



EATING BEHAVIOURS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: A STUDY USING FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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ABSTRACT

From secondary schools to college is a crucial transition in the lives of students. It is a critical period wherein various changes take place in the students' lives i.e. socializing, use of internet, unhealthy changes in eating behaviors etc. Changes in eating habits is one of the most important among all. During the transition from schools to college, students gain more financial and decision-making independency and so they are confronted to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy food choices. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors influencing college students' eating behaviour, using a qualitative research design. Also, the study aimed to collect opinions and recommendations in order to develop appropriate interventions to that aims to improve health eating habits among college students. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, three focus group discussions were conducted consisting of college teaching staff, non-teaching staff and the students from two disciplines i.e. management and technology. Students were reported to be influenced by individual factors i.e. taste preferences, self-control, lack of parental control, shortage of time and convenience; their social networks i.e. friends and peers; physical surroundings i.e. availability and accessibility of food, appeal and prices of food product; and marketing strategies i.e. influence of media and advertising. Furthermore, eating behaviour seem to be affected by the other characteristics such as residency, societies and amount of work (exams in case of students). Recommendations for college administration, teachers and parents include initiating health awareness programs, providing information to make healthy food choices, enhancing self-control, developing time management skills, enhancing social support and enhancing campus physical surroundings by making healthy and cost effective food items available. A focused group discussion was conducted on the same issue.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION

Junk food can be appealing for a variety of reasons, including convenience, price and taste. For students, who do not always understand the health consequences of their eating habits, junk food may appear especially appetizing. However, regularly consuming fattening junk food can be addictive for children and lead to complications like obesity, chronic illness, low self-esteem and even depression, as well as affecting how they perform in school and extracurricular activities. Prevention of diseases and overweight has become a worldwide challenge. College is a critical period for weight gain. During the transition from secondary school to college, students need to adapt to a new environment.. Now a days, students generally do not eat the recommended amount of fruit and vegetables, rather consume increasing amounts of high-fat foods. Furthermore, research has reported significant decreases in the amount of vegetables consumed during the first year of college and significant increases in percentage fat intake among students..These unhealthy behaviors may not only occur during the years at college but may remain throughout adulthood as well. Therefore, prevention and remedial programs countering unhealthy eating habits in college students are needed, in order to prevent an increasing prevalence of diseases and overweight in later life.

To develop effective health management programs, it is important to gain understanding into factors influencing eating behaviors of college students. Various individual and social factors i.e. social norms, behavioral control, self-efficacy have been found to affect eating habits. In addition, environmental is also considered to have a significant influence on eating behaviors. The environment has changed during the last decades wherein opportunities to eat energy-dense foods are omnipresent. Individuals interact in a variety of settings, say, schools, workplaces, homes, restaurants which, in turn, are influenced by the macro-environments such as industry, its strategies and government etc. based upon these theories, a framework was proposed including individual (intrapersonal), social environmental (interpersonal) and physical environment to understand factors influencing eating behaviors.

The study was conducted using focus group discussions from three groups that examined factors influencing eating behaviour among

college students. Lack of parental control, low self-efficacy, poor self-control availability of food items, social network limited budget, product, prices, shortage of time were reported as important influencing factors of students' eating habits. The study was conducted randomly among the college students of Faridabad city from two disciplines (management and technology) and also include the people working in college as teaching and non-teaching members. Many differences in lifestyle, environment and culture (e.g. fast food culture) can be observed now a days that not only influence students' eating behaviors but are also presented as barriers in engaging in healthy eating practices. Hence, there is a need for investigating the determinants of eating habits of college students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore which factors influence our college students' eating and drinking habits. Also, the study aimed to solicit opinions and recommendations in order to facilitate the development and implementation of appropriate interventions in order to positively influence the eating behaviors of college students.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature and was conducted using focus group discussions. To make the sample representative of population, teaching and non-teaching staff and students from first to third year were from different disciplines were included in the study. Three groups were formed for the purpose and the group of teaching and non-teaching staff consisted of six participants from two disciplines. And, group of students consisted of twelve participants with equal proportion of male and female. First year students were also included since they have recently entered into the college and gained more liberty than ever. Simple random sampling method was adopted to choose the sample. Each focus group lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. The discussion was facilitated by the two moderators to make notes of the discussions. Based on literature, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed in order to identify factors influencing eating behaviors of college students. Further, participants were also asked to give suggestions relating to strategies to improve healthy eating behaviors. The discussion was kept flexible in order to obtain greater information.

Questionnaire
For Students

1. Demographic
2. What's your name
3. Where are you from?
4. Where do you reside?
5. When you think of a health in college students, what comes to your mind?
6. As compared to last years, did your body weight and/or body composition change since you entered into college?
7. Did your health related habits change since you entered college?
8. Which factors have caused these changes (or which factors influence current health behaviors)?
9. Which of the previous mentioned factors have had the greatest influence?
10. What barriers and enablers of healthy behaviour can you identify?
11. Do you have any ideas, opinions, suggestions?
12. Soon, we will try to help students make healthier choices. Can you give us some advice on how to promote healthy eating behaviors in students?

For Teachers and non-teaching staff

1. Demographic
2. What's your name
3. Where are you from?
4. Where do you reside?
5. When you think of a health in college students, what comes to your mind?
6. As compared to last years, did you notice change in body weight and/or body composition since students entered into college?
7. Did you notice change in health related habits since students have entered college?
8. In your opinion, which factors cause these changes (or which factors influence current health behaviors)?
9. Which of the previous mentioned factors have had the greatest influence?
10. What barriers and enablers of healthy behaviour can you identify?
11. Do you have any ideas, opinions, suggestions?
12. Soon, we will try to help students make healthier choices. Can you give us some advice on how to promote healthy eating behaviors in students?

RESULTS

Content was analysed and factors identified and reported by the participants were coded and similar codes were grouped together into more general categories and subcategories. These categories are individual (intrapersonal), social environment (interpersonal), physical surroundings (community settings), macro environment, and college settings/ characteristics.

Factors influencing eating behaviors of College students: Highlights from students focus group discussion Individual (intrapersonal)

Tastes and preferences

Students reported that 'taste' is an important factor influencing their food choices. Taste can make students eat unhealthy, however it can help them make healthy choices as well. They choose to eat healthy food as well if they like it.

Self-control

Students believed that self-control may have an influence on eating habits. They reported that they have become more independent so they take their own decisions – they have to take care of themselves, some can and others can't.

Time and convenience

Time seems to be a very precious issue when talking about student eating practices. Students indicated they would rather spend time

on other activities than cooking, especially when they have to cook only for themselves. When students living in rented accommodation, they stated that *"I always have something else to do instead of cooking, so I don't have time to make dinner"*. Or if they are living in hostel and do not like the food served in the mess, they prefer to eat outside and forced to choose unhealthy options. Students explained that meal preparation time is of great importance: *"The faster my meal is ready, the better, so I can install myself in front of the television"*. Time is mentioned to be especially important during exam periods: *"After exam periods, you have more time to cook. When you are studying (during exam periods), you want to spend as little time as possible on cooking"*.

Daily routine

Students indicated that many students live a rather unstructured life (incl. sleeping habits), especially when living in student residences. Hence, their eating practices can suffer from this. *"When you stay awake longer, the urge to grab something sweet (cookies, candy,...) is bigger, whilst when having a good sleeping pattern, the urge may be smaller"*. On the other hand, when living with their parents, students felt they were subject to a certain 'structure'. *"When I lived at home, everything was nicely structured and I didn't even have to think about it, because the foundations had already been set by my parents."*

Physical activity level

Students stated that a higher caloric intake is needed when exercising, so they start eating more. So, they pay attention to what to eat. Also, it was mentioned that some students tend to think they can eat anything they want after exercising whereas some think that after they have exercised, they cannot eat anything.

Social environment (Interpersonal)

Family and friends

Students revealed that support from family and friends can influence their eating behaviour. They stated that during exam periods they feel happy that their moms prepare meal, because if they had to make it all by themselves. They would make Maggie more often". Living together with peers can also influence eating behaviors. They emphasized the importance of a great social network.

Physical surroundings

Availability and accessibility of healthy foods items

When students have easy access to on-campus eating facilities, they seem to get tempted more easily. For example, the student canteen and its meal offers seem to influence students regarding their individual food choices. Students stated they have no choice of picking up food items. They mentioned that when healthy foods are available in their nearest environment, they tend to eat them and vice versa.

Appeal of foods

Students believed that the appeal of food items makes it sometimes hard for them to make healthy choices. They emphasized that the student canteen is a 'dangerous' place, you walk into it and you see others (friends) eating pizza, burger and subsequently they leave their lunch in your bag and go get some too.

Food prices

Food product prices and individual budget influence students' food choices. On the one hand, when eating outdoors, they might spend more money. It was stated that *if they buy a sandwich every day it would become too expensive*. On the other hand, students also believed that healthier foods in e.g. fast food restaurants are less expensive than preparing a healthy meal at home. *"It will be more expensive when they eat healthy; for example a burger is cheaper than buying onions, tomatoes and carrots."* Participants also mentioned that when living in a student residence, one becomes more self-dependent which also implies that price and budget become more and more important. "

Macro environment

Socio-cultural norms and values

Students mentioned that certain eating behaviors can be region as well as society specific: But this (eating behaviour) is specific to our society; nowadays. Societal norms are changing now a days. It is becoming normal now to go out to eat fast food every day. Since, coco-cola, tea, coffee have socially respected beverages.

Media and advertising

Participants felt influenced by media and advertising: *"When I see food on television, I am more likely to go get something from the cupboard; on the one hand because I feel like it, but also because I see it on television"*.

College characteristics

Residency

Participants felt that students living in a student residence and being surrounded by other student peers are often subject to lots of stimuli influencing their eating behaviour. *"You see a lot of students who just arrived at college and stay in a student residence, eating pizza...." "I noticed that students living in student residences eat much more unhealthy foods, go out more and drink more ..."* Students personal experience confirmed the latter that living in student hostel or rented accommodation make you gain weight because of *going out too much and eating unhealthy*. However, other participants reported no changes in eating behaviour.

Exams

Participants reported that eating behaviors during the academic year can differ (in a positive and a negative way) from those during exam periods. *During exam periods, they tend to quickly grab something during a break.*

Factors influencing eating behaviors of college students: Highlights from teaching and non-teaching staff focus group discussion

In addition to the above factors stated by students, teaching and non-teaching staff identified additional factors that influence students' eating behavior at college.

Home education

Staff indicated that eating habits may depend on their home education. When one is raised in a healthier environment it is more likely one consumes e.g. sufficient fruits and vegetables.

Values, norms, beliefs

According to the participants, norms and values as well as personal beliefs can influence students' eating behaviors. Moral conviction, spiritual guidance drive them to become a vegetarian and healthy eaters. Staff also explained that they sometimes changed their eating behaviors due to a feeling of guilt when eating unhealthy foods such as pizza.

Parental control

Staff felt that parental control had a crucial role in their eating behaviors. When parental control is lacking this can have great influences on individual food choices. *"After the transition from secondary school to college, parental control decreased, so consequently 'freedom' increased, which means they become more self-dependent and that influence their eating behaviour. For example, in secondary school it was mandatory to bring home prepared food for lunch, while at college they can eat cafeteria sandwiches.*

State of mind (stress)

Staff also observed that exam periods (when academic achievement pressure is highest) provide a lot of stress on students. Participants strongly believed that eating choices during stressful periods can be influenced in both directions. Students tend to eat more but some tend to eat healthier. Others' eating patterns tend to worsen when experiencing such stress levels. Not only academic stress but also social stress can alter students' eating behaviors.

When one does not feel well, e.g. heart broken, then the cliché of eating ice cream in front of the television becomes reality or hanging out with friends and having fast food there becomes stress buster.

Nutritional knowledge

Participants believed that a certain nutritional knowledge is needed to be able to make changes in one's eating pattern. Participants believed that students lack knowledge regarding importance of nutritional food or consequences of unhealthy eating habits. To a certain extent students seemed to be aware of what is good for their health, still they do not exhibit positive behaviour due to lack of self-discipline.

Suggestions from Students, teachers and non-teaching staff

Individual level

- Participants believed that one to one direct communication should be used. Students should be confronted individually, they should be sensitized because standard communication is not as effective as the tailored one is.
- Students should be given personal feedback on their health status and subsequent counselling session should be held to make it effective.
- It was also suggested to use posters that display healthy eating pyramid.
- Health class to be organized for students so that they could be given like one hour of information about healthy eating. However, it was also mentioned that *"knowledge helps you to make decisions, but it doesn't force you"*. So, it was necessary to sensitize them towards the same with consistent efforts.
- It was also felt to give advice via internet and social media, so that students can check the message whenever they are free. Furthermore, participants believed that promotion strategies should focus on convenience. Since, these strategies should be 'easy going' and convenient, don't make it look like students have to do a lot of effort to be healthy".

Administration level

- When asking participants for suggestions regarding intervention development, it was believed that the college canteen and residential mess should offer healthier menu choices, so you actually oblige students subtly to eat healthy. It would be good when, for example, the canteen or mess wouldn't always offer burger, pizza, and cold drinks etc. because (when available) they feel tempted and tend to choose unhealthy options very often.
- Concerning price and cost, it was also mentioned that the canteen should modify its prices, because that would motivate students to eat more healthy foods when lower in price. Students will choose a healthy menu lower in price over a less healthy and more expensive one.
- Participants also expressed that the government should implement higher taxes for unhealthy foods. Another suggestion was to display the amount of calories on every menu. When the college canteen would display calories, lots of students will probably think twice when choosing a dish.