being. This implies that students realise the possible health repercussions of regular fast food eating, demonstrating an awareness of dietary patterns and their influence on long-term health. This impression fits with increased concerns about diet and lifestyle choices among young individuals.

The second-highest ranked item, with a mean of 3.43, suggests that students sense guilt after ingesting fast food regularly. This emotional reaction implies that although fast food is convenient and extensively eaten, many students are aware of its downsides, potentially owing to cultural and health factors. Feelings of guilt may result from regular exposure to health education materials that stress the hazards associated with processed meals.

Conversely, the lowest-rated view, with a mean of 2.50, is the belief that fast food is more of a pleasure than a normal meal. This study shows that students do not necessarily consider fast food as an infrequent pleasure but rather as a fundamental component of their diet. This might be due to the ease, cost, and accessibility of fast food, which makes it a common option rather than a rare treat. Overall, the data indicates a difference between students' understanding of the health consequences of fast food and their actual consumption patterns. While many know the detrimental consequences, convenience and lifestyle demands may promote regular usage.

### Conclusion

This research gives insights into university students' behaviour, knowledge, and views on fast food intake. The data reveal that convenience, cost, and accessibility are the key variables driving students' dependency on fast food. Despite being aware of its severe health effects, students continue to consume fast food owing to lifestyle demands, social pressures, and entrenched eating patterns. Notably, there is a gap between nutritional awareness and actual dietary choices, showing that information alone is inadequate to motivate behavioural change. The relevance of our results resides in their addition to the current knowledge of student nutrition and public health. By exposing the gap between knowledge and behaviour, this research underlines the need for focused nutritional education programs, university-driven health campaigns, and legislative measures to encourage healthy eating habits.

Addressing extrinsic motivators such as time restrictions and pricing might play a crucial role in influencing students' eating choices more effectively.

In accordance with the research goals, this study effectively identified important determinants of fast food consumption, evaluated students' comprehension of its nutritional worth, and analysed their perspectives. The data imply that although students realise the hazards, their consumption habits are mostly influenced by convenience rather than inclination. This underlines the relevance of environmental and institutional influences in moulding students' food patterns. Future research should include longitudinal studies to follow changes in student eating habits over time and analyse the efficacy of intervention techniques like as meal-planning efforts or alternative food alternatives on campus. Additionally, using qualitative methodologies, such as interviews or focus groups, might give greater insights into the psychological and social aspects impacting students' eating practices.

In conclusion, although knowledge of nutrition is vital, structural and social factors remain substantial impediments to improved eating habits among students. Universities, politicians, and health groups must work to design practical, student-friendly programs that go beyond awareness and actively support healthy eating choices. Addressing these difficulties is vital in fostering long-term well-being among students and minimising the incidence of diet-related health concerns at higher education institutions.

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