



## Health and Inequity: A Socio-Cultural Analysis on Food and Nutrition Among Students

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### Abstract:

Food is not just a biological need but it is very much social in nature. Socialization and culture has an influence on the eating habits as culture plays a significant role in our daily food choices and diet. The present study endeavors to create an awareness on the effects of unhealthy food habits which are developed by the students due to one's culture or enforced by an organization. Undergraduate students pursuing education at University of Eswatini are considered ensuring or seeking information that will be helpful in the research.

Nutritionist in the academic sphere is consulted to interpret the data

looking into the health perspective and predict the threats imposed by the food culture health-wise. The study revealed that most students eat twice a day and some once which is not advisable and recommended by dietitians and nutritionists, because this can obviously lead to malnutrition and under nourishment. The developed culture of eating in the institution, happens to impose an unhealthy hazard to the health of students. One of the major challenges of students is that they are not permitted to cook for themselves in the institution (dormitory), which exposes students to junk food, hence the future health complications, like obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and many other diet related illnesses or conditions. The research recommends reframing university rules on cooking, provision of meals on fixed time and nutrition based education should be provided by the institution.

**Keywords:** *health, food culture, nutrition, junk food, implications.*

### Introduction

Nutrition is an interesting subject and everyone loves food, even the thought of food brings joy to oneself. Food plays a very important role in our daily lives. Food can determine one's mood and performance in their day to day activities; for example, a good breakfast can help individual face work challenges with positive attitude, leading to the achievement of goals. (Pathan, 2013). It can be or it is used to express affection for someone indirectly, breakfast in bed, to reinforce love relationships through dinner dates and also to show a sign of remorse in cases of disputes, dinner surprises for example. On a

larger perspective, the idea of having food as a means of earning a living has also gained momentum in past few decades.

Critically when we think of it, most of our activities revolves around food and nutrition even though we might not be consciously aware of that. Food is clearly important for nutrition, but it's also meaningful to humans in other ways. Anthropologist Margaret Mead famously wrote about how food is for gifting. What Mead meant by this is that food provides us with something more symbolic than simply nutrition (though that's certainly important). Food is meant to be exchanged and shared with family and



friends (Mujawar & Pathan, 2013). Food has largely been ignored until recently in the sociological sphere, because it was seen as just as only as biological and something we needed for survival.

Interestingly, food is very much social when you think about what we eat, how we eat, where we eat it and who we eat with. As members of different societies, we eat what we are socialized what to eat, in our different cultural societies. This means that culture plays a huge role in our daily choices of food and diet, in terms of symbols and meanings created around food patterns. Culturally speaking, food is very important. Food can be nostalgic and provide important connections to our family or our nation. Food can be a bridge that helps immigrants find their place in a new society. For example, each meal eaten may symbolize or mean something, from time at which the food is served (breakfast foods to start of a day) to the season at which that particular food item is being eaten (different seasons brings different kinds of food).

The Kingdom of Eswatini is a country that has a certain food culture, grow crops like maize, which happen to be the staple food of the country, amongst many other crops grown. This is suitable for the environment and even climatic conditions and this have been mastered and institutionalized as natural yet it is not but more cultural. Food provides an important link to our cultural heritage. For example, *Swazi society is socialized to eat with a bare hand and are not supposed to eat standing and all lots sort of things which in other cultures may not apply*, this also applies to the University of Eswatini, where the students, seemingly are concerned with hunger satisfaction and cravings (regardless of the nutritional value within the food) rather than the nutritional concentration within the food item or diet and sadly, students are ignorant and seemingly nobody even cares, and this in turn, has future consequences and implications, as a result of every behavior. However, this does not ignore the food choice influences such as socio-economic status of students and the university rules and laws which prohibit cooking in the campus and this may place students to

vulnerable situations of eating fast and unhealthy food substances or diets, and this is telling us that choice can be voluntary and involuntary. It is also important to note that food culture in this paper is discussed and explained in terms of the food choices, patterns and practices.

## Significance of the Study

This study is important not only to the researcher but to the country at large. Students will be able to make proper decisions with regards to their food choices and practices. The University is also made aware on how they influence the everyday loss of many professionals which are indirectly slaughtered; having their unwell thought decisions, reinforced as rules, in collaboration with other factors. It also seeks to help the country in creating awareness about how much the country suffers in terms of sickly and even dying professionals and to influence proper food culture at schools and universities encouraging nutritional value based education, in terms of public policy making for the net benefit of society as a whole.

## Aim of the Study

The study aims at raising an awareness about the negative effects or rather the consequences of unhealthy eating that university students are exposed on a daily bases. The study also aims at exploring other contributing factors for the unhealthy eating habits which also includes the rules and regulations of the University of Eswatini at large, amongst others.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research are as follows;

1. Understanding the socio-economic factors that influences choice of diet.
2. Sensitizing the issue of improper food choices and its implications.

3. Recommending solutions to the problem i.e., 'behavior based nutritional education'.

## Literature Review

The subject matter had been a major concern and many sociologists have shown interest in its discourse. This is because of the rising issues about health concerns, especially obesity that invites a lot of diseases in one's life. However even so, it is important to note that health concerns can be both looked as an implication of the food choices, patterns and practices and also as a factor that influences the food choice, patterns and practices some studies have looked at it that way.

Patricia Crotty (1993) wrote that 'the act of swallowing divides nutrition's "two cultures", the post swallowing world of biology, physiology, biochemistry and pathology, and the pre-swallowing domain of behavior, culture, society and experience'. She offers this to help explain her observation that nutrition gives limited attention to the pre-swallowing, or the social nature of food and eating. Nutrition, as a scientific discipline that studies nutrient requirements for the optimal functioning of the body, regards food and eating as the means by which nutrients are delivered to the biological system. Fields that address the application of nutrition science, such as public health nutrition, home economics and dietetics, are concerned with eating behavior. A number of authors (Boero, 2007; Lawrence, 2004; Mitchell & McTigue, 2007) point to the construction of obesity as an 'epidemic' with long term health and economic ramifications. Studies are more focused on the obese implication side of things (as one of the implications, amongst many), of school children as a result of their food choices, and this revealed that those who are most at risk for being obese due to dietary reasons are the urban poor and children who attend public schools. The urban poor do not have access to or the means to afford nutritious options and must go with processed foods because it is cheaper and has a longer shelf life.

In a study that was conducted at Stanford University, participants were signed up to attend two testing sessions, in exchange for monetary compensation. One hundred twenty (84 female) non-dieting, non-vegetarian Stanford students between 18 and 25 years old participated in the first testing session. They were given images of both healthy and unhealthy foods to rate and they preferred peer rating. During each trial, participants viewed and rated their preference for a food item. Participants could take as long as they liked to rate their preferences, though each food image remained on the screen for at least 2 seconds. If participants took longer than 2 seconds to respond, the image remained on screen for an additional 0.5 seconds. Afterward, the peer rating appeared for 2 seconds. And the findings were that the peer ratings were manipulated to adhere to one of two health norms. Participants in the Healthy Norm condition (N = 40) saw peer ratings that favored healthy foods, whereas participants in the Unhealthy Norm condition (N = 40) saw peer ratings that favored unhealthy foods.

Charles and Kerr studied food, women and families for the ways in which 'eating habits are fundamentally influenced, if not determined, by social factors such as gender, age and class' (1988: 1). While being heavily deterministic, this statement explicitly considers social stratification systems (e.g. age, class, and gender) and ideologies (e.g. family ideology) as being produced, and reproduced, through the social processes created when people live their daily lives (Bernardes, 1985; Levi-Strauss, 2013). DeVault's (1991) research, which examines feeding the family as 'an activity and not as an image or an emotion', explicates the social organization of women's caring work. Her approach has shed light upon the ways in which caring is constructed as women's work, emphasizing women's participation in social relations, in particular, prevailing relations of inequality. DeVault's (1991) work supports the notion that families are created through relationships involving food and that feeding a family is an activity central to family life. Research into the nutrition inequities experienced by women on social assistance has

explored ways through which women's family feeding practices reinforce the social order (understood to be constituted in social processes), and provided explanations for the constraints of feeding families (Power, 1999; Travers, 1996). These studies of food and families show that daily recurrent practices characterizing routine family feeding can be examined for the ways in which they symbolize, reinforce and reproduce social relations and divisions. The ways in which people feed their families occur in a network of social relationships which involve, and go beyond, the individual and the household. Research on adolescent eating practices, for example, from both parent and adolescent perspectives has shown that eating practices are deeply embedded in the contexts of home and school as well as relationships with parents and peers (Backett-Milburn et al., 2006; Wills et al., 2005). As such, consideration for how feeding a family impacts on the health or nutrition of families, or specific family members, must include an exploration of these relationships and how they configure family feeding practices (Gregory, 2005; Breslow, 1999).

Other writers continue to study the social psychological aspects of food and focused on three broad themes on the subject. Firstly it is the social and environmental influences on food choice, psychological influences on eating behavior and eating behavior profiling (Morgan, 1996; Murcott, 1988; ).

## Methodology

The population of students in the university campus is approximately 5000. The target population is that of undergraduate students because they are more prone to this problem than the rest and the present case study is undertaken in the university corridors, since the students are the target population under study. Both the quantitative and qualitative approaches are used in the study at various levels.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

The food culture of students of the University of Eswatini, specifically Kwaluseni on-camp students only. To balance the perceptions and to avoid gender biases, 50 percent of the respondents were males and 50 percent were female. In this regard, respondents were selected and questionnaires were delivered door to door with the aim of ensuring or seeking to find information that will be helpful in the research.

Lastly, also a nutritionist in the academic sphere was consulted to interpret the data, looking into the health perspective and predict the threats imposed by the food culture health-wise. The data collected was manually analyzed, presented using tabulations and interpreted using the percentage method.

**Table 1. The Sex-Wise Distribution**

Sl. No.	Sex	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	079	50
2	Female	079	50
	Total	158	100

**Source:** Field survey, 2022

Table 1 depicts sex-wise distribution, which represents equal representation of male and female respondents. Here, 50 percent of the respondents are male respondents and 50 percent are female respondents.

**Table 2. Sponsorship for Education**

Sl.No.	Sponsorship	Frequency	Percentage
1	Self	034	21.5
2	Government	124	78.5
3	Ngo's	00	00.0
	Total	158	100

**Source:** Field survey, 2022

Table 2 exhibits sponsorship distribution of the respondents and it reveals that none is sponsored by Non-Governmental Organizations, 21.5 percent of the respondents are self-sponsored and 78.5 percent are

government sponsored. This means that majority of the respondents are government sponsored students. This may imply that probably 78.5 percent of students can hardly afford tertiary education, and are poor for that matter. Food culture theorist (Rosales, 2015) postulates that among other things, food communicates social class belonging. Some researchers found that the urban poor spend 39 percent of their total food budget on street food as opposed to 26 percent among the middle and upper class (Haddad et al., 1999), research or a study This however links or summarizes that since students are confined to one environment which is semi urban, they have adapted a culture of fast and street food as opposed to cooking fresh food.

**Table 3. Food Preference**

Sl.No.	Food Preference	Frequency	Percentage
1	Vegetarian	05	3.20
2	Non Vegetarian	31	19.6
3	Both	122	77.0
	Total	158	100

**Source:** Field survey, 2022

Table 3 shows distribution results of respondents' food preference. The result shows that 3.2 percent of the population is vegetarian, 19.6 percent prefer non-vegetarian meals and the majority i.e., 77 percent of the respondents prefers both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. From these findings, we may assume that a larger percentage of the population consume vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian food.

**Table 4. Frequency of Eating Food by the Respondents on Daily Basis**

Sl.No	Eating Times Per Day	Frequency	Percentage
1	Once	43	27
2	Twice	66	43
3	Thrice	36	23
4	More than thrice	11	07
	Total	158	100

**Source:** Field survey, 2022

The above distribution shows the eating patterns, where the number of times the respondents eat per day is exhibited. 27 percent of the respondents eat only once, 43 percent eat twice and 7 percent eat more than thrice. It shows that only 23 percent of the population eats three times a day. It is important to note that the recommendable eating frequency per day is three and this means that 77 percent of the population has adopted a wrong or unhealthy eating patterns and this may be influenced by one or other reasons.

**Table 5. A Distribution of Influence for Food Choice (N = 158)**

Sl.No	Influence	Frequency	Percentage
1	Money	103	65.2
2	Availability	39	24.7
3	Cravings	11	07.0
4	Hygiene	07	04.4
5	Timetable	02	01.3
6	Time	07	07.0
7	Health	02	01.3

**Source:** Field survey, 2022

The above distribution displays the influence on food choice and diet pattern. The majority of the respondents i.e., 65.2 percent, said it was money or financial issues influencing food choice and diet pattern, 24.7 percent said they eat whatever is available. The gate keeping theory explains this better to say convenience, due to availability and time, college students tend to grab whatever is available for eating. 7 percent said they eat as per their craving for a particular food item and fewer reasons were time, hygiene, health etc. This shows that, lot of respondent eat or choose their food for wrong reasons rather than health and nutritional values of the food.

**Table 6. Consideration of Nutritional Value of the Food Items by the Respondents'**

Sl.No	Nutritional Value	Frequency	Percentage
1	Yes	19	12.0
2	No	101	63.9
3	Sometimes	38	24.1
	Total	158	100

**Source:** Field survey, 2022

Table 6 shows whether respondents consider the nutritional value of every food item they eat. 12 percent of them responded positively, 24.1 percent said they consider sometimes and lastly 63.9 percent said they do not consider the nutritional value of their food items due to their financial situation or wrong eating culture, only matters in this case is life sustenance rather than negative effects of unhealthy or junk food.

**Table 7. University Rules and Environment Influencing Respondents' Food Choices and Patterns**

Sl.No.	University's Influences	Frequency	Percentage
1	Timetable Inconsistencies	013	08.2
2	Cooking Resistances	136	86.1
3	No Influence	009	05.7
	Total	158	100

**Source:** Field survey, 2022

Respondents were asked whether the university rules and environment does influence their food choices and patterns or not. 5.7 percent said the university rules and environment has no influence on their choice of food and patterns. 8.2 percent said the unfixed timetable hours do not accommodate fixed eating hours for breakfast, lunch and supper, and lastly 86.1 percent which happens to be the majority, said the rule that prohibits them from cooking, influence their choice of diet because they tend to eat whatever that is available.

Some of the respondents even said they have a health condition which prohibits some of the food items which students get exposed to, but tend to relapse or eat these prohibited food items because of desperation. This is noted in the structuration theory by Giddens of social practices that structure imposes a constraint, which are rules of cooking restrictions in this case.

## Conclusion

The study depicts the students pursuing graduation from University of Eswatini, Kwaluseni campus are from semi-urban area and they prefer both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, when asked whether they are aware of the future implications of their food choices, and they responded that they are aware but they usually have no choice because of the limiting factors beyond their control. As per the food culture theorists, food is communicative as it asserts even one's social class in society. Some research findings reveal, that the urban poor spend more on street food as compared to middle and upper class people.

Fast and junk foods are convenient to students because of time issues. This automatically makes these foods as the food culture of students in the institution. Food and culture relates in the sense that food becomes a particular society's way of life and the subjective meanings around those foods. The gate keepers in this case are the students who are responsible with their eating. Also, students hardly talk about the health consequences of the food items they eat, which means the subject is largely ignored, deliberately and unconsciously. One good example is that one respondents even mentioned that the doctor had stopped her from eating bread because of a condition of piles but she eventually had to ignore that doctor's advice because the environment does not favor her condition.

The study also revealed that most students eat twice a day and some once, due to some of the reasons mentioned above and it is important to note that eating pattern is not advisable and recommended by dietitians and nutritionists, because this can obviously lead to malnutrition and under nourishment.

Students in this regard, mentioned that this kind of eating is different when they are at home. This means there is a developed culture of eating and the food eaten in the institution, which happens to impose an unhealthy hazard to the lives of students.

All the participants had responded that they were not receiving some form of behavior based

nutrition education/knowledge in the institution. In this regard, some students argued that they do receive HIV/AIDS education and knowledge in the institution but they do not receive any nutrition based education

One of the major challenges of students is that they are not allowed to cook for themselves in the institution (dormitory), which leads them to grab whatever they find along and wherever, regardless of nutritional content. This, by so doing, exposes students to junk food, hence the future health complications, like obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and many other diet related illnesses or conditions.

The study also revealed that nationality, gender or socio-economic background does not have any major inclination because respondents are confined to the same environment, and the rules apply across to everybody else. Social practices explain the issue of rules as constraints imposed on the agency (which are the University students in this case) by social structures like the University institution for that case is better explained by Giddens' structuration theory and relevant in this case to say, the rules and resources configure the enabling or constraining conditions under which actors make these explained food choices and unhealthy food choices for that matter.

## Suggestions & Recommendations

University administration needs to reframe the rules that prohibits cooking.

The institution can provide meals for University students, on specific/fixed times (breakfast, lunch and supper), with the aim of improving the food patterns and hopefully eradicating unnecessary classes among students.

The institution can also provide the warden flats or kitchens for students to cook for themselves which may curb the road to hospital.

The institution can allow students to use microwave ovens in their rooms for them to cook because they can serve that function if not the kitchens.

Lastly, behavioral nutrition based education should be provided by the institution in as much effort and commitment as it happens with that of HIV/AIDS.

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