




HOW DO DIETARY HABITS IMPACT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS?



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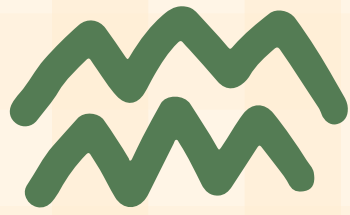


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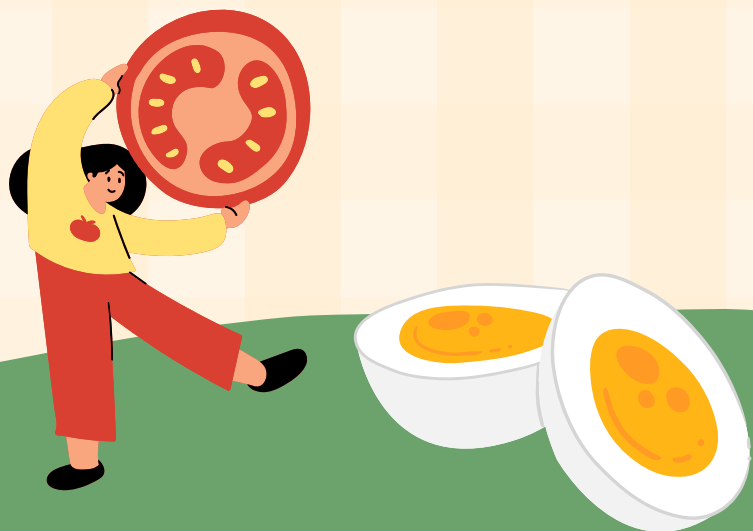
RESEARCH QUESTION:

Primary Research Question:

What factors influence the **relationship** between **dietary habits** and **mental health** among undergraduate students?

Sub-Questions:

1. What factors shape students' dietary habits?
2. How do students perceive their diet impacting their mental health?



WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Students face:

- High stress and anxiety
- Financial and time constraints
- Newly transitional period (increased independence + autonomy)

Food insecurity is prevalent among postsecondary students

Dietary habits are shaped by:

**Time
Cost
Accessibility**

This often leads to an over reliance on convenient, less nutritious foods

Poor diet quality is linked to:

**Lower mood
Reduced energy
Impaired cognitive functioning**

RESEARCH GAPS AND STUDY PURPOSE



Research tells us *WHAT* is happening and *WHAT* students should be eating



Stress

Dietary Habits

Food insecurity

Mediterranean diet and nutritional guidelines

But not *HOW* students experience it and not *HOW* they perceive diet influencing their mental health

Most studies rely on quantitative measures



- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)
- Food Frequency Questionnaires (FFQ)
- BMI

1. These factors are studied separately
2. Limited insight into lived experiences and how these factors interact in everyday contexts
3. We still don't understand *WHY* students make the choices they do

(Stokoe et al., 2024; Worsley et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Solomou et al., 2024; Uppal, 2023; Ahmad et al., 2021)



METHODS

Approach

- Exploratory qualitative design
- Hermeneutic phenomenological approach

Participants

- 15 undergraduate students (Years 1 -4)
- Sample guided by data saturation principles

Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews (45 -60minutes)
- Conducted via Microsoft Teams
- Over a 1-month period

Analysis

- Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)
- NVivo software
- Inductive and deductive coding

Framework

- Social Determinants of Health Framework (SDPH)





Culture

Cultural and religious factors shape food choices

Nutrition

Nutritional awareness varies across students

KEY FINDINGS:

(INTERCONNECTED)

Emotion

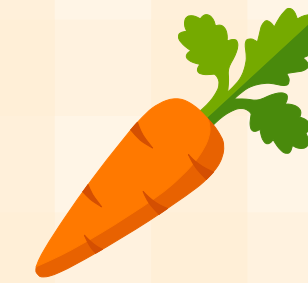
Emotional states influence eating behaviours

Environment

University environment impacts diet and access



THEME 1: CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES



- Food choices are shaped by cultural and religious beliefs

- Food is tied to:

Identity

Comfort

Familiarity

- Limited access can create restrictions and require adaptation



Quotes:

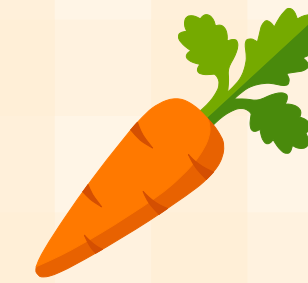
"I'm fully restricted to the point where I can't have a proper meal just because the options are all non-halal."

"Any beef outside of my house... I'll make sure to ask, like, is your beef halal?"

"My mother wouldn't eat beef, and for that same reason I don't touch it either."

"The food that I had growing up is comforting to me... it's familiar"

THEME 2: NUTRITIONAL AWARENESS AND BELIEFS



- Students define “healthy eating” differently
- Food is tied to:
- Tension exists between nutritional quality and convenience
- Dietary choices are influenced by health conditions

Energy

Performance

Well-being

Quotes:

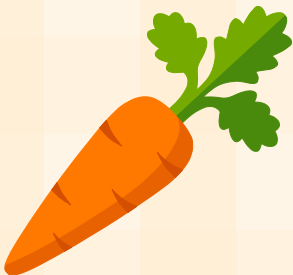
“If I go to the gym and I don’t get enough protein, it’s going to affect my performance.”

“I have Crohn’s disease, so I have to be careful with what I eat.”

“The person making the food cares more about the balanced diet... Takeout is more about money, oil, and cholesterol.”



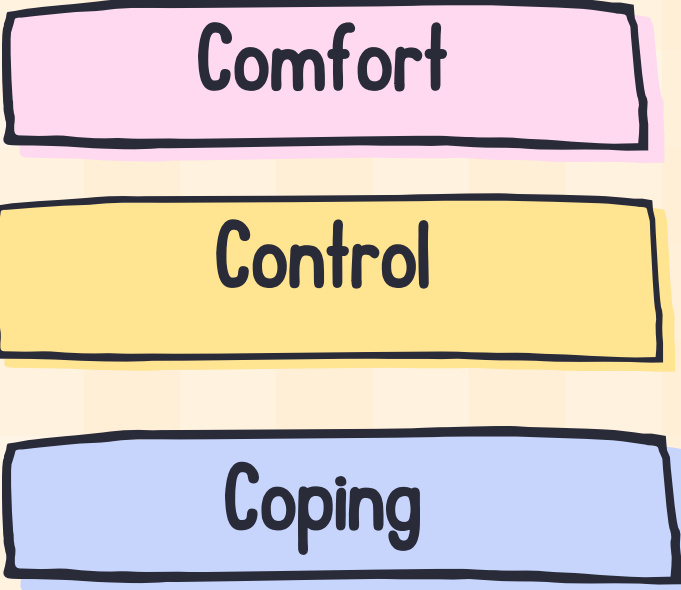
THEME 3: EMOTIONAL INFLUENCE ON EATING



- Emotional states shape appetite and food choices
- Eating behaviours can reinforce emotions

“Mood affects the food”

- Food is used for:
- Experiences vary between individuals



Quotes:

“Almost 99.9% of the time, my mood affects the food that I eat... If I’m not in the best mental state, I won’t be able to eat.”

“It’s like a loop... the worse I’m eating, the worse I feel, which makes me eat worse.”

“Sometimes I’m overwhelmed, and I’m like, I deserve a bowl of Oreo Minis.”

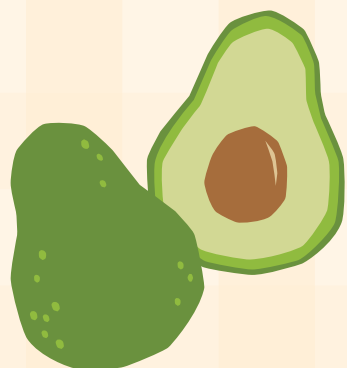
“Its like a loop”



THEME 4: UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT



- Academic demands and time constraints disrupt eating routines
- Living arrangements influence food access and choices
- Food availability on campus shapes dietary behaviours
- Social support and environment impact mental health and eating

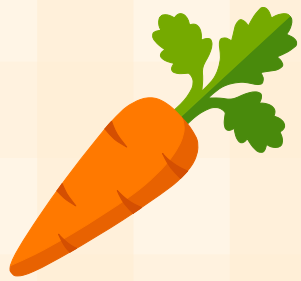


Quotes:

“If it’s a busy day, I usually snack instead of eating meals... and that backfires because I don’t have enough energy.”

“At home my mom would always have food ready. Here, I have to do schoolwork and then figure out food on top of that.”

“Everything I eat mostly comes from the dining hall... I don’t cook, and I don’t really grocery shop.”



HOW STUDENTS PERCEIVE DIET AND MENTAL HEALTH



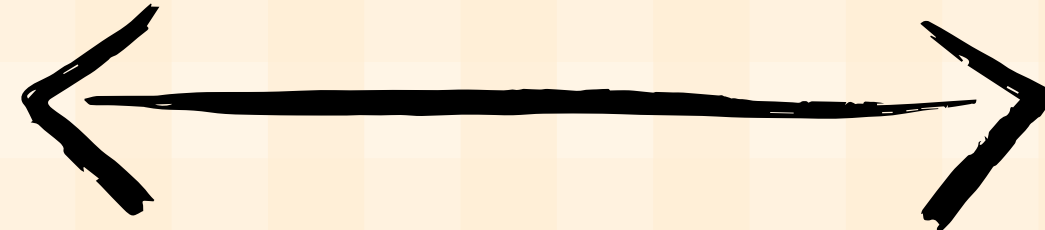
Diet

Mental Health

MOOD

ENERGY

MOTIVATION



APPETITE

FOOD CHOICES

EATING ROUTINES

Students differ in how they define "healthy eating"

- Some prioritize quality (balanced, nutritious foods)
- Others prioritize quantity (feeling full or satisfied)

Perceptions matter

- It's not just what students eat, but how they think about their food choices

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

IMPLICATIONS

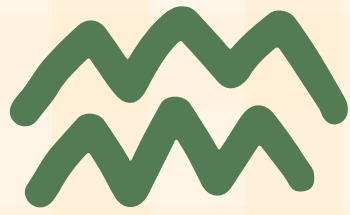
- Move beyond “what to eat” to understand WHY students make their choices
- Address root-level barriers
- Provide practical supports
- Integrate nutrition education
- Embed nutrition within student and mental health services

LIMITATIONS

- Data saturation was used instead of information power
- Analysis was more linear than iterative
- Interview guide may have introduced deductive elements to theme formation
- Greater emphasis on inductive analysis is needed

WHAT'S NEXT

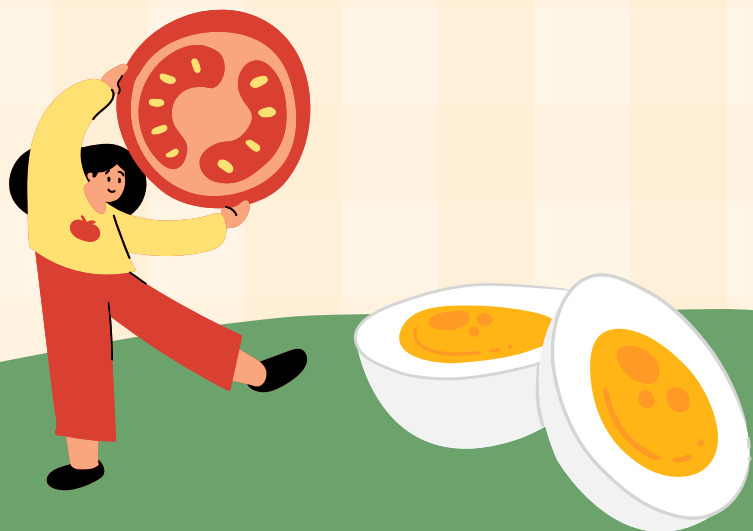
- More diverse samples and contexts
- More iterative and reflexive analysis
- Combine qualitative and quantitative approaches
- My current master's research: National School Food Policy (NSFP)
 - Exploring lived experiences in secondary school students



CONCLUSION



- **Diet and mental health are closely interconnected**
- **Relationship is complex and bidirectional**
- **Food choices are shaped by underlying factors and everyday realities**
- **Understanding why is key to supporting behaviour change**
- **Nutrition education is essential for informed and meaningful choices**



THANK YOU





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