

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE EATING BEHAVIOUR AMONG POSTGRADUATE
STUDENTS IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY.**

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Practice-Based Research

Course module: LCHS7001

23 August 2023

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INTRODUCTION/ LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Eating behavior among postgraduate students has become a significant area of concern, given its implications on students' physical health, mental well-being, and academic performance (Meryem & Nurcan, 2018). Various studies have shown that the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate studies often brings about significant changes in students' lifestyles, including eating habits and behaviors (Beasley, et al., 2004).

Research conducted in public universities has highlighted the influence of different factors on eating behavior. Factors such as academic stress, financial constraints, time management, and access to food options have been identified as key determinants of eating habits among postgraduate students (Brown, et al., 2014)

Moreover, the social environment within universities has been found to play a crucial role. The peer influence, social norms, and cultural diversity found in public universities can significantly impact students' food choices and consumption patterns (Steptoe, et al., 2015).

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a gap in understanding how these factors interplay and influence eating behavior among postgraduate students in public universities. Furthermore, existing studies have often been conducted in Western contexts, leaving a dearth of knowledge about non-Western public university settings (Kremmyda, et al., 2008)

This study aims to explore and understand the factors influencing eating behaviors among postgraduate students in a public university setting, considering the unique context and challenges faced by these students. The findings will contribute to the existing body of knowledge and provide valuable insights to university administrators and health professionals in designing effective interventions to promote healthy eating behaviors among postgraduate students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS/ AIMS/ HYPOTHESIS

The health and well-being of postgraduate students are crucial to their academic performance and overall quality of life. However, studies indicate that postgraduate students often neglect their nutritional health due to academic pressure, limited time, and financial constraints. Understanding the factors that influence their eating behaviours could lead to significant insights into how these can be addressed. This study intends to explore these factors in the context of a public university, where students may face unique challenges compared to their counterparts in private institutions.

Research Questions:

1. What are the key factors influencing the eating behaviours of postgraduate students in a public university?

2. How do academic pressures and time constraints impact the nutritional choices of postgraduate students?
3. What role does the university environment play in shaping the eating habits of postgraduate students?

Aims

The aims of carrying out this research include.

1. To identify the key factors that influence the eating behaviours of postgraduate students in a public university.
2. To understand the impact of academic pressures and time constraints on the nutritional choices of these students.
3. To explore the role of socio-economic background in shaping the eating behaviours of these students.
4. To assess the influence of the university environment on the eating habits of postgraduate students.

Hypothesis:

1. Postgraduate students in a public university are likely to have poor eating habits due to high academic pressures and time constraints.
2. Students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have poorer nutritional choices due to financial constraints.
3. The university environment plays a significant role in shaping the eating habits of postgraduate students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for this study consists of a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. The combination of these methods will provide robust data and a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing eating behaviour among postgraduate students.

1. **Quantitative Method:** This portion involves a structured survey distributed to a large sample of postgraduate students (20 students). This survey includes questions about dietary habits, academic pressures, time constraints, socio-economic background, and perceptions of the university environment. **(See Appendix 1)** Statistical analysis could then be used to identify correlations and trends.
2. **Qualitative Methods:** To supplement quantitative findings, in-depth interviews or focus groups with a smaller, selected group of postgraduate students (6 students) will be conducted by asking participants the survey questions. This will help to gain a deeper understanding of their eating habits and the factors influencing them.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study will employ a cross-sectional research design, which is often used in health-related, social science, and behavioral research. This design allows the researcher to collect data at a specific point in time. (Wang & Cheng, 2020)

The research will be divided into two phases. In the first phase, a quantitative approach will be used. A structured questionnaire could be administered to a random sample of postgraduate students in the public university to gather data on their eating behavior. The questionnaire includes sections on their eating habits, perceived academic pressure, social influence, availability and cost of food, health considerations, and cultural background.

In the second phase, a qualitative approach will be used to delve deeper into the factors influencing eating behavior. This involves conducting semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions with a smaller, purposively selected group of students. The qualitative data will provide rich, detailed insights into the students' experiences and perceptions, which will help to explain the patterns and trends identified in the quantitative data.

Data from the two phases will then be triangulated to draw comprehensive conclusions about the factors influencing eating behavior among postgraduate students in the university. A summary of the research method can be found in the appendix (**See Appendix 2**)

RECRUITMENT, SAMPLING AND STUDY PARTICIPANTS.

Depending on the wide scope of the study, limited time and resources available, a sample size of 20 student will be sufficient for the (quantitative) and 6 students will be sufficient for the second (qualitative) phase.

The recruitment and selection of study participants will be done through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling methods.

The convenience sampling will involve selecting the 20 quantitative phase participants who are readily available and willing to participate in the study. This has been chosen because it is quick, easy, and an inexpensive way to recruit participants. It is however important to note that it may not be entirely representative of the population.

The purposive sampling will be used to select the 6 qualitative phase participants who can provide rich, relevant, and diverse data. These participants are therefore selected from the master's in public health postgraduate students with different cultural backgrounds and age groups.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS/ PROCEDURE.

The primary data collection method will be a structured questionnaire (**See Appendix 1**), distributed electronically via university email platforms. The questionnaire will contain questions related to eating behavior, diet preferences, and lifestyle habits. For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions will be conducted. These will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed. Focus groups will be facilitated through physical gatherings, while interviews will be conducted either in-person or virtually, depending on participant preferences. All data collection will be conducted after obtaining informed consent from participants. Strict measures will be implemented to ensure confidentiality and privacy throughout the data collection process.

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE.

The analysing of this data will include, both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Quantitative Analysis: The responses from the structured questionnaire will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean, median, mode, standard deviation) and inferential statistics using excel to uncover patterns, trends, and correlations. (Salkind & Frey, 2019)

Qualitative Analysis: Content analysis will be applied a qualitative method used to analyze text data. It involves categorizing verbal or behavioural data to classify, summarize and tabulate the data. (Krippendorff, 2004).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.

When conducting research using the aforementioned data analysis techniques, several ethical considerations should be adhered to. Firstly, privacy and confidentiality of the data must be maintained. Participants should be informed about how their data will be used and stored. Secondly, informed consent should be obtained from participants prior to data collection. Thirdly, it's crucial to avoid any form of fabrication or falsification in the data analysis process. Lastly, any potential conflicts of interest should be disclosed. The research should be designed and conducted in a way that minimizes harm to participants and maximizes the potential benefits.

RESULTS.

This study delivered the results (**See Appendix 3**) predicted by the hypothesis i.e.

- Postgraduate students in a public university are likely to have poor eating habits due to high academic pressures and time constraints.
- Students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have poorer nutritional choices due to financial constraints.
- The university environment plays a significant role in shaping the eating habits of postgraduate students.

The results from the survey showed that postgraduate students have poor eating habits, due to high academic pressures and time constraints. The majority of the students agreed to not having eating schedules (17 students), half of the students (10 students) agreed to not having full meals a day while most of the students agreed to academic pressure having a negative influence on their eating behaviour with 7 students giving a high ranking.

When it comes to the second hypothesis i.e., students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds being most likely to have poorer nutritional choices due to food constraints, it resulted to be true for the majority of students (13 students) finding the cost of food determining their food choices. Furthermore, to determine food choices, students were asked if cultural background had an influence, and it was observed that it indeed played a part in the choice of food consumed. For example, during the second phase (qualitative phase), a student of Asian decent agreed to eating very spicy food and avoiding preparing her food with hot spices she would usually use to prepare her meals when expecting student colleagues because they can't handle the spices, she consumes without getting sick.

The last hypothesis that states "The university environment plays a significant role in shaping the eating habits of postgraduate" was solidified from the findings of the survey. The majority of students (17 students) agreed that there are limited food options on and near campus which means the students have limited access to healthy foods. Furthermore, during the quality

research phase, two students agreed that the university mostly sells fizzy drinks that are not healthy therefore, they would only consume foods they carry from home.

DISCUSSION

The eating behaviors of postgraduate students in public universities are influenced by a myriad of factors. They range from academic pressures and time constraints, socio-economic background, and the university environment. The interaction of these factors significantly shapes the dietary patterns of these students, and understanding their implications is crucial in promoting healthier eating habits among this demographic (Smith, et al., 2012).

Among the most influential factors is academic stress. Postgraduate studies entail a high level of academic rigor, often involving long hours of lectures, research, and study. The demanding academic environment leaves little time for students to prepare nutritious meals, causing them to resort to readily available fast foods, which are often high in calories and low in nutritional value (Papier, et al., 2015). Indeed, a study by El Ansari et al. found a positive correlation between academic stress and poor eating habits among university students (El Ansari, et al., 2014).

The socio-economic background of students also plays a significant role in determining eating behavior. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face financial constraints that limit their access to diverse and nutritious food options. They may rely heavily on cheaper, calorie-dense foods, which often lack essential nutrients (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2015). Conversely, students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have more options and may have better access to healthier food choices. However, this does not necessarily mean they always make the healthiest choices, as other factors, such as time constraints and the university environment, still come into play.

The university environment also exerts a strong influence on students' eating habits. Universities are typically dotted with fast-food outlets, vending machines, and convenience stores, offering quick, high-calorie food options that appeal to time-strapped students (Horacek, et al., 2013). Additionally, the social norms and eating behaviors prevalent on campus can influence individual students. For instance, peer influence has been recognized as a significant determinant of dietary choices among university students (Lally, et al., 2011).

Overall, the eating behavior of postgraduate students in public universities is shaped by a complex interplay of factors. The academic pressures and time constraints, socio-economic background, and the university environment all contribute significantly to the dietary habits of these students. Understanding these influences is crucial for universities and policymakers to implement measures that promote healthier eating habits among students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the factors that influence postgraduate students' eating behavior in a public university are multifaceted and complex. The interplay of academic pressures and time constraints, socio-economic backgrounds, and the university environment significantly shape their dietary choices and habits.

Academic pressures and time constraints often force students to resort to convenient but unhealthy food choices, leading to irregular eating patterns. This underlines the importance of

time management in maintaining good nutrition habits. Universities could support students by providing resources such as healthy meal plans and cooking classes and promoting stress management techniques to alleviate academic pressures.

Socio-economic background plays a substantial role in dietary behavior. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may encounter challenges accessing nutritious food due to financial limitations. On the other hand, those from higher socio-economic backgrounds have a broad array of food options but may be tempted by unhealthy choices. This calls for more support systems, such as subsidized meal plans or food pantries, to ensure equitable access to healthy food for all students.

The university environment, with its fast-food outlets and social norms, also exerts a profound influence on students' food choices. Universities could make a difference by promoting healthier food options on campus and creating a supportive environment for healthy eating.

Furthermore, Universities should organise proper university food programs that are inclusive of foods from different backgrounds and emphasize the important of proper nutrition for a student during the sessions

In summary, while individual responsibility is important, institutional support and interventions are critical in promoting healthier eating habits among postgraduate students. Understanding the factors influencing students' eating behaviors can help universities and policymakers design effective strategies and interventions to improve the nutritional health of the student population.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Survey/Interview Questions

1. How often do you eat a full meal a day?

Never	Once	Twice	Thrice	More than thrice
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2. Do you have a regular eating schedule?

YES	NO
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3. How often do you eat out per week?

Never	Once	Twice	Thrice	More than thrice
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4. Do you consider the nutritional content of the food you eat?

YES	NO
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5. How often do you consume fast food or processed food items?

Never	Once	Twice	Thrice	More than thrice
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6. How much negative influence does your academic schedule have on your eating behaviour?
Rate 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest.

1	2	3	4	5
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7. How often do you skip meals due to academic workload?

Never	Once	Twice	Thrice	More than thrice
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8. Do you believe your eating habits are influenced by your peers or social group?

YES	PARTLY	NO
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9. Does the availability of food options on or near campus influence your eating behaviour?

YES	PARTLY	NO
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10. How important is the cost of food in determining what you eat? Rate 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest.

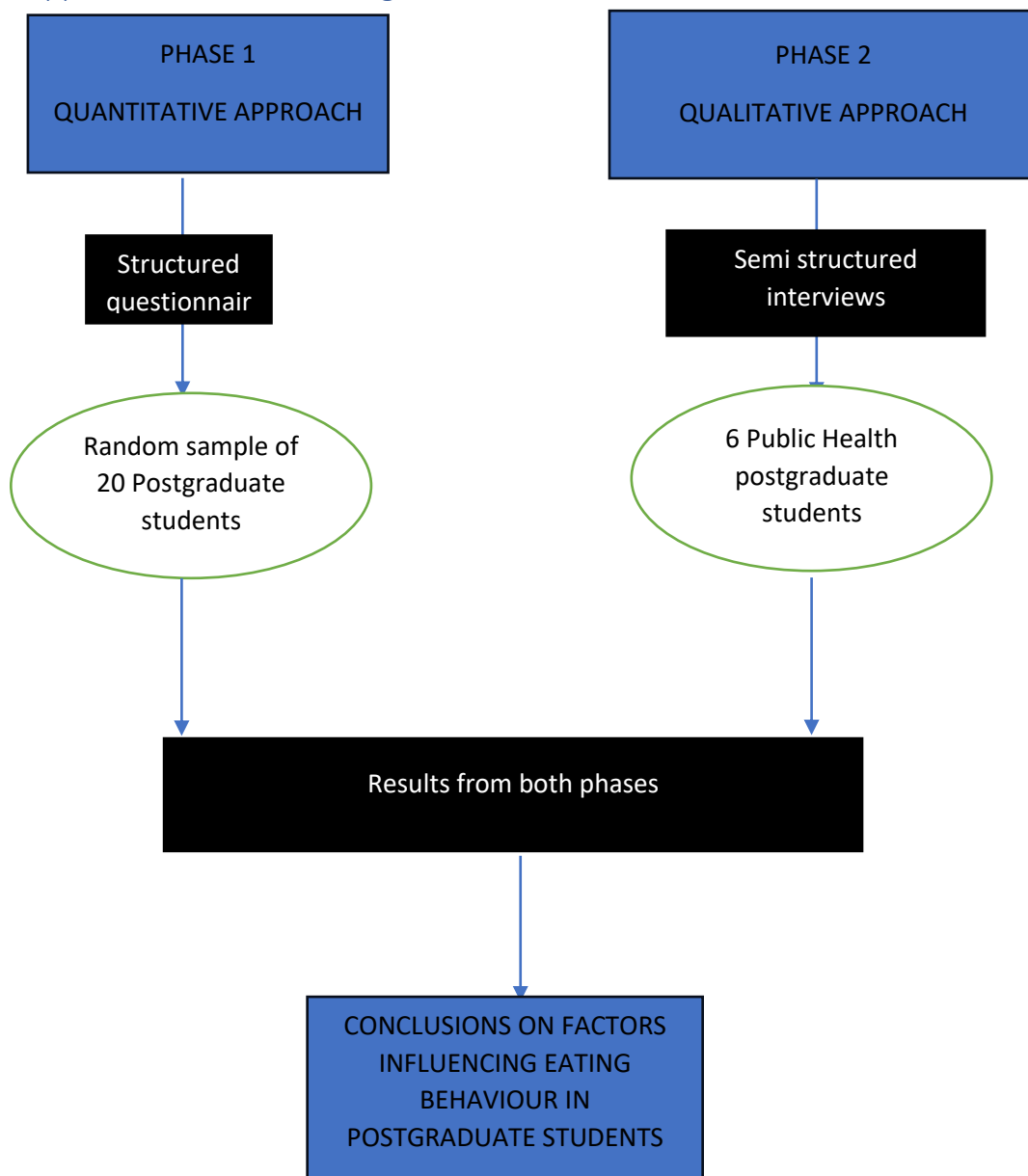
1	2	3	4	5
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11. Do health considerations influence your food choices?

YES	PARTLY	NO
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12. How much does your cultural background influence your eating habits? Rate 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest?

Appendix 2: Research Design



Appendix 3: Results

SURVEY QUESTIONS	NUMBER OF STUDENTS				
	Never	Once	Twice	More than once	
Full meals a day	3	7	10	0	
Eating out per week	1	9	7	3	
	Rating 5	Rating 4	Rating 3	Rating 2	Rating 1
Negative influence academic pressure has on eating behaviour	7	4	5	2	2
Cost of food determining food	13	1	3	2	1
Cultural background influence on eating habits	15	1	2	2	0
	YES	PARTLY	NO		
Eating habits influenced by peers	0	6	14		
Availability of food options on/near campus	0	3	17		
	YES	NO			
Have a regular eating schedule	3	17			
Consider the nutritional content of food	17	3			