Research Article

Determinants of Eating Behaviour Among University Students: A Case Study of UiTM Dungun, Terengganu

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Abstract
Poor eating behaviours among Malaysian university students are a pressing public health concern; yet much pre-pandemic evidence under-represents today's campus realities, including digital cues that shape food choices. This study aimed to identify the key determinants of eating behaviour among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Dungun, focusing on socioeconomic, environmental, cultural, psychological, and digital influences. Guided by the Health Promotion Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior, a quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted involving 360 students selected using probability sampling. Analyses showed that psychological factors (particularly stress) were the strongest

correlates of irregular eating, followed by environmental conditions such as affordability, availability, and peer norms, while cultural preferences and socioeconomic constraints also contributed. Exposure to persuasive food content on social media and delivery platforms further shaped choices. The findings highlight the need for practical, context-sensitive strategies: improving affordability and availability of healthier foods on campus, providing culturally familiar options, embedding stress-management supports, and leveraging digital platforms to promote healthier norms.

Keywords:
Eating behaviour, Socioeconomic, Psychological, Digital influence, University students

1 Introduction

Eating behaviour is a critical component of health and well-being, particularly during the university years, when students experience major lifestyle transitions. At this stage, young adults often take on greater independence in making food choices, while simultaneously balancing academic pressures, financial limitations, and social adjustments. Studies across different contexts have consistently shown that university students are prone to poor eating habits, including irregular meal patterns, frequent consumption of fast food, and reliance on convenience foods. These practices are linked not only to immediate concerns such as fatigue and reduced academic performance but also to long-term risks of obesity, metabolic disorders, and other non-communicable diseases (Sabbah et al., 2024; Amoako et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, student eating behaviours have been investigated for over a decade, with research highlighting the role of affordability, cultural preferences, and limited availability of healthy meals in shaping dietary practices. However, much of this literature predates the COVID-19 pandemic, which means it may not adequately capture recent developments. The pandemic disrupted access to food, altered social norms, and accelerated reliance on digital platforms, including food delivery services and social media, which now play a significant role in shaping dietary choices (Desbouys et al., 2020; Gligorić et al., 2023). In this context, there is a pressing need to revisit the determinants of student eating behaviour in Malaysia with attention to both traditional influences—socioeconomic status, environmental availability, cultural norms, and psychological stress—and emerging digital drivers.

Hence, theoretical frameworks can help situate these determinants in a broader behavioural perspective. The Health Promotion Model emphasizes the importance of perceived benefits, barriers, and self-efficacy in health-related choices, while the Theory of Planned Behavior highlights the role of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control. Together, these models offer a useful lens for examining how internal and external factors converge to shape students' dietary practices in higher education contexts. By applying these frameworks, the study not only describes patterns but also links them to established behavioural theories, strengthening the explanatory power of the findings (Li et al., 2022; Ali et al., 2024).

Against this background, the present study aims to identify the key determinants of eating behaviour among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Dungun. Specifically, it explores how socioeconomic conditions, environmental settings, cultural preferences, psychological pressures, and digital influences interact to shape students' dietary decisions. By addressing gaps in the Malaysian literature and incorporating emerging post-pandemic factors, this study provides timely evidence to inform policies and interventions that promote healthier eating behaviours within the university setting.

2 Literature Review

Transitioning to university life represents a critical turning point that often results in significant changes to students' dietary habits and overall lifestyle choices. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing targeted interventions that promote healthier eating behaviours and improve student well-being (Sabbah et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2023). Socioeconomic position is widely recognised as a determinant of eating behaviour among university students. Danecka at al., (2025) describes socioeconomic factors as the intersection of financial realities with social, cultural, and environmental conditions, highlighting that food decisions are rarely made on logic alone but are shaped by emotions, norms, and cultural beliefs. Szczuko et al. (2014) observed that students from lower-income households often turn to cheaper, less nutritious food because of limited budgets. This is consistent with Martinez-Lacoba et al. (2018), who found that financial stress exacerbates poor dietary patterns, contributing to longer-term health risks. Recent studies confirm this trend, showing that low socioeconomic status, limited financial literacy, and time constraints increase the likelihood of meal skipping and unbalanced diets among young adults (Zulkarnine & Krishnan, 2024). A multi-country study further demonstrates that food insecurity reduces diet quality, particularly during the pandemic and emphasises the need for interventions such as meal vouchers and campus food banks (Witkowiak, 2024). Together, these findings highlight the importance of addressing socioeconomic inequalities when designing university-based health strategies.

Beyond economics, the campus environment also exerts a strong influence on student food decisions. Environmental factors include the availability, quality, and affordability of food on campus, as well as the influence of peers and social networks (Li et al., 2022). Rahmat (2022) reports that family, friends, and social circles shape preferences for traditional foods, while the presence of diverse and affordable options increases the likelihood of healthier eating (Keat et. al., 2024; Langfield et. al., 2023). Peer norms are particularly powerful during emerging adulthood, as students often mirror the habits of their social groups, reinforcing both positive and negative patterns (Gligorić et al., 2023). Comfort within student residences and the visibility of others' behaviours also play a role, sometimes encouraging unhealthy snacking or meal skipping (Street et. al., 2024). Research further suggests that incentives and institutional policies can create meaningful shifts: when campuses provide varied nutritious foods, students report higher dietary quality, whereas restricted options lead to greater reliance on

processed items (Amore et. al., 2019; Shokeen et. al., 2022). Even parental influence has lingering effects, as food values and cultural practices established earlier in life continue to guide choices during the university years (Muhammad et al., 2015).

Cultural traditions remain a vital determinant of eating behaviour, as dietary preferences are deeply rooted in heritage and identity. Traditional meals, often tied to family routines and cultural values, evoke familiarity and comfort while reinforcing social belonging (Norazmir et al., 2012; Rahmat, 2022). Malaysian students represent a mix of ethnic backgrounds, including Malay, Chinese, and Indian, contributing to a rich food culture where traditional cuisines significantly shape daily choices (Jalis, et. al., 2009, as cited in Rahmat, 2022). Similar arguments are found in cross-cultural research that underscores the role of heritage foods in shaping identity and sustaining health practices (Pugra, 2025; Reddy, 2020). Recent Malaysian studies confirm that cultural attachment influences meal selection, with students preferring traditional dishes even when exposed to modern or fast-food alternatives (Ali, et. al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2025). Cultural continuity therefore remains an important pathway for designing interventions that resonate with students' lived experiences.

Psychological dimensions are equally important. Razali et al. (2014) describe psychological factors as encompassing emotions, moods, and beliefs that directly shape eating practices. University students often experience stress, which can lead to emotional or binge eating (Dalton, 2024; Cardi et al., 2015). Coping mechanisms may include consuming comfort foods, sometimes those with cultural significance, as a way to manage academic or personal pressures. According to Maslow's Motivation Theory (Sumbul & Khare, 2024), psychological needs such as stress management and emotional balance play a crucial role in shaping everyday food choices. Research from multiple settings confirms that high stress increases reliance on fast food and processed snacks, while better coping strategies align with healthier behaviours (Amoako et al., 2023; Ljubičić et al., 2023). These findings underscore the importance of integrating mental health initiatives with nutrition education.

Taken together, socioeconomic, environmental, cultural, and psychological determinants form a complex web of influences that interact to shape students' dietary practices. Environmental constraints, for example, can amplify the challenges of financial limitations, while cultural traditions may mediate how stress is managed through food. This dynamic interplay has been highlighted in recent work on Malaysian students, suggesting the need for a more holistic perspective in understanding eating behaviour (Chai & Cheah, 2024; Choi, 2020). In line with this, the present study proposes a framework that integrates these four key domains, offering a comprehensive model for examining student eating behaviour in a post-pandemic context.

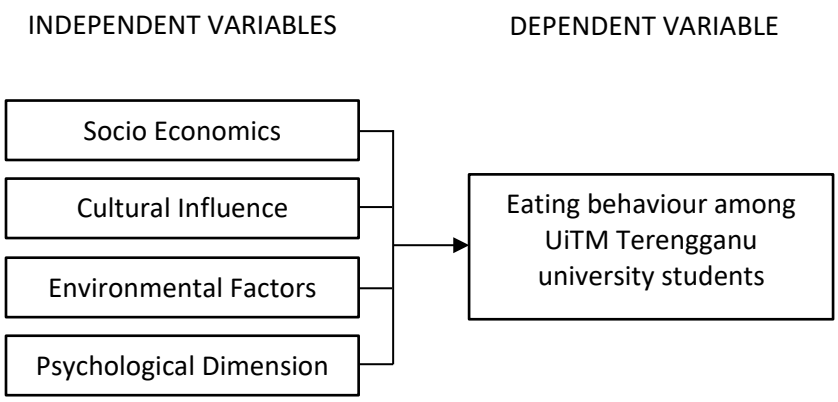

Figure 1: Study Framework

3 Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design to provide a comprehensive examination of the factors influencing eating behaviour among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Terengganu, Kampus Dungun. A quantitative approach was considered most appropriate because it allows for systematic collection and analysis of numerical data, making it possible to identify patterns and evaluate relationships between socioeconomic, environmental, cultural, and psychological variables in relation to students' dietary practices. A cross-sectional survey design was employed, enabling the study to capture a snapshot of current eating behaviours and their associated determinants within the university population. UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, Kampus Dungun has an estimated student population of 5,640, and the study targeted individuals aged 18 to 25 years. The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size table, which recommends a minimum of 360 respondents for a population of 6,000. To strengthen statistical power and ensure generalisability, 400 respondents were selected. Probability sampling through simple random selection was used to reduce bias and increase the representativeness of the sample, ensuring that students from different faculties and backgrounds had an equal chance of participation.

Data collection took place at various strategic locations across campus, including lecture halls, libraries, and common student areas, to ensure diversity in responses. Questionnaires were distributed both physically and digitally via student community groups and in-person engagement. The survey instrument included items on demographic background, food access and affordability, cultural influences, psychological stress, and eating practices. Reliability of the questionnaire was assessed prior to data collection, with pilot testing indicating an acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha above the recommended threshold of 0.70; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Moreover, ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Participation in the study was voluntary; informed consent was obtained from all respondents. To ensure confidentiality, individual data was kept anonymous, and responses were used solely for research purposes. Students were also informed that

they could withdraw at any time without penalty. The completed questionnaires were coded and entered into IBM SPSS Statistics version 28 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise demographic information and patterns of eating behaviour, while inferential statistics such as chi-square were applied to explore associations between categorical variables. This approach was considered suitable given the categorical nature of much of the data, and it provided meaningful insights into the relationships among the study variables in line with the research objectives.

4 Findings

4.1 Demographic of Respondents

The demographic analysis of the 360 respondents provides a useful backdrop for understanding the study findings.

Table 1: Demographic variables

Variables	Categories	Frequencies	Percentages (%)
Gender	Male	(177)	(49.3%)
	Female	(182)	(50.7%)
Age	18-19	(89)	(24.8%)
	20-21	(120)	(33.4%)
	22-23	(71)	(19.8%)
	24-25	(79)	(22%)
Education level	Bachelor degree	(178)	(49.6%)
	Diploma	(181)	(50.4%)
How much did you spend on food in a day?	RM5-RM10	(95)	(26.5%)
	RM11-RM15	(158)	(44%)
	RM16-RM20	(31)	(8.6%)
	RM21-RM25	(75)	(20.9%)
How much does your parent/guardian provide pocket money in a month?	RM100-RM200	(66)	(18.4%)
	RM201-RM300	(99)	(27.6%)
	RM301-RM400	(79)	(22%)
	RM400 and above	(115)	(32%)

The gender distribution was nearly balanced, with female students accounting for 50.7% (n = 182) and male students representing 49.3% (n = 177). Age distribution revealed that most students were in early adulthood, with the largest proportion (33.4%) aged between 20 and 21 years. This was followed by 24.8% aged 18–19, 22% aged 24–25, and 19.7% aged 22–23. Next, academic background was similarly well distributed, with 50.4% (n = 181) enrolled in diploma programmes and 49.6% (n = 178) pursuing bachelor's degrees. This balance suggests that the study sample adequately reflects the diversity of educational levels at UiTM Dungun.

Daily food expenditure patterns showed that 44% of students spent between RM11 and RM15 per day. Meanwhile, 26.5% spent RM5–RM10, 20.9% spent RM21–RM25, and only 8.6% reported spending RM16–RM20 daily. In terms of financial support, one-third

of students (32%) reported receiving RM400 or more in monthly allowances from parents or guardians, while 27.6% received RM201–RM300, 22% received RM301–RM400, and 18.4% received RM100–RM200. These figures highlight moderate but varied financial backgrounds across the student body. Overall, the demographic profile indicates that UiTM Dungun students represent a youthful, gender-balanced, and socioeconomically diverse population. This composition is consistent with broader trends reported among Malaysian university students, where early adulthood is a critical stage for lifestyle and dietary behaviours (Bahha, 2025).

4.2 Regression Analysis Model Summary and Coefficient Analysis

4.2.1 Cultural Influences

Regression analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between cultural influences and eating behaviour ($R = 0.788$; $R^2 = 0.621$; $p < .001$). This suggests that 62.1% of the variance in eating behaviour can be explained by cultural factors. The unstandardised coefficient ($B = 0.622$) indicated that each unit increase in cultural influence predicted a 0.622-unit increase in eating behaviour. The standardised coefficient ($\beta = 0.788$) further highlights the strength of this association. Thus, these findings underscore the enduring impact of cultural traditions, family eating practices, and ethnic food preferences on students' choices. Similar conclusions have been drawn in recent reviews emphasising that cultural identity continues to play a critical role in shaping food habits even in highly globalised contexts (Almoraie et al., 2024). For universities, this implies that nutrition interventions are likely to be more effective when they respect and integrate traditional food practices.

Table 2: Regression model summary of cultural influences

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	.788[a]	.621	.620	.58428	587.633	< .001

Note:
a. Predictors: (Constant), overallmeanculturalinfluence
b. Dependent Variable: overallmeaneatingbehaviour

Table 3: Coefficient analysis of cultural influences

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.206	.077	—	15.617	< .001
overallmeanculturalinfluence	.622	.026	.788	24.241	< .001

Note:
a. Dependent Variable: overallmeaneatingbehaviour

4.2.2 Environmental Factors

Environmental influences also demonstrated a strong positive association with eating behaviour ($R = 0.863$; $R^2 = 0.744$; $p < .001$). This indicates that 74.4% of the variance in eating behaviour could be explained by environmental factors. The coefficient analysis revealed that eating behaviour increased by 0.748 units for every unit increase in environmental conditions, with a high standardised beta value ($\beta =$

0.863). These results suggest that campus food environments—including the accessibility, affordability, and quality of food options, as well as peer influence—are powerful determinants of student dietary choices. Such findings mirror international evidence where availability and convenience strongly predict eating behaviour among young adults (Li et al., 2022; Martins et al., 2021). Improving the range of healthy options in campus dining settings could therefore bring meaningful improvements to student diets.

Table 4: Regression model summary of environmental factors

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	.863[a]	.744	.744	.48000	.744	1043.148	< .001

Note:
a. Predictors: (Constant), overallmeanenvironmentalfactors
b. Dependent Variable: overallmeaneatingbehaviour

Table 5: Coefficient analysis of environmental factors

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.600	.076	—	7.872	< .001
overallmeanenvironmentalfactors	.748	.023	.863	32.298	< .001

Note:
a. Dependent Variable: overallmeaneatingbehaviour

4.2.3 Psychological Dimensions

Among all predictors tested, psychological dimensions showed the strongest relationship with eating behaviour ($R = 0.915$; $R^2 = 0.838$; $p < .001$). This means that 83.8% of the variance in eating behaviour can be explained by psychological factors. The coefficient analysis indicated that each unit increase in psychological influence corresponded to a 0.713-unit increase in eating behaviour, with a very strong standardised beta value ($\beta = 0.915$). These findings demonstrate that psychological elements such as stress, coping mechanisms, and emotional states exert substantial influence on student dietary choices. High levels of academic pressure were linked to reliance on fast food and comfort eating, while healthier psychological coping strategies correlated with better eating habits. Recent empirical evidence supports this relationship, with studies showing that stress and mental health are among the most consistent predictors of poor dietary behaviour in university populations (Dalton, 2024; Martins et al., 2021). The strength of these associations highlights the importance of integrating mental health support with nutrition interventions for students.

Table 6: Regression model summary of psychological dimensions

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	.915[a]	.838	.837	.38237	.838	1850.012	< .001

Note:
a. Predictors: (Constant), overallmeanpsychologicaldimension
b. Dependent Variable: overallmeaneatingbehaviour

Table 7: Coefficient analysis of psychological dimension

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.466	.061	—	7.689	< .001
overallmeanpsychologicaldimension	.713	.017	.915	43.012	< .001

Note:
a. Dependent Variable: overallmeaneatingbehaviour

4.3 Overall Summary of Findings

The regression analyses collectively indicate that cultural, environmental, and psychological influences all significantly predict eating behaviour, though psychological and environmental factors are the most powerful. Cultural influences remain important, but the results show that the broader campus environment and individual mental well-being are critical drivers of dietary choices. These findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives such as the Health Promotion Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior, which highlight the interaction of personal beliefs, perceived barriers, and social norms in shaping health behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Pender et al., 2011).

5 Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the determinants of eating behaviour among 360 university students at UiTM Dungun. The demographic analysis shows that the respondents represent a youthful and gender-balanced population, with students almost evenly distributed between diploma and bachelor's programmes. These characteristics strengthen the generalisability of the results and highlight that the observed behaviours reflect the wider student body.

One of the most striking outcomes of the analysis is the significant influence of psychological factors on eating behaviour. With 83.8 percent of the variance explained, the findings confirm that stress, coping mechanisms, and emotional states significantly shape students' food choices. This is consistent with earlier evidence, which showed that university students under academic pressure often resort to irregular eating, emotional eating, or increased consumption of high-calorie snacks (Cardi et al., 2015; Dalton, 2024). In the Malaysian context, this highlights the importance of integrating mental health services with nutrition interventions, as psychological well-being and dietary choices are closely connected. Similar conclusions were reported in a Brazilian

study where stress and mental health strongly predicted diet quality among undergraduates (Martins et al., 2021).

Environmental factors also emerged as powerful predictors, explaining 74.4 percent of the variance in eating behaviour. This confirms that campus food environments, such as the availability and affordability of nutritious options and the influence of peers, substantially determine student choices. The results support the findings of Li et al. (2022), who noted that accessibility and convenience are critical drivers of dietary behaviour among young adults. At UiTM Dungun, this implies that practical interventions such as improving campus dining services, providing healthier and affordable food choices, and encouraging peer influence through student-led health campaigns could foster positive change. Recent work has shown that when universities enhance the nutritional profile of campus foods, students are more likely to adopt healthier eating patterns (Bahha, 2025).

Hence, cultural influences also demonstrated a strong and significant association with eating behaviour, explaining 62.1 percent of the variance. This result highlights the ongoing importance of traditional food practices and family dining norms, even in a modern university setting. Students rely on cultural food identities, which shape both preferences and coping mechanisms during stressful times. Earlier research has reported similar findings, showing that cultural continuity stabilises food choices despite growing exposure to globalised diets (Rahmat, 2022; Almoraie et al., 2024). This suggests that nutrition interventions that incorporate cultural traditions, such as campus menus that feature diverse ethnic cuisines, are more likely to resonate with students and promote lasting behavioural change.

These findings are consistent with the Health Promotion Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The Health Promotion Model emphasises perceived benefits, barriers, and self-efficacy as key influences on health behaviour (Pender et al., 2011). This is reflected in how students balance cost, convenience, and health outcomes in their dietary decisions. The Theory of Planned Behavior stresses the role of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). This is evident in the way peer norms, cultural expectations, and personal stress management shape eating habits. Taken together, these frameworks provide a strong lens to interpret the complex interplay of determinants observed in this study. In summary, the study shows that cultural traditions remain relevant, but environmental conditions and psychological well-being are the strongest predictors of eating behaviour among UiTM Dungun students. Addressing these issues requires a holistic strategy that includes improvements in campus food services, culturally sensitive nutrition education, and the integration of mental health support into student services. A multidisciplinary approach of this kind is essential to encourage healthier eating habits, enhance well-being, and ultimately support the academic success of university students.

6 Conclusion

This study examined the determinants of eating behaviour among 360 university students at UiTM Dungun and found that cultural, environmental, and psychological factors all play significant roles in shaping dietary choices. Among these, psychological and environmental influences were the strongest predictors, while cultural traditions continued to provide meaningful context for food preferences and coping mechanisms. These results highlight that eating behaviour among young adults is not the outcome of a single factor, but rather the result of a complex interaction between personal well-being, social environments, and cultural values.

The findings carry significant implications for health promotion and campus policy. The robust association between psychological factors and dietary behaviour highlights the necessity for interventions aimed at enhancing student mental health and fostering healthier eating habits. Stress management programs, counselling services, and peer support initiatives can effectively address the emotional drivers behind poor dietary choices. Furthermore, environmental factors suggest that university food services must prioritise the availability, affordability, and quality of nutritious meals. By creating appealing, culturally relevant, and accessible food options on campus, universities could promote healthier consumption patterns. Additionally, the influence of cultural traditions underscores the importance of tailoring nutrition education and interventions to respect and incorporate students' cultural and ethnic food practices. Future research could expand upon these findings by integrating digital influences into a more comprehensive or modified framework, thereby capturing their increasing impact in contemporary food environments.

In conclusion, the study emphasises that a holistic and multidisciplinary strategy is required to improve eating behaviours among university students. This includes strengthening campus food policies, integrating mental health support with nutrition initiatives, and designing culturally sensitive programmes. By addressing these interconnected factors, universities can foster healthier lifestyles, enhance student well-being, and support academic success.

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