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PERCEIVED RISK AND HEALTHY EATING DETERMINANTS: A STUDY AMONG STUDENTS IN SHAH ALAM

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Abstract:

Although healthy eating is essential for preventing nutrition-related diseases and promoting well-being, unhealthy dietary practices remain prevalent among university students. Numerous factors that influence healthy eating habits have been studied in the past, but few studies have concurrently looked at the impact of perceived risk, the social environment, the physical environment, and social media in the context of Malaysian higher education. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate how these variables affected students' healthy eating habits at Management and Science University (MSU), Shah Alam. 300 university students were surveyed using structured questionnaires as part of a quantitative cross-sectional study design. The data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis to determine the relative influence of the proposed factors on healthy eating habits. All five

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factors had a significant impact on students' healthy eating habits, according to multiple regression analysis, with the physical environment having the biggest influence and perceived risk being the most significant factor. The social environment and social media both had a significant positive influence. These results imply that students' awareness of health risks, social influences, environmental factors, and exposure to digital media all have an impact on their eating habits. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on healthy eating behavior by deepening our understanding of different behavioral determinants in a university setting. Likewise, the findings provide policymakers, health educators, and university administrators with useful information for developing targeted health promotion programs and fostering campus environments that support students' healthier eating habits.

Keywords:

Culinary Industry, Food and Beverage Industry, Healthy Eating, Physical Environment, Perceived Risk, Social Environment, Social Media



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Introduction

University students are especially vulnerable to unhealthy eating habits due to the widespread availability of appealing but nutritionally poor food options, limited access to cooking facilities, and a lack of nutritional knowledge. In addition, given the unique food environment and demographic characteristics of higher education institutions, universities are well-placed to develop and implement targeted interventions to improve student eating behaviors.

Furthermore, the idea of “healthy eating” is often subjective, depending on the individual’s perceptions of food composition. For example, foods labeled low fat, organic or low sugar are widely assumed to be better choices, although this may not always be the case in nutritional terms (Schultchen et al., 2019). There are several key factors influencing students’ food choice, such as sensory appeal, hygiene standards, cost, availability and time constraints. Social factors also significantly influence dietary habits, especially those of family, friends and peers (Huatangari et al., 2023). In particular, food cost has been identified as a key barrier, particularly in the physical environment of university settings. Furthermore, the social environment has direct and indirect impacts on students’ eating behaviour.

Additionally, the family routine established in childhood is usually continued in university and the level of family support can facilitate or hinder healthy eating habits. Similarly, peer influence may also have an impact on meal timings and food choices, making students feel compelled to conform to social expectations or peer-related status norms for eating” (Alshehri

et al., 2023). In order to prevent chronic non-communicable diseases, many of which are caused by behavioural and unmodifiable risk factors, it is crucial to promote healthy eating habits and regular physical activity. A healthy diet and exercise can greatly enhance the quality of life and reduce the risk of long-term health issues (Cerqueira Sousa et al., 2022).

In the digital era, social media plays a significant role in influencing students' food consumption patterns. It is a great source of information and inspiration and influences dietary choices with its visually appealing content and trends. Although social media can be a positive tool to stimulate culinary exploration and awareness, it has the potential to have a negative effect on students' perceptions and behaviours regarding healthy eating (Patwardhan et al., 2024).

Literature Review

Healthy Food

According to Cerqueira Sousa et al. (2022), healthy food is becoming more widely recognised as a basic human right. It must be affordable, accessible, culturally relevant, and produced sustainably while adhering to the values of moderation, balance, variety, and enjoyment. The preference for organic foods, which are thought to be minimally processed and free of additives or chemical residues, is influenced by consumer perceptions of food healthiness that go beyond nutritional content and include sensory pleasure, satisfaction, and beliefs in purity and naturalness (Ditlevsen et al., 2019). In addition, scientific evidence indicates that plant-based dietary patterns, such as the Mediterranean diet, are important in the reduction of chronic non-communicable diseases through a higher intake of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and nuts, and a lower intake of processed meats (Cena & Calder, 2020). In addition to the growing interest in healthy eating, global labelling practices have been shaped, with countries using terms like "foods for specific health uses," "functional foods," and "healthy foods," yet consumers consistently associate healthy eating with moderation, balance, and variety of diets (CuestaValiño et al., 2020). Furthermore, health literacy strongly influences dietary behavior, as poor health decisions, higher hospitalization rates, and inadequate preventive practices are associated with low health literacy. The Philippines have demonstrated that general literacy does not necessarily translate to effective health literacy (Cecila & Zamora, 2019; WHO, 2013).

Behaviour Towards Healthy Eating Among Students

Students' dietary choices are influenced by healthy eating behavior, which includes conscious, repeated, and socially influenced actions. Due to stress, limited time and rest, financial constraints, and changes in lifestyle, university students are particularly susceptible to unhealthy eating. According to Medina et al. (2020), despite the fact that students in culinary or nutrition-related fields are expected to eat healthier, the evidence regarding whether nutrition knowledge improves eating habits is inconsistent. Behavior is also influenced by motivations like controlling one's weight and preventing illness. However, there are many different definitions of healthy eating, and problematic behaviors like restricting one's food intake, binge eating, or purging have the potential to develop into clinical eating disorders (Schultchen et al., 2019; Rosen et al., 2023). According to Ragavi & Muthu Meenakshi (2024), family and peer interactions have been shown to encourage both food intake and healthier food choices. Environmental studies emphasize multilevel determinants like peer support, food prices, taste

preferences, and media exposure, and health literacy further mediate relationships between sociodemographic factors and health-promoting behaviors (Lai et al., 2021). Due to time constraints, many students continue to rely on low-nutrient, convenient foods that may have long-term health consequences later in life (Wongprawmas et al., 2022).

Physical Environment

The physical environment is crucial in forming healthy eating habits because people's food choices are shaped by their interactions with family, friends, home, school, workplace, and larger societal structures (Marcone et al., 2020). Research indicates that although young adults and adolescents are aware of what makes food healthy, this awareness does not always translate into healthier choices, often because of factors like value for money, convenience, and temptation (Neufeld et al., 2022). According to Ragavi & Muthu Meenakshi (2024), the availability of home-cooked meals and the growth of online food delivery both influence dietary patterns. Furthermore, appealing unhealthy options are widely available in university settings, while healthier options are more expensive and less accessible. Students' ability to prepare nutritious meals is further hindered by additional constraints like inadequate storage, limited cooking facilities, and shared kitchen conditions (Hafiz et al., 2023). In addition, given that the majority of Malaysians are obese, it is evident from the demographics of those who took part in the survey that they are increasingly choosing healthy foods. (2021) (Jamaludin et al. These results show that students' ability to eat healthily is significantly influenced by their physical environment.

Social Environment

The social environment plays a critical role in shaping students' eating behaviour, as food choices are strongly influenced by family practices, peer norms, cultural beliefs, and daily social interactions (Mollaei et al., 2023). Furthermore, unhealthy eating norms are accepted as normal, it is difficult for students to recognise the advantages of healthy eating because they usually adopt eating habits that are similar to those of their social circles. Family and peer influence can encourage healthier choices, although can also promote negative behaviour that contributes to weight gain and poor diet quality, so when social pressure reinforces unhealthy eating patterns (Amore et al., 2019). Besides that, perceptions of what constitutes "normal" or acceptable food are further shaped by social cultural values that are passed down through peer groups and family customs, forming enduring habits that are challenging to break (Oljans et al., 2024). According to research, education programs and interventions should concentrate on the dietary habits of adolescents (Ragavi & Muthu Meenakshi, 2024). Furthermore, poor eating habits can continue into adulthood, increasing the risk of diseases linked to nutrition and having an impact on productivity and long-term well-being. Additionally, emotional and psychological factors such as body image, attitudes toward food, and guilt impact students' decisions to eat healthily (Huang & Liu, 2021; Deliens et al., 2014).

On the other hand, limited parental control during the university years increases independence and may expose young adults to more unhealthy food choices. Overall, the social environment significantly shapes students' behaviour toward healthy eating through the combined influence of social norms, family practices, peer networks, and cultural values.

Perceived Risk

University students' healthy eating behaviours are significantly influenced by perceived risk, as their demanding daily routines and reliance on convenient food outlets often contribute to poor dietary choices (Cerqueira Sousa et al., 2022). Chronic non-communicable diseases like obesity and type 2 diabetes are more likely to develop when people eat a lot of energy-dense foods that are also high in fat, sugar, and calories. In addition, stress, mood swings, and reward-seeking behaviors may encourage overeating and a preference for unhealthy food choices (Kent et al., 2024). Negative dietary changes have also been linked to the college experience. Antwi et al. (2024) claim that university students tend to consume more fast food and snack foods while consuming fewer fruits, vegetables, and other nutrient-dense foods. Metabolic disorders, cardiovascular diseases, and lower academic performance may result from these eating habits. Even though these well-known health risks are known, many students underestimate the long-term effects of their eating habits and believe they have enough control over their eating habits. In addition, Huang and Liu (2021) reported that obesity remains one of the most prominent perceived health risks associated with unhealthy eating patterns, primarily driven by an insufficient intake of essential nutrients and an excessive intake of foods high in sugar and fat.

Social Media

Due to their constant exposure to food images, recipes, and content driven by influencers, students' eating habits have become significantly influenced by social media. According to research (Keser et al., 2020; Khayrina Kamarudzaman et al., n.d.), students' taste preferences, food choices, and awareness of dietary trends are influenced by their frequent use of platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and food-related channels. Viewing food content is linked to increased desire to eat, higher calorie intake, and even higher BMI. Furthermore, exposure to food-related social media is also associated with eating disorders, poor consumption habits, and body image problems (Wu et al., 2024). Additionally, by serving as unofficial nutrition educators and influencing followers' dietary decisions, influencers significantly contribute to the promotion of healthy eating (Pila et al., 2021). Further research indicates that by emphasizing the advantages and disadvantages of social media on eating habits, nutrition-focused content can motivate young adults to make healthier decisions (Klassen et al., 2018).

Social media is a vital communication tool for both individuals and businesses, and it is a substantial source of user-generated big data that supports customer analysis procedures. Mazme et al., 2022.

Research Methodology

A cross-sectional design adopted for this research instead of experimental or longitudinal studies, it enables researchers to concurrently analyze multiple variables, such as age, gender, education, or location (Allen, 2017). This cross-sectional study focused on a particular group of young members of Generation Z, ages 12 to 27, who have internet access and gave their direct consent to participate (Keser et al., 2020). This design makes it possible to observe and compare variables across various demographic groups that are pertinent to the study's goals.

Population and Sampling

Participants in this study are Management and Science University (MSU) students, specifically members of Generation Z, who range in age from 12 to 27. The sample size complies with the suggested recommendations (Hair et al., 2018; Tbachnick & Fidell, 1989). A higher ratio of 15:1 or 20:1 is advised to do this analysis, but each variable must have at least 5 respondents. Based on these suggestions, about 300 respondents were chosen, according to Ali Memon et al. (2020). Additionally, a non-probability convenience sampling method was used because it was practical, economical, and appropriate for quantitative research, even though it was not general. To reduce bias, a sufficient sample size was ensured, and a diverse group of participants was selected (Golzar & Tajik, 2022). The earlier convenience sampling studies, like Goerke et al. (2024), also used survey questionnaires to target young participants between the ages of 12 and 27.

Data Collection

The information was gathered using an online survey made with Google Forms and sent to Management and Science University (MSU) students via QR codes on various social media platforms. This approach facilitated effective distribution and wide reach via platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp, in line with students' digital habits. While the QR code offered rapid and easy access, the Google Form made it simple for respondents to finish the survey on their mobile devices. This approach increased the likelihood that a representative and accurate sample of MSU students would be gathered while also making the data more accessible. A five-point interval scale, with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree," was used in the survey to gauge respondents' agreement with each statement. The "seven basic question types" quantity or information, category, list or multiple choice, scale, ranking, complex grid or table, and open-ended formats are frequently included in closed-ended questionnaires, which are frequently used to collect quantitative data (Benkharafa, 2013).

Data Analysis

Multiple regression analysis is a statistical technique used to examine the relationship between one or more independent variables (predictors) and a single dependent variable. It is especially helpful for figuring out how many variables affect an outcome at once, as well as the direction and strength of each variable's effect.

Research Analysis and Findings

Table 1: Summarized of Demographic Profile

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	137	45.1%
Female	167	54.9%
Total	300	100%
Qualification		
Foundation	39	12.8%
Diploma	92	30.3%

Bachelor	173	56.9%
Total	300	100%
Living		
Family	142	46.7%
Alone	113	37.2%
Friends	49	16.1%
Total	300	100%

Table 1 indicates that of the 300 respondents in the sample, 137 were men and 167 were women. In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents (56.9%) were pursuing a bachelor's degree, followed by a diploma (30.3%) and foundation studies (12.8%). 37.2% of respondents said they lived alone, 16.1% said they lived with friends, and 46.7% said they lived with family. These demographic trends support the interpretation of how sociodemographic factors might affect students' healthy eating habits and give a clear picture of the respondents' backgrounds.

Descriptive statistics were used to compile and analyze the responses from the respondents. This statistical method gives a summary of the distribution, central tendencies, and variability of the study's variables. Descriptive statistics are crucial for arranging big datasets into useful summary measures and getting the data ready for further analysis, even though they do not permit prediction or inferential comparisons. The descriptive results for each construct are displayed in Tables 2 through 6. The average scores show the general trends of MSU's Generation Z students in terms of perceived risk, social media, physical and social environments, and healthy eating habits. The students' perceptions of their eating habits, the availability of healthful food options, the social factors influencing their diet, their awareness of health risks, and the impact of social media on food choices are all highlighted in these summaries.

Table 2: Descriptive Results Behaviour Healthy Eating Toward Students

Variables	Items	Mean	Std. deviation
Behavior healthy eating towards students	Often, I engage in a particular eating behavior to achieve a healthier lifestyle.	3.33	1.125
	My eating behavior is only influenced by the immediate consequences of my actions.	3.47	1.089
	My convenience eating habits is a big factor in the food I choose or my eating behavior.	3.41	1.183
	I am willing to sacrifice the immediate happiness or well-being I get from my eating behavior.	3.26	1.190

Table 3: Descriptive Results Physical Environment

Variables	Items	Mean	Std. deviation
Physical environment	Cooking healthy food is easier than unhealthy food	3.51	1.244
	There are many healthy foods in my university	3.36	1.231
	Fast foods are easily and quickly available around me	3.98	1.092
	There are many high cost of healthy foods around me	3.82	1.049

Table 4: Descriptive Results Social Environment

Variables	Items	Mean	Std. deviation
Social environment	My families and friends always eat healthy foods	3.39	1.062
	My families and friends encouraged me to buy healthy foods	3.48	1.086
	My families and friends gave me ideas to eat more healthy foods	3.53	1.172
	My peers praised the advantages of eating healthy foods	3.53	1.122

Table 5: Descriptive Results Perceived Risk

Variables	Items	Mean	Std. deviation
Perceived Risk	I consider how my health risk might be in the future with my day to day eating behaviors	3.57	1.147
	I am well informed about the long term consequences of a healthy diet	3.69	1.143
	Consuming healthy food helps reduce health risk	3.77	1.115
	I think it's risky to develop health related issues if I do not consume healthy food	3.65	1.134

Table 6: Descriptive Results Social Media

Variables	Items	Mean	Std. deviation
Social Media	I search healthy food related topic on social media	3.46	1.154
	I regulate my diet according to shared news/photos/videos about the foods/dishes that I see on social media	3.18	1.304
	I think foods/dishes with more like/share on social media are healthier	3.12	1.243
	The more I spend my time on social media, my desire to eat increases and I eat more	3.55	1.166

In order to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire items, a reliability test was carried out on a preliminary sample of 300 Generation Z students at MSU. Cronbach's alpha was used as the primary indicator of reliability, as it measures how closely related a set of items are in representing a single construct. A value of less than or equal to 0.70 is generally accepted as a sign that the items accurately measure the desired variable. Healthy eating behavior, the physical environment, the social environment, perceived risk, and social media are all constructs in the study, as shown in Table 7. This study found Cronbach's alpha values greater than 0.70. These findings verify that the instrument is appropriate for additional statistical analysis and that each variable attained satisfactory reliability.

Table 7: Reliability Test of 300 Respondents

No	Variable	Total items	$\alpha \geq 0.7$
1	Behaviour Healthy Eating Toward Students	4	0.720
2	Physical Environment	4	0.708
3	Social Environment	4	0.802
4	Perceived Risks	4	0.705
5	Social Media	4	0.730

The relationship between the dependent variable, students' healthy eating habits, and the independent variables, the physical environment, social environment, perceived risk, and social media, was investigated using multiple regression analysis. Researchers can ascertain whether the relationships are positive or negative and how much each predictor contributes to the outcome variable using this statistical technique. A number of assumptions, such as sample

size adequacy, multicollinearity, and normality, were evaluated in order to guarantee the validity of the model (Akinwande et al., 2015).

Assumption 1: Sample Size

There were 300 responders in all, which satisfied Hair et al. (2018)'s suggested ratio of 15 respondents per item. Multiple regression analysis can be performed with this sample size.

Assumption 2: Multicollinearity

To evaluate multicollinearity, tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were looked at. Every predictor had tolerance values greater than 0.70 and VIF values less than 2, demonstrating the absence of multicollinearity issues and verifying the independence of the independent variables.

Assumption 3: Normality

Normal P-P plots and scatterplots were used to assess the distribution of residuals. Given that the data points were closely aligned with the reference line, the residuals seemed to have a normal distribution with few deviations. Furthermore, scatterplots supported the normality assumption by showing that most points fell within the acceptable range. The regression model satisfied all requirements, enabling accurate interpretation of the relationship between the variables. The model summary, ANOVA, and coefficient outputs from the multiple regression analysis are used to present the results of the hypothesis test.

The overall model explains 29.2% ($R^2 = 0.292$) of the variance in students' healthy eating behaviour (Table 4.9), indicating a modest explanatory power. Table 4.10 shows that the set of predictors collectively influences healthy eating behavior, and the ANOVA results confirm that the model is statistically significant ($F(4, 295) = 30.391, p = 0.001$). The regression coefficients show that all four independent variables exert significant positive effects on healthy eating behaviour among MSU students (Table 4.11). The physical environment significantly predicts healthy eating behaviour ($\beta = 0.054, t = 2.083, p = 0.038$), supporting H1. The social environment also shows a significant relationship ($\beta = 0.050, t = 3.431, p < 0.001$), confirming H2. Similarly, perceived risk demonstrates the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.057, t = 5.340, p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Lastly, H4 is confirmed by the fact that social media is a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.050, t = 3.573, p = 0.001$). Overall, the findings suggest that students' healthy eating habits are influenced by a variety of factors, including their social environment, perceived health risks, and use of social media. Therefore, all four hypotheses are accepted (Table 4.12).

Table 10: ANOVA Test Result

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
1	Regression	998.803	4	249.701	30.391	<0.001
	Residual	2423.793	295	8.216		
	Total	3422.597	299			

Table 11: Summarized Results of Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Variables	B	t	p	Results
H1	Physical environment - > Behaviour healthy eating toward students	0.054	2.083	0.04	Accepted
H2	Social environment - > Behaviour healthy eating toward students	0.050	3.431	0.01	Accepted
H3	Perceived risk- > Behaviour healthy eating toward students	0.057	5.340	0.01	Accepted
H4	Social media - > Behaviour healthy eating toward students	0.050	3.573	0.01	Accepted

Significant at $p < .05$

Discussion

Students are more likely to develop healthy eating habits when they are aware of the importance of this aspect of their health and wellbeing. According to the findings of this study, the social environment is the best predictor of MSU students' healthy eating habits. Family, friends, and peers have a significant impact on students' food choices on a daily basis, influencing their habits and providing support. According to Mollaei et al. (2023), students continue to be influenced by eating habits learned at home and practiced in social settings throughout university life and beyond. Additionally, social media has a significant positive effect on eating habits. Online content motivates, educates, and inspires students, and social media platforms can be used to educate peers and promote health (Watanabe-Ito et al., 2020).

This suggests that students' healthy eating practices can be effectively supported by social media. Although the physical environment showed the weakest correlation, it still significantly affects eating behaviour. Students' capacity to make healthy choices is influenced by factors such as food accessibility, pricing, transportation, and cooking facilities that are readily available. Maintaining healthy habits becomes difficult when the environment is not supportive (Mollaei et al., 2023). Last but not least, despite the fact that many students underestimate the long-term health effects of poor eating habits, perceived risk also demonstrated a significant effect. Huang and Liu (2021) made the observation that young people frequently overlook nutritional risks because they believe that negative health outcomes won't affect them at their age. Perceived risk is a significant predictor of healthy eating behavior because this lack of awareness contributes to unhealthy eating habits.

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