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Introduction

Culture, society, psychology, and the natural and social environments all have a role in shaping individual eating habits. Particular demographic groups, such as graduate students at a public institution, may give these considerations more weight than others when making food decisions. Understanding the eating habits of graduate students and the factors that contribute to such practices is the subject of this discussion. Academic stress, financial limits, and time constraints are all factors that might affect a postgraduate student's eating habits. It is crucial to promote healthy eating and general well-being to investigate the variables that impact the food choices of this specific population (Holder, 2019). One can learn a lot about the drivers, roadblocks, and preferences that shape individuals eating habits via focus groups. Understanding these aspects will allow us to serve better the dietary requirements of graduate students at public institutions, which will have a positive impact on their health and performance in the classroom.

This study explores the varied eating habits of graduate students in state universities. The study's overarching goal is to shed light on the complex web of influences on students' food preferences by investigating the roles played by academic constraints, social dynamics, and psychological aspects.

Literature Based Background to the Study

There are substantial social and environmental impacts on the eating habits of graduate students. It has been shown that the social dynamics of shared mealtimes and peer interactions have a significant role in shaping food habits among college students. According to research, the opinions of one's peers may have a substantial impact on one's dietary habits (Hawkins, Farrow and Thomas, 2020). To further emphasise the significance of the environment in determining dietary choices, consider the effect of students' communal meal habits in campus dining facilities. There is a strong correlation between postgraduate students' time restrictions and their eating habits. The demands of school might force students to resort to convenient but harmful fast-food options (Lak, 2023). The time limits imposed by coursework, research, and other academic activities may lead to irregular eating habits and the use of convenience foods, which may have ramifications for their health and nutrition.

Postgraduate students' eating habits are strongly influenced by their mental state, which includes their level of stress and emotional well-being. An analysis of this population's stress levels and eating habits has shown a significant link between the two (Wilder-Davis et al., 2021). When people are feeling overwhelmed, they may turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms like comfort food, emotional eating, or meal skipping. Several variables influence the eating patterns of graduate students, including financial constraints and the availability of healthful food alternatives. One research showed that students with tighter finances tended to choose less healthy, less expensive foods (Nikolaus, Ellison and Nickols-Richardson, 2019). Their eating habits may be significantly influenced by the accessibility and cost of healthy food options on and near campus.

Rationale

Understanding the significant elements determining the eating behaviour of postgraduate students at public institutions is crucial for their overall well-being and academic achievement. The purpose of this research is to understand better the many ways in which students' nutritional preferences are influenced by factors such as academic demands, social dynamics, time limits, and financial constraints. The idea is to provide treatments that are specific to their needs in order to help them adopt better eating patterns (D'Innocenzo, Biagi and Lanari, 2019). Furthermore, diet has a significant impact on cognitive function and general energy levels, which in turn influences academic achievement. Participating in a focus group with graduate students will help researchers learn more about their experiences, likes, and dislikes. It will pave the way for the development of strategies to meet their nutritional needs, improving their well-being and productivity while they are in school.

Research Question

1. What are the factors influencing postgraduate students' eating habits at a public university?
2. How do socioeconomic variables such as budgetary restrictions and the availability of healthy food alternatives influence postgraduate students' dietary choices?
3. To what degree do cultural and social factors within the university environment impact postgraduate students' eating habits?

Aim

The study aims to explore the factors that influence eating behaviour among postgraduate students in a public university using a focus group discussion.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Postgraduate students' eating habits at public institutions are highly influenced by a combination of academic stress, time constraints, and convenience.

Hypothesis 2: Financial limitations and the availability of healthy food alternatives, for example, have a significant impact on postgraduate students' dietary choices at public institutions.

Hypothesis 3: The cultural and social features of the university setting have a proven effect on postgraduate students' eating habits, with peer influences and cultural norms playing a substantial role in deciding food choices.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research employs a qualitative approach, with a focus on in-depth Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with graduate students at a public university. This method captures the diverse experiences and viewpoints of the participants, allowing for a more in-depth analysis of the factors that impact eating behaviours (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). To choose people from various intellectual and cultural backgrounds, a purposive sampling approach will be utilised. Facilitated group discussions (FGDs) give an interactive forum for participants to share their perspectives, resulting in a complete picture of the interplay between social, cultural, and economic elements in moulding postgraduate students' eating habits in the university setting. The acquired qualitative data will be thematically evaluated in order to develop conclusions.

In order to obtain qualitative data, it will organise focus groups with graduate students to learn more about the factors (e.g., motives, experiences, and viewpoints) that influence their eating habits (van der Bend et al., 2022). In this stage, one can use free-form inquiries and theme analysis to get to the underlying causes, such as academic and social demands, peer influences, stress, and financial limitations. To better understand the social and psychological factors that shape people's food

choices, qualitative insights will supplement quantitative data. Combining quantitative data to identify trends with qualitative data to illustrate the underlying motives and experiences of postgraduate students at a public institution, this mixed-methods approach provides a complete study.

Recruitment, Sampling & Study Participants

Recruitment:

The reliability and accuracy of the research depend on how well and carefully it recruits participants (Raven-Gregg, Wood and Shepherd, 2021). Selecting graduate students from a public institution using a purposive sample strategy will provide a more complete understanding of the many elements that go into shaping their food habits.

Sampling Strategy:

A purposive sample strategy was used to recruit graduate students from a wide range of fields, socioeconomic levels, ages, and cultural backgrounds. The goal of this method is to collect a wide range of viewpoints and experiences to comprehend better the many factors that affect people's food choices.

Study Participants:

Participating graduate students from various public universities will help researchers better understand the factors influencing their dietary habits. Participants will come from multiple academic disciplines, including the arts, sciences, and social sciences. This diversity is significant because it allows for the potential for academic demands and societal norms to affect eating habits (Modlinska et al., 2020). Furthermore, volunteers will be sought from a diverse spectrum of economic circumstances, including students on scholarship, graduate students on assistantship, and those who are footing the bill themselves. The study will account for the wide variety of ages among graduate students and individual differences in lifestyle and diet that may point to connections between chronological age and dietary choices. Researchers will enlist people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds to investigate the interplay between cultural factors and other variables affecting food preferences and eating habits. This research provides a full view of the complicated web of variables that interact to determine the eating habits of graduate students at a public university by considering all possible factors in choosing participants.

Data Collection

Data Collection Method:

Resources Used for Data Collection:

Online resources, including virtual meeting software and digital communication tools, are the key sources of data for this qualitative research. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) may be more easily implemented with the help of these materials.

Location of Data Collection:

The information will be gathered in cyberspace using real-time communication sites (Archibald et al., 2019). The FGDs will be held online so that students from all post-secondary programmes may take part in them without having to travel.

Data Collection Process:

1. **Recruitment and Informed Consent:** Purposive sampling will be used to choose study participants to increase racial and ethnic diversity as well as the breadth of fields represented. An email invitation will be sent out to potential participants, detailing the study's goals, methods, and the need for their informed permission.
2. **Virtual Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Participants will be able to speak freely about their eating habits during the FGDs since they will be held via video conference (Scheelbeek et al., 2020). The conversations will be guided by an experienced moderator using a semi-structured interview approach with set, open-ended questions. This method promotes open dialogue among participants on the personal and environmental variables that play a role in shaping their eating patterns.
3. **Digital Recording:** Focus groups will be recorded digitally (with participants' permission) to ensure reliable data collection. This guarantees that the subtlety of participants' replies is captured, allowing for in-depth analysis later on in the research.
4. **Transcription and Data Management:** Transcription services will be used to turn the audio recordings of the FGDs into text (Yulianti and Sulistyawati, 2021). The identities of the people who fill out the transcripts will be concealed. Qualitative data analysis software will be used to manage and organise the data for systematic coding and theme analysis.

5. **Member Checking:** To strengthen the study's validity, participants will be given the chance to examine the synthesised results, offering input to guarantee the appropriate depiction of their opinions.

This method of gathering information on the variables that influence eating behaviour among graduate students at a public university makes use of online resources and virtual platforms to increase reach, promote open participation, and guarantee the efficient capture of qualitative insights.

Data Analysis Technique

Focus group data on the variables affecting eating behaviour among graduate students at a public institution must be analyzed using a thorough and complete data analysis approach if any valuable conclusions are to be drawn. It is planned to use theme analysis on the qualitative data collected from the focus groups. The transcripts of these talks will be read and tagged in order to spot trends in postgraduate students' eating habits, as well as their drivers and obstacles (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Stress, social connections, and cultural influences are only some of the underlying reasons that may be uncovered via thematic analysis and lead to healthier eating habits.

Focus group transcripts are an excellent example of qualitative data that benefit from a thematic analysis approach to data organization and interpretation. Typically, these are the stages involved in the process:

1. Familiarization with the Data:

By reading the same information over and over again, the researcher grows to know and understand it intimately. In-depth comprehension of the data acquired is made possible by this phase.

2. Generating Initial Codes:

The next step is for the researcher to begin coding the data by locating and labelling key elements (Lester, Cho and Lochmiller, 2020). In the context of graduate students' eating habits, codes may refer to specific topics, ideas, or thoughts.

3. Searching for Themes:

Codes have been categorized into possible categories. Patterns or common threads in the data reveal themes about the eating habits of graduate students. This phase requires an intensive investigation of the interrelationships present in the codes.

4. Reviewing Themes:

Each theme is checked and modified to make sure it fairly represents the facts. In this stage, one can make certain the data is precise and uniform throughout.

5. Defining and Naming Themes

The last stage is to give concrete names to the concepts that have emerged (Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger, 2020). This requires presenting precise and short explanations of each topic, conveying the core of the patterns seen.

Researchers may use the thematic analysis' adaptability and methodical nature to find both anticipated and unexpected patterns in the data. Thematic analysis may provide subtle insights into the experiences and perspectives of graduate students at a public institution, which is especially useful given the intricacy of the variables affecting their eating behaviour. By adopting this strategy, researchers may obtain rich, contextually relevant results that lead to a more excellent knowledge of the issue under examination.

Ethical Considerations

"Exploring the factors that influence eating behaviour among postgraduate students in a public university: a focus group discussion" requires a robust ethical framework to ensure participant safety, privacy, and validity. This framework requires informed consent from all postgraduate students, ensuring that they understand the study's objectives and methods and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. This method allows one to be sure that persons are voluntarily participating in the research and are aware of its limitations. Personal information and replies provided by participants will be kept private. The study will be extensively evaluated by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) or ethics committee to guarantee ethical conduct and participant safety and respect.

Results

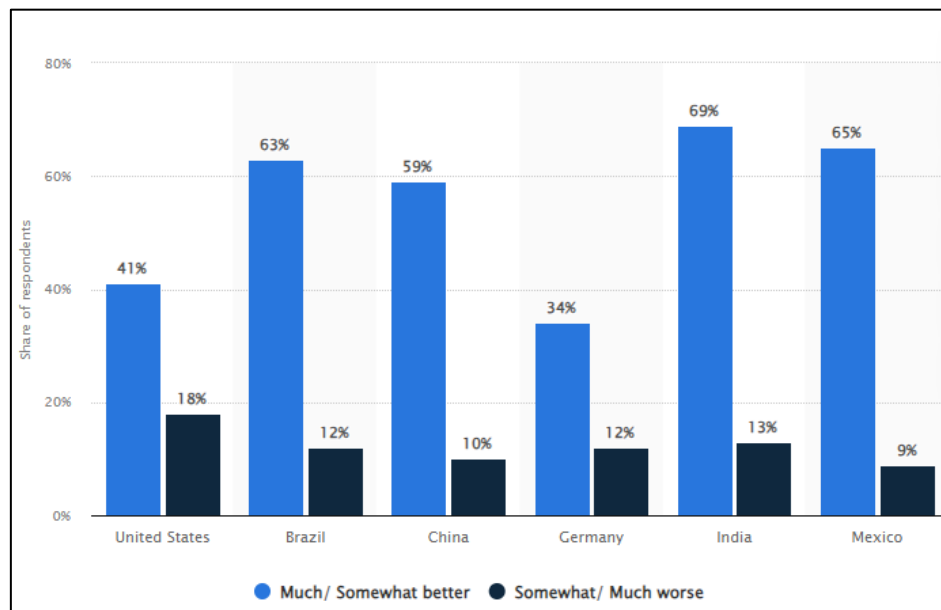


Figure 1: Changes in diets over the past year worldwide in 2021, by country and quality

Source: (Wunsch, 2023)

While data on worldwide dietary habits in 2021 give insight into modifications made by students all around the world, examining eating behaviour among graduate students at a public institution necessitates a narrower perspective (Holder, 2019). Academic pressure, time constraints, social anxiety, and food accessibility on campus may all play a part in moulding this group's eating habits. It is vital to have a more excellent knowledge of the elements that impact student's dietary choices in order to enhance their health and academic success.

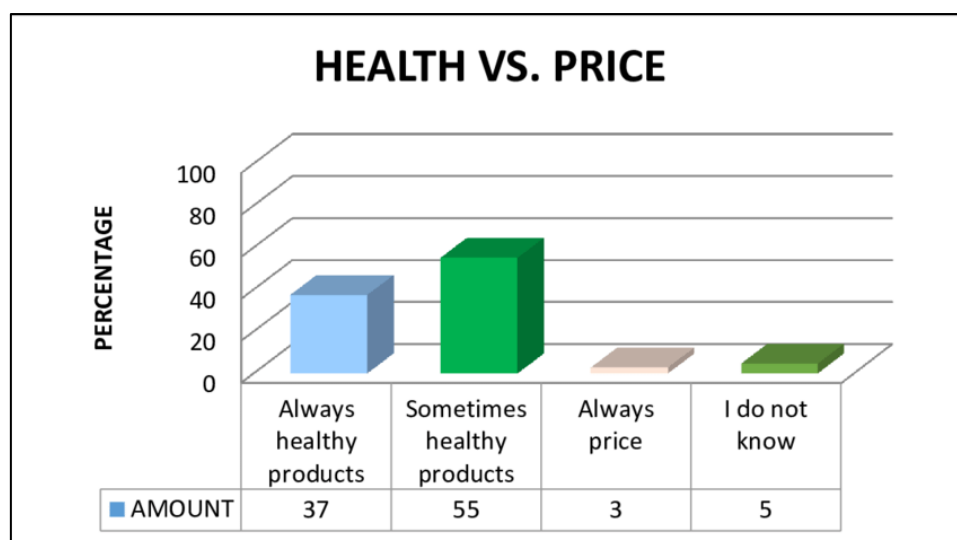


Figure 2: Change in eating behaviors of University Students

Source: (Bamwesigye and Kong, 2019)

The supplied data shows how college students make meal selections based on a balance between cost and nutritional value. It's encouraging to see that a sizable percentage of students (55%) choose healthier choices when given the option. In comparison, just 37% of students show a more health-conscious attitude to their diet by frequently selecting nutritious goods (GÜLTEKİN and VEUPHUTEH, 2023). The fact that just 3 per cent of people put price ahead of health shows that concern about food prices is relatively low. In addition, 5% of students are on the fence about their choices, suggesting some uncertainty about which value, health or cost, to place higher. The results show that there is a wide range of eating habits among college students, with the majority prioritising cost-effectiveness but a more minor subset prioritising health.

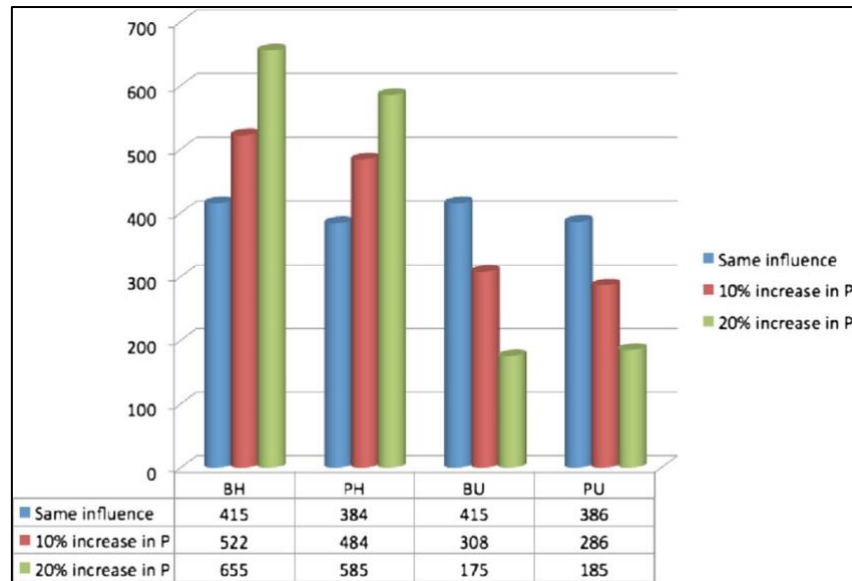


Figure 3: Social interactions of eating behaviour among high school students: a cellular automata approach

Source: (Dabbaghian and Mago, 2019)

The social relationships and eating habits of high school students were investigated using cellular automata. Various settings are analysed depending on how much the person or peers impact food choices and consumption in the "Both High" scenario (BH); when friends and individual influence are prominent, eating behaviour scores vary from 308 to 655, an average of 415. In the "Peer High, Individual Low" (PH) scenario, when friends have a significant influence, but the person has less, scores range from 175 to 585, with an average of 384. Eating behaviour scores average 286 in the "Both Low" scenario (BU) when both the individual and peers have a poor effect (Swaffield and Guo, 2020). Finally, in the "Peer Low, Individual High" (PU) scenario, where the individual has a high impact while the peer group has a low influence, eating behaviour scores range from 185 to 386, with an average of 286. These results highlight the importance of social ties in high school students' nutritional patterns, as well as how individual and group factors may impact eating behaviour.

Discussion

The study's findings and assumptions give an in-depth look at graduate students' eating habits at a public university. The data support the initial prediction that academic stress and time restrictions would increase reliance on less healthy, ready-made meals (Reynolds, 2023). There is evidence to support the second hypothesis, which states that social and environmental variables impact dietary choices and modifications,

particularly in university settings. This evidence comes from the recorded growth in food quality in various nations, most notably the United States and Brazil. The swings in body weight and levels of physical activity that were seen during the COVID-19 lockdown, particularly the discrepancies across genders, are symptomatic of the varied eating habits among nervous and emotionally disturbed young persons. According to a study on the dynamics of social interaction, the impact of one's peers is a significant factor in the development of eating patterns among students in high school (Ragelienė and Grønhøj, 2020). This comprehensive study examines how intellectual, social, and emotional factors influence graduate students' diets. Individualised solutions for encouraging good eating in the face of intellectual and emotional stress are required.

Conclusion

The results of the research "Exploring the factors that influence eating behaviour among postgraduate students in a public university" show that a complex web of influences shapes the dietary preferences of this group. This supports the first hypothesis that students under time and work restrictions are more likely to choose quick and easy meals that may be lower in nutritional value. The second hypothesis is supported by the fact that social and environmental variables have a significant influence on food choices and enhancements to diet quality. Consistent with the third hypothesis, there were gender-based disparities in how much participants ate and how much exercise they got while confined to the COVID-19 facility. The significance of friendships in shaping eating behaviour is also shown in the research of college pupils. These results emphasise the diverse character of postgraduate students' food habits and the significance of targeted measures to promote healthy eating despite academic and emotional pressures.

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Appendix (Questionnaire)

1. Gender:

- a. Male
- b. Female

2. What is your age range?

- a. 18-20
- b. 20-23
- c. 23-25
- d. 25 and above

3. How many hours a week do you spend on academic activities (classes, research, homework) on average?

- a. Less than 7 hours
- b. 7-10 hours
- c. 10-12 hours
- d. More than 12 hours

4. How frequently do academic pressures and time restrictions impact your food choices?

- a. Rarely
- b. Occasionally
- c. Frequently
- d. Always

5. How would you assess the accessibility of healthy food options on or around campus?

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

6. How much influence do financial constraints have on your eating choices?

Not at all

Slightly

Moderately

Significantly

7. How much influence do cultural variables have on your food preferences?

Not at all

A little

Moderately

Very much

8. How much effect do your classmates' food choices have on your eating habits?

Not at all

A little

Moderately

Very much

9. How frequently do you choose nutritious meals over convenience?

Rarely

Occasionally

Frequently

Always

10. Have your eating habits changed as a result of academic stress or emotional well-being?

Yes

No

11. In a normal week, how frequently do you eat fast food or ready-made meals?

Rarely

1-2 times

3-4 times

5 or more times

12. How pleased are you with the range of healthy food alternatives accessible to you on a scale of 1 to 5?

1 (Not satisfied at all)

2

3

4

5 (Very satisfied)

13. How well do you understand the nutritional worth of the foods you eat?

Not knowledgeable

Somewhat knowledgeable

Moderately knowledgeable

Very knowledgeable