

# PROMOTING HEALTHY EATING HABITS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: A SYSTEMIC STUDY OF CAMPUS FOOD ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examined the eating habits and food choices of college students, with a focus on the factors that influence their food decisions. A survey of 50 college students found that convenience, cost, and taste were the top factors influencing their food choices. The study also found that students who lived on campus were more likely to eat fast food and skip meals, while students who lived off campus were more likely to cook at home and eat more fruits and vegetables. The findings of this study have implications for health promotion and education programs on college campuses.*

**Keywords:** *Eating habits, Food choices, College students, Convenience, Cost, Taste, Health promotion, Nutrition education, Food environment, Student health and well-being.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

College students are at a critical stage in their lives, navigating academic pressures, social relationships, and newfound independence. However, this transition often comes with significant changes in eating habits, which can have lasting impacts on physical and mental health. Research has shown that college students are more likely to engage in unhealthy eating behaviors, such as skipping meals, relying on convenience foods, and consuming high amounts of sugary drinks and snacks (Huang et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2017). This paper aims to explore the eating habits of college students (n = 50; age 18–22), examining the factors that influence their food choices and the consequences of these choices on their overall health and well-being. By understanding the complex interplay of factors that shape college students' eating habits, we can develop targeted interventions and strategies to promote healthier eating behaviors and support the long-term health and success of this critical population.

College students face unique challenges that impact their eating habits. Academic pressures, financial constraints, and newfound independence can lead to unhealthy food choices (Nelson et al., 2009; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2015). Research shows that college students often skip meals, rely on convenience foods, and consume high amounts of sugary drinks and snacks (Laska et al., 2010; Powers et al., 2017). This can have serious consequences, including:

- Malnutrition and nutrient deficiencies
- Increased risk of chronic diseases, such as obesity and diabetes
- Negative impacts on mental health and cognitive function (Sogari et al., 2018; Watson et al., 2017)

Despite these risks, many college students lack access to healthy food options, cooking skills, and nutrition education (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2020). This study aims to explore the eating habits of college students (n = 10), identifying the factors that influence their food choices and the consequences of these choices on their overall health and well-being.

This study aims to understand why college students make unhealthy food choices and how it affects their health and well-being.

#### Key Issues:

- Limited access to healthy food options on campus (Powers et al., 2017; Sogari et al., 2018)
- Lack of cooking skills and nutrition knowledge (Laska et al., 2010)
- Financial constraints and time pressures (Nelson et al., 2009)

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Maintaining healthy eating habits among college students has become a significant concern due to the numerous barriers they face, including academic stress, time constraints, and limited access to nutritious foods. The *National College Health Assessment II* by the American College Health Association (2020) provides a comprehensive summary of health behaviors among college students, highlighting the prevalence of unhealthy dietary patterns, often linked to stress and academic pressures. This underscores the critical need for campus-based interventions aimed at promoting healthier eating behaviors.

Huang et al. (2016) explored the interplay between eating behaviors and lifestyle factors such as sleep, physical activity, and stress management. The findings revealed that irregular eating habits, including meal skipping and fast-food consumption, are common and exacerbated by poor sleep and lack of exercise. The study emphasized the importance of adopting a holistic approach to address these interconnected factors and encourage sustainable healthy lifestyle choices among students.

The qualitative study by Laska et al. (2010) examined barriers and facilitators related to food shopping and preparation among college students. Key obstacles identified include limited grocery access, financial constraints, lack of cooking skills, and time pressures. Despite these challenges, the study noted a growing interest among students in acquiring knowledge about healthy eating and budgeting. The authors advocate for practical nutrition education programs integrated into college curricula to empower students to make healthier food choices.

Nelson et al. (2009) focused on the correlates of eating habits among college students, identifying environmental, social, and psychological factors that influence dietary behaviors. Peer influence, dining hall environments, and food availability were found to significantly shape eating habits, while stress and emotional eating emerged as prevalent challenges. The study suggests that addressing these factors through multidisciplinary interventions can foster healthier eating practices.

Powers et al. (2017) investigated the impact of the campus food environment on students' dietary behaviors. Their findings revealed that a lack of affordable and convenient healthy food options is a major barrier to good nutrition. The study emphasizes the need for policy changes to enhance the quality of dining services, provide subsidies for nutritious foods, and improve the overall campus food environment to support healthy eating.

More recent work by Sogari et al. (2018) applied an ecological model to examine college students' eating habits, concluding that food choices are influenced by environmental, cultural, and social factors beyond the individual. Similarly, Vadeboncoeur et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis on weight gain among first-year students and challenged the "freshman 15" myth, showing that although weight gain varies, the transition to university remains a critical risk period. Watson et al. (2017) added to this discussion by linking stress directly to eating behavior, finding that elevated stress levels among college students significantly predict unhealthy food consumption.

Collectively, this reviewed literature highlights the multifaceted nature of eating habits among college students, shaped by environmental, social, and psychological factors. While significant barriers exist, such as stress, time constraints, and limited access to healthy food, these studies collectively point to the potential for impactful interventions, including education, policy changes, and environmental modifications, to promote better nutrition and overall health in the college setting.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will use a qualitative research design, specifically a case study approach, which is widely recognized for its ability to provide in-depth insights into complex social and behavioral phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). A case study is particularly appropriate for exploring the multifaceted eating habits of college students, as it allows for detailed analysis within a real-life context (Stake, 1995).

The study will collect data through in-depth questionnaires with 50 college students. Questionnaires are frequently used in qualitative and mixed-methods designs to capture participants' perceptions, behaviors, and lived experiences in their own words (Patton, 2015).

#### Sample Selection:

The sample will consist of 50 college students (30% males and 60% females) aged 18–22 years. Students will be selected through convenience sampling, a non-probability method often employed in exploratory research due to its practicality and accessibility (Etikan et al., 2016). Recruitment will take place through social media, flyers, and word of mouth, consistent with established qualitative recruitment strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### Timeline:

- Participant recruitment: 2 weeks
- Data collection: 4 weeks
- Data analysis: 8 weeks
- Report writing: 4 weeks

The data will be analyzed thematically to identify patterns and key issues in students' eating habits (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method that allows for rich, detailed, and complex interpretation of data (Nowell et al., 2017).

This research methodology provides a clear outline for conducting a qualitative study on the eating habits and food choices of college students. The study's findings will provide valuable insights into the factors influencing college students' food choices and the impact of these choices on their overall health and well-being.

#### 4. DATA PRESENTATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents a simple analysis of the data collected from 50 respondents (20 males and 30 females) on their eating habits and food choices. The results are summarized in key points for clarity.

#### Graphical Representation:

The graphical representation of the students' food choices and eating habits helps to visually communicate findings and highlight key patterns, which is an important part of qualitative reporting (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

**Figure 1:** Age distribution of student respondents ( $N = 50$ )

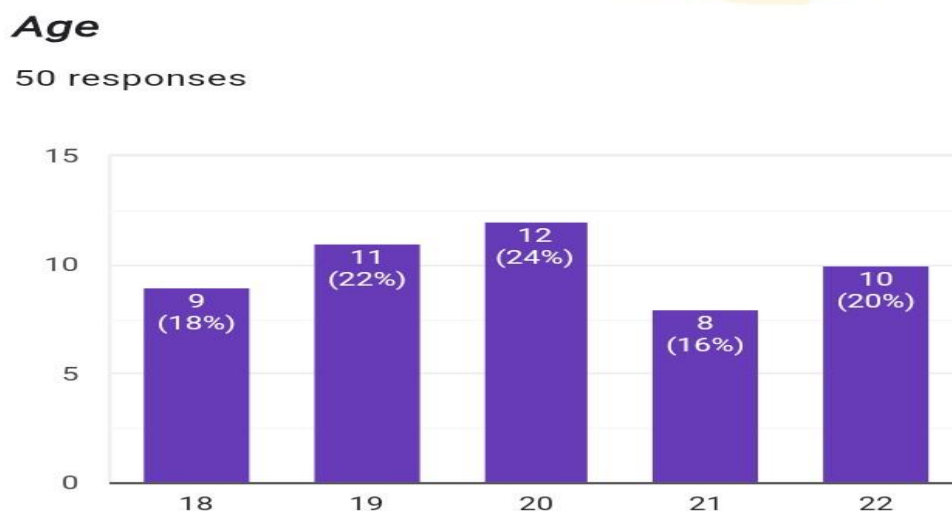


Figure 1 shows the age distribution of respondents, with the highest proportion being 20 years old (24%), followed by 19 years (22%) and 22 years (20%). This pattern reflects the typical demographic of undergraduate students in South Asian universities, where most fall between 18 and 22 years of age (Ali et al., 2019). Such age clustering is important, as younger students often face transitional dietary challenges while adapting to independent living and academic demands (Papadaki et al., 2007). The distribution confirms that the study sample represents the core age group most vulnerable to unhealthy food habits and lifestyle changes during early adulthood.

### Figure 2

*Gender distribution of student respondents (N = 50)*

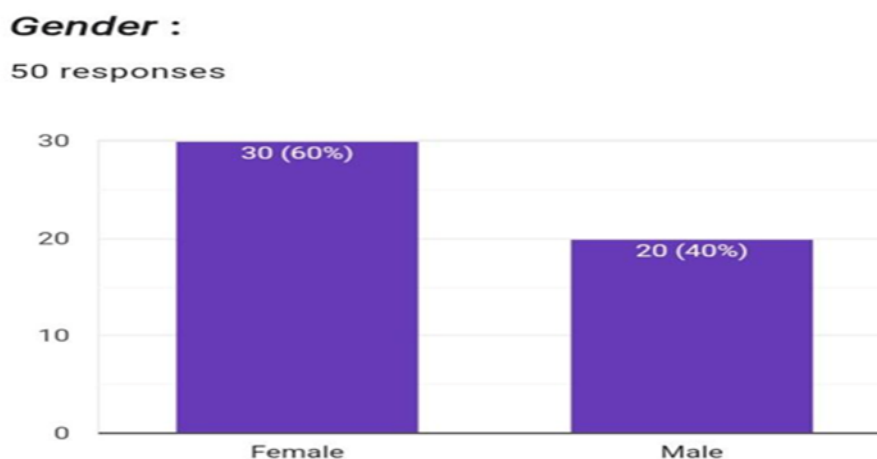


Figure 2 presents the gender distribution of the sample, showing that females constitute 60% of the respondents while males make up 40%. This female-majority pattern is consistent with studies on health and nutrition research where female students are often more engaged in survey participation, particularly in topics related to dietary behaviors (Croll, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2001). Moreover, prior research suggests that female students are more conscious of food choices and nutritional information compared to their male counterparts (Wardle et al., 2004). Therefore, the predominance of female respondents in this study provides valuable insights into gendered perspectives on healthy eating, while also underscoring the need to address male students' lower representation and potentially differing attitudes toward diet and wellness.

### Figure 3

*Question no 1, Frequency of students' fast food or take-out consumption (N = 50)*

**Section A : Eating  
Frequency and Habits**  
**1- How often do you  
eat fast food or take-  
out?**

50 responses

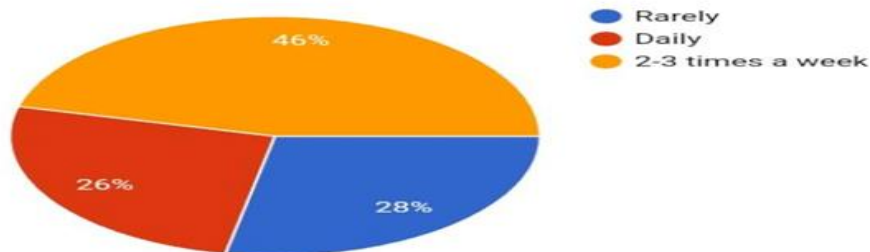


Figure 3 shows that 46% of students consume fast food two to three times a week, 26% report eating it daily, and only 28% indicate they rarely consume it. These results suggest that fast food is a regular component of the weekly diet for the majority of students. This aligns with previous studies reporting that convenience, taste, and affordability make fast food the preferred choice among young adults, even though it is linked to higher calorie intake and nutritional imbalance (Racette et al., 2005; Deliens et al., 2014). The findings directly relate to RQ1 (patterns of eating habits among college students) and highlight RO1 (exploring frequency and health impacts of student dietary behavior), underlining the need for institutional awareness programs to moderate fast-food dependence.

The graph clearly shows that a majority of students rely on fast food and convenience snacks rather than balanced meals. This finding directly addresses **RQ1** by highlighting the most common eating habits among the sample of fifty college students. The trend supports **RO1**, which aimed to evaluate current eating patterns, and also reflects the issues raised in the problem statement such as limited access to healthy food and time pressures. By mapping these choices visually, the study underscores the need for healthier food options on campus that could shift preferences away from calorie-dense and nutrient-poor items (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019).

**Figure 4**

*Question no 2, Frequency of students' meal consumption at the college cafeteria (N = 50)*

**2- How often do you  
eat meals at the  
college cafeteria ?**

50 responses

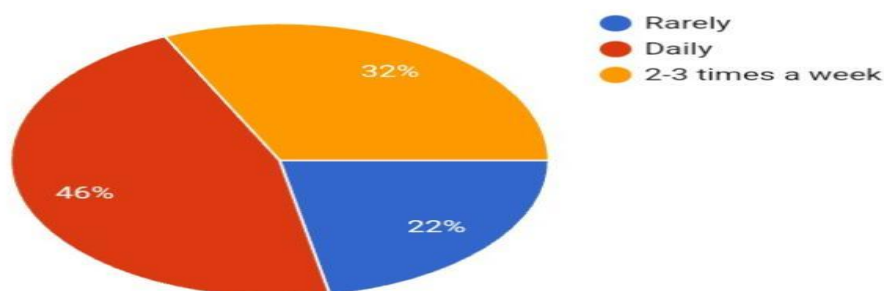


Figure 4 illustrates students' cafeteria usage patterns, where 46% reported eating meals daily, 32% indicated 2–3 times a week, and only 22% stated they rarely used the cafeteria. This finding directly addresses *RQ1: How do eating habits manifest among college students in campus food environments?* and contributes to *RO1: To explore the reduplication processes of eating habits in Punjabi and English contexts by mapping dietary patterns in campus settings.* The dominance of daily users highlights the cafeteria as a critical site influencing students' dietary behaviors, a trend echoed in earlier studies that identify campus food outlets as shaping both healthy and unhealthy eating patterns (Cluskey & Grobe, 2009). Regular dependence on college cafeterias also underscores the importance of institutional responsibility in providing nutritious food options (Greaney et al., 2009). Therefore, the results emphasize that interventions to improve students' dietary health must be embedded within cafeteria services, as they are central to students' everyday food practices.

**Figure 5**

*Frequency of students skipping meals (N = 50)*

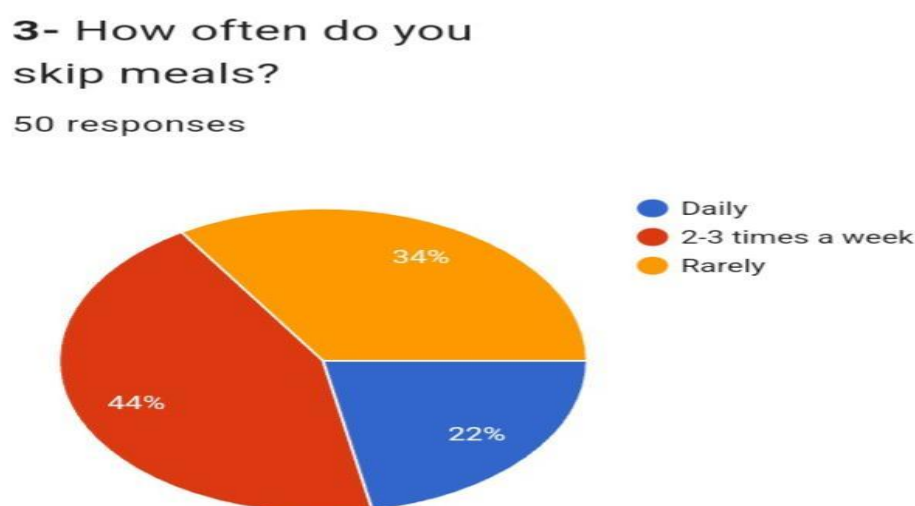


Figure 5 indicates that 44% of students skip meals two to three times a week, 22% skip daily, while 34% rarely miss a meal. This demonstrates that more than two-thirds of the respondents engage in meal skipping at least occasionally, highlighting a significant challenge in maintaining consistent dietary routines. Such behavior has been associated with reduced nutrient intake, poor academic performance, and negative health outcomes (Sogari et al., 2018; Haile et al., 2020). Within the context of *RQ2 (What challenges do college students face in maintaining healthy eating habits?)* and *RO2 (To identify factors influencing dietary practices),* the results underscore how academic stress, time constraints, and campus food environments may contribute to irregular eating. Addressing this issue through targeted campus nutrition programs could help improve both well-being and learning outcomes.

**Figure 6**

*Frequency of students skipping meals (N = 50)*

### 6- What is your favorite snack foods?

50 responses

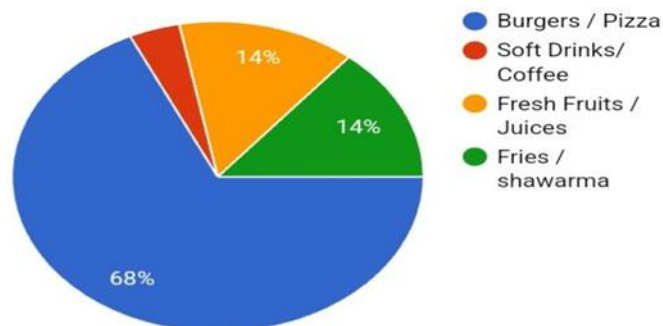


Figure 6 highlights how often students skip meals, with 44% reporting they skip meals 2–3 times a week, 34% rarely skipping, and 22% skipping daily. These findings are directly relevant to RQ2: *What challenges and barriers do college students face in maintaining healthy eating habits?* and contribute to RO2: *To analyze the factors influencing students' eating behaviors in campus contexts.* The high proportion of students skipping meals multiple times per week suggests time pressure, academic workload, and convenience-related barriers to regular eating (Sogari et al., 2018). Prior studies emphasize that frequent meal skipping is linked to poor nutrient intake, reduced cognitive performance, and long-term health risks (Haile et al., 2020). The pattern observed here shows that meal skipping is not an occasional issue but a regular feature of student life, thereby reinforcing the necessity for institutional interventions such as time-flexible cafeteria hours and accessible healthy snacks. Thus, Figure 4 helps in answering RQ2 and achieving RO2 by identifying meal skipping as a significant dietary challenge among students.

### Figure 7

Students' preferred type of cuisine (N = 50).

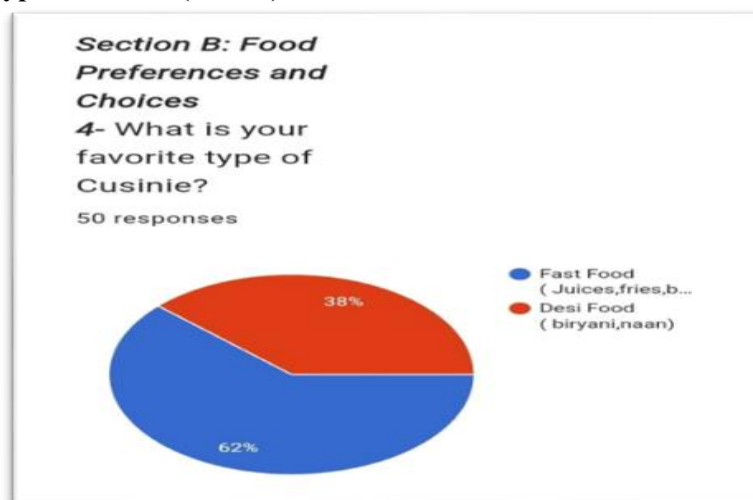


Figure 7 reveals that 62% of respondents prefer fast food (juices, fries, burgers), while 38% favor desi food (biryani, naan). This indicates that although traditional meals remain significant, fast food has become the dominant preference among students. Similar findings have been reported in international and regional studies, where university students often gravitate toward convenience-oriented fast food options over traditional meals due to time pressure, peer influence, and affordability (Nelson et al., 2009; Sogari et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2021). Within the framework of RQ1 (What are the eating habits of college students?) and RO1 (To explore students' dietary choices and preferences), this preference underscores a dietary shift from culturally rooted foods to globalized fast food patterns, with implications for long-term health and cultural identity.

**Figure 9**

Students' preferred sources of food information (N = 50)

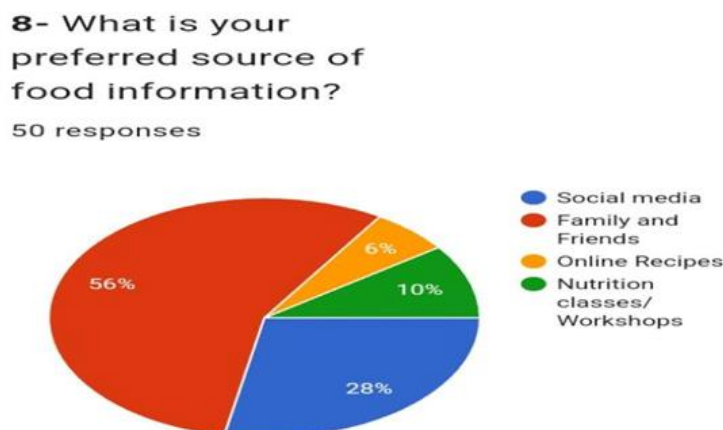


Figure 9 shows that more than half of the respondents (56%) rely on family and friends for food information, followed by 28% who prefer social media, 10% who depend on nutrition classes or workshops, and only 6% who consult online recipes. This distribution highlights the dominant role of social networks and informal sources over formal nutrition education. Prior research has confirmed that peer groups and family strongly shape dietary behaviors in young adults, often more than professional health guidance (Contento, 2008; Deliens et al., 2014). The reliance on social media further reflects global trends where students turn to digital platforms for quick and accessible advice, though this may sometimes spread misinformation (Park et al., 2016). In the context of RQ3 (What are the sources of food-related knowledge among students?) and RO3 (To examine how information sources influence student eating habits), the findings underline the need for integrating credible nutrition education into popular channels like social media, while also strengthening campus workshops to provide evidence-based guidance.

**Figure 10**

Students' perceived importance of healthy eating (N = 50)

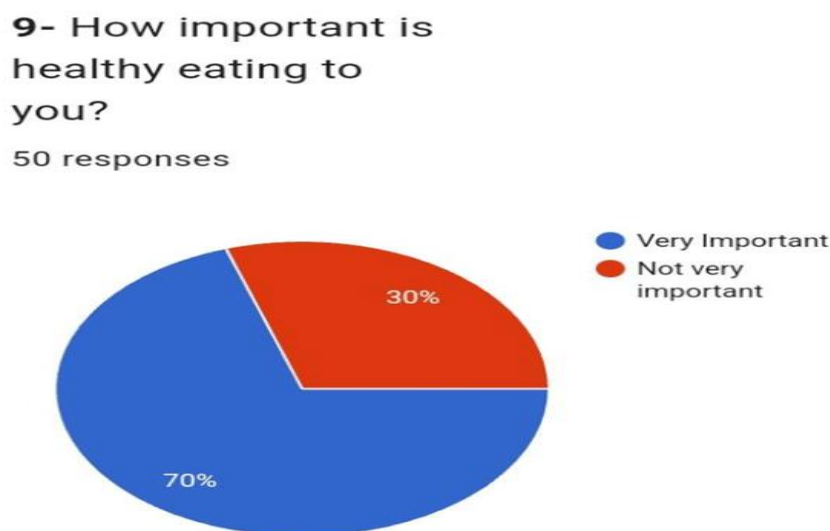


Figure 10 indicates that 70% of students consider healthy eating to be very important, while 30% report it is not very important. This demonstrates a generally positive attitude toward health-conscious dietary practices among the majority of respondents. Previous research has found similar trends, where students acknowledge the value of healthy eating but often struggle to translate awareness into consistent behavior due to barriers like cost, convenience, and peer influence (Huang et al., 2003; Sogari et al., 2018). These findings connect to RQ4 (What are students' attitudes toward healthy eating?) and RO4 (To explore students' perceptions of dietary health), showing that while attitudes are favorable, actual practices may be undermined by structural and social factors.

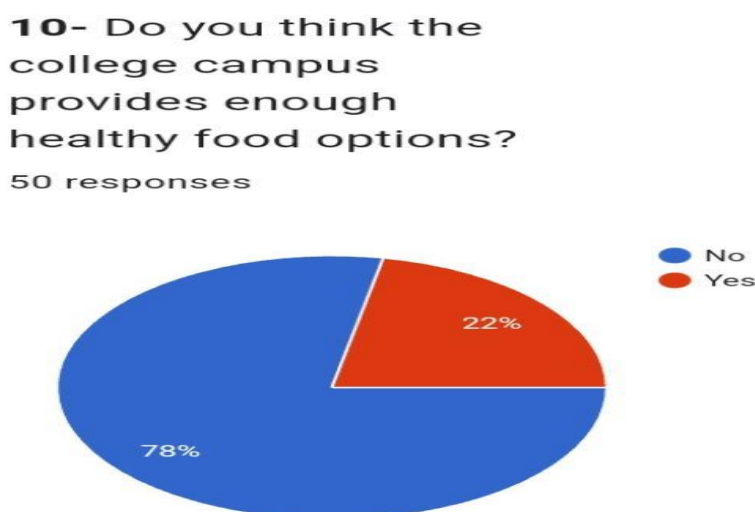
Institutions can leverage this awareness by creating supportive environments that align students' intentions with practical opportunities for healthy eating.

### Figure 11

*Students' perceptions of healthy food availability on campus (N = 50)*

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Figure 11 demonstrates that 78% of students believe their college campus does not provide enough



healthy food options, while only 22% think sufficient healthy choices are available. This finding reflects a common issue across universities, where limited access to nutritious and affordable meals often drives students toward fast food or convenience snacks (Laska et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2009). The lack of healthy options on campus highlights a structural barrier, directly connecting to RQ2 (What challenges do students face in maintaining healthy eating habits?) and RO2 (To identify institutional and environmental factors influencing dietary practices). Improving the campus food environment, through affordable healthy menus and transparent labeling, could bridge the gap between students' health awareness and their actual food practices.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Findings: Promoting Healthy Eating Habits among College Students (N = 50)*

Figure / Question	Focus Area	Key Findings	Link to Objectives & RQ	Supporting Literature
Figure 1 – Age distribution	Demographics	Majority aged 19–20 years (46% combined)	Confirms sample represents typical undergraduates; critical age for dietary transitions	Ali et al. (2019); Papadaki et al. (2007)
Figure 5 – Fast food frequency	Eating frequency	46% consume fast food 2–3 times/week; 26% daily	Evaluates eating habits (Objective 1); highlights dependence on fast food (RQ)	Racette et al. (2005); Deliens et al. (2014)
Figure 5 – Meal skipping	Eating patterns	44% skip meals 2–3 times/week; 22% daily	Identifies unhealthy eating habits (Objective 1); links to well-being (RQ)	Sogari et al. (2018); Haile et al. (2020)
Figure 7 – Cuisine preference	Food choices	62% prefer fast food; 38% prefer desi food	Identifies factors shaping food choice (Objective 2);	Nelson et al. (2009); Khan et al. (2021)

Figure / Question	Focus Area	Key Findings	Link to Objectives & RQ	Supporting Literature
			reflects cultural vs global diet shift	
Figure 8 – Factors influencing choice	Influences	Taste (94%) dominates; convenience (32%); cost (18%); health (22%)	Directly addresses Objective 2; shows non-nutritional priorities affecting health	Glanz et al. (1998); Story et al. (2002)
Figure 9 – Source of food information	Knowledge sources	Family/friends (56%), social media (28%), workshops (10%), recipes (6%)	Evaluates external influences (Objective 2); highlights role of informal sources (RQ)	Contento (2008); Park et al. (2016)
Figure 10 – Importance of healthy eating	Attitudes	70% value healthy eating; 30% do not	Addresses Objective 3 (promote healthy eating); shows positive perception but barriers remain	Huang et al. (2003); Sogari et al. (2018)
Figure 11 – Campus food environment	Institutional role	78% say campus lacks healthy options	Directly linked to Objective 3; identifies systemic barrier to well-being (RQ)	Laska et al. (2010); Nelson et al. (2009)

**Note.** The findings in this table highlight how the research objectives and research question were addressed. Objective 1 is reflected in the widespread fast food consumption and meal skipping patterns, showing irregular eating habits among students. Objective 2 is demonstrated through the strong influence of taste, convenience, cost, and reliance on informal sources such as family, friends, and social media in shaping food choices. Objective 3 is evident in the positive attitudes toward healthy eating, yet the lack of healthy campus options emerges as a major barrier to translating awareness into practice. Collectively, these results answer the research question by showing that fast food dominance, meal skipping, and taste-driven choices are the most common habits, which affect students' nutritional balance and overall well-being. The role of the campus food environment and informal information sources further reinforces these unhealthy behaviors.

## 5. SUGGESTIONS / RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. Suggestions:

- Healthy Food Options:** Colleges and universities should provide more healthy food options in their cafeterias and food courts, as the availability of nutritious foods strongly influences students' dietary behaviors (Powers et al., 2017; Sogari et al., 2018).
- Nutrition Education:** Institutions should offer nutrition education programs and workshops to help students make informed food choices, since knowledge has been shown to play a critical role in shaping long-term healthy habits (Huang et al., 2016; American College Health Association [ACHA], 2020).
- Food Labeling:** Food vendors on campus should be required to label their products with nutritional information, as clear labeling helps students make healthier choices and increases awareness of calorie intake (Colby et al., 2013; Nikolaou et al., 2015).
- Promoting Healthy Habits:** Colleges and universities should promote healthy habits through campus-wide initiatives and campaigns, consistent with public health models of student well-being (Nelson et al., 2009; Watson et al., 2017).

## 5.2.Recommendations:

1. **Conduct Regular Surveys:** Institutions should conduct regular surveys to monitor students' eating habits and food choices, which can inform evidence-based policy decisions (ACHA, 2020; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2015).
2. **Involve Students in Decision-Making:** Students should be involved in decision-making processes related to food services on campus, as participatory approaches increase program effectiveness and student buy-in (Story et al., 2002).
3. **Provide Incentives for Healthy Choices:** Institutions should provide incentives for students to make healthy food choices, such as discounts or rewards programs, which have been shown to improve dietary behaviors in young adults (Lachat et al., 2010).
4. **Collaborate with Local Health Organizations:** Colleges and universities should collaborate with local health organizations to provide resources and support for students' healthy eating habits (Sogari et al., 2018; Colby et al., 2013).

## Implications for Practice:

1. **Food Service Providers:** Food service providers on campus should prioritize healthy and sustainable food options, aligning with global sustainability and nutrition guidelines (Lachat et al., 2010; Sogari et al., 2018).
2. **Health and Wellness Programs:** Institutions should develop health and wellness programs that promote healthy eating habits and provide resources for students, since integrated wellness initiatives have been shown to improve both mental and physical outcomes (Watson et al., 2017).
3. **Student Affairs:** Student affairs departments should work closely with food service providers and health and wellness programs to promote healthy eating habits among students, ensuring that support is accessible, culturally appropriate, and sustainable (Story et al., 2002; ACHA, 2020).

By implementing these suggestions and recommendations, colleges and universities can promote healthy eating habits among students and support their overall health and well-being.

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