

Perceived Determinants of Daily Food Choices among University Students

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ABSTRACT - Food choice behavior among university students is an important public health issue because eating patterns developed during young adulthood may persist into later life. This study aimed to examine students' perceived determinants of daily food choices using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ). A quantitative descriptive design with a cross-sectional survey approach was applied to 150 undergraduate students from the Culinary Education Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia, selected through random sampling based on the Slovin formula. Data were collected using the FCQ consisting of 36 items across nine dimensions and analyzed using descriptive percentage analysis. The results showed that price was the most influential determinant of daily food choices (86.28%), followed by mood (83.78%), convenience (83.63%), sensory appeal (83.58%), and health (83.14%). Natural content (79.56%) and weight control (72.39%) were perceived as moderately influential, while ethical concern was the least influential determinant (68.83%). These findings indicate that students' food choices are shaped primarily by economic, emotional, and practical considerations, suggesting an intention-behavior gap in which health awareness does not consistently translate into daily food choice behavior.

Keywords: Daily food choices, eating pattern, university students, food choice questionnaire.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in dietary patterns among young adults have become a global public health concern due to their strong association with the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (Akseer et al., 2020; Curioni et al., 2022). Diets characterized by high consumption of ultra-processed foods, excessive sugar, fat, and sodium intake significantly increase the risk of obesity and metabolic disorders, particularly among individuals of productive age (Martini et al., 2021). University students represent a critical population in this context, as they experience a transition toward independent living and autonomous decision-making, including daily food selection.

Food choice behavior is widely recognized as a complex and multidimensional process influenced by individual, social, and environmental factors. Recent studies emphasize that daily food choices are shaped not only by health considerations but also by perceived convenience, price, sensory appeal, emotional state, and ethical concerns (Chen & Antonelli, 2020; Fernqvist et al., 2024; Imtiyaz et al., 2021). Among young adults, these perceived determinants often interact dynamically, resulting in food decisions that prioritize practicality and pleasure over long-term health benefits (Daly et al., 2022; Leng et al., 2017; Mohammadzadeh et al., 2025).

Empirical evidence indicates that health is commonly acknowledged as an important factor in food choice among university students; however, its influence is frequently outweighed by time constraints, financial limitations, and food availability. Savelli et al. (2019) reported that although students express positive attitudes toward healthy eating, convenience and affordability remain dominant determinants of daily food selection. Similarly, research by Nekitsing

et al. (2018) demonstrates that sensory attributes and familiarity play a significant role in shaping students' preferences, even among those with high nutritional awareness.

University students belonging predominantly to Generation Z are also characterized by high exposure to digital media and health-related information. This generation shows increasing interest in natural and minimally processed foods, often associated with the concept of *real food*, which emphasizes freshness, minimal additives, and nutritional quality (Asioli et al., 2017; Monteiro et al., 2018). Nevertheless, previous studies reveal a consistent gap between awareness and actual dietary behavior. Despite positive perceptions of healthy and natural foods, Generation Z students' daily food choices remain strongly influenced by mood, convenience, price, and social familiarity (Janssen, 2018).

In the Indonesian context, research examining the perceived determinants of daily food choices among university students remains limited. Indonesian students often face unique challenges such as living away from family support, managing restricted budgets, and relying on campus-based or nearby food vendors. These conditions may intensify the influence of price, convenience, and familiarity while reducing the relative importance of health and ethical considerations. Therefore, empirical evidence is needed to better understand how university students perceive and prioritize different determinants in their daily food choices.

Accordingly, this study aims to explore university students' perceptions of determinants influencing their daily food choices. By examining the relative importance of health, mood, convenience, sensory attributes, naturalness, price, body weight concerns, familiarity, and ethical factors, this research seeks to provide empirical insights to support nutrition education initiatives, healthy campus programs, and food communication strategies targeting young adults in higher education settings.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design using a cross-sectional survey approach to examine university students' perceptions of determinants influencing their daily food choices. A cross-sectional survey is appropriate for capturing subjective evaluations of food-related motivations at a single point in time and has been widely applied in food choice research among young adults (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022).

Research Subjects

The research subjects were undergraduate students enrolled in the Culinary Education Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), Indonesia. The sample was selected using random sampling to ensure that each member of the population had an equal probability of being included in the study. The determination of sample size was calculated using the Slovin formula, which is commonly applied in survey-based research to estimate an adequate sample size when population variance is unknown. Based on the Slovin calculation with an acceptable margin of error, a total of 150 students were selected as research participants.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) developed by (Steptoe et al., 1995), which is a widely validated instrument for measuring motivational determinants of food choice behavior. The FCQ assesses intrinsic and extrinsic food attributes that motivate consumers' daily food selection and has been extensively applied in studies involving university students and young adults across different cultural contexts (Geuens, 2023; Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000)

The instrument consists of 36 items representing search, experience, and credence characteristics related to food attributes. Respondents were instructed to rate the importance of each item for their food choices "on a typical day." Responses were measured using a unipolar four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important).

The FCQ comprises nine motivational dimensions, each represented by three to six items. **TABLE 1** presents the blueprint of the research instrument, including the dimensions measured, conceptual indicators, and the number of items for each dimension.

TABLE 1. Blueprint of the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ)

| FCQ Dimension | Conceptual Indicator | Number of Items |
|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| Health | Importance of food in maintaining health, preventing illness, and improving physical well-being | 6 |
| Mood | Influence of food on emotional state, stress reduction, and mood regulation | 6 |
| Convenience | Ease of preparation, availability, and time efficiency of food | 5 |
| Sensory Appeal | Taste, aroma, texture, and visual attractiveness of food | 4 |
| Natural Content | Preference for natural ingredients, absence of additives, and minimal processing | 3 |
| Price | Cost, affordability, and value for money of food | 3 |
| Weight Control | Role of food in controlling body weight and calorie intake | 3 |
| Familiarity | Preference for familiar, traditional, or commonly consumed foods | 3 |
| Ethical Concern | Consideration of environmental impact, animal welfare, and ethical production | 3 |
| Total | | 36 items |

The blueprint demonstrates that the instrument comprehensively captures psychological, sensory, economic, and ethical dimensions of food choice motivation. The use of the FCQ ensures content validity, as the dimensions and items have been theoretically grounded and empirically validated in previous research (Asioli et al., 2017; Steptoe et al., 1995).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistical techniques. Responses for each FCQ dimension were summarized using percentage distributions to describe the relative importance of each determinant as perceived by the respondents. This descriptive approach was selected to provide an overview of dominant motivational factors influencing students' daily food choices rather than to examine causal relationships, which is consistent with previous descriptive food choice studies (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Food Choice Determinants

This section presents the results of university students' perceptions of determinants influencing their daily food choices, measured using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ). **TABLE 2** summarizes the percentage scores of each FCQ dimension, indicating the relative importance of different factors in students' food selection. The results demonstrate variations in perceived importance across dimensions, which are discussed in detail in the following subsections.

TABLE 2. Percentage scores of food choice determinants based on the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ).

| FCQ Dimension | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|----------------|
| Health | 83.14 |
| Mood | 83.78 |
| Convenience | 83.63 |
| Sensory Appeal | 83.58 |
| Natural Content | 79.56 |
| Price | 86.28 |
| Weight Control | 72.39 |

| FCQ Dimension Percentage (%) | |
|------------------------------|-------|
| Familiarity | 82.44 |
| Ethical Concern | 68.83 |

Health

The health dimension received a high percentage score of 83.14%, indicating that health-related considerations play a significant role in students' daily food choices. Item-level analysis reveals that students associate healthy food with nutritional adequacy, as reflected in statements related to vitamin and mineral content, balanced nutrition, sufficient protein intake, and high fiber content. These indicators suggest that students possess a relatively comprehensive understanding of nutrition, viewing healthy food not only as a means of preventing illness but also as supporting overall bodily function.

Interestingly, health motivations also extend to appearance-related outcomes, such as food being beneficial for skin, hair, teeth, and nails. This finding indicates that health perceptions among university students are closely intertwined with aesthetic and functional considerations. Previous studies have reported similar patterns, showing that young adults often frame healthy eating in relation to both well-being and physical appearance (Asioli et al., 2017; Marinova & Bogueva, 2022). However, despite this high perceived importance, earlier research suggests that health awareness alone does not consistently lead to healthy eating behavior, particularly when students face constraints related to price and convenience (Almoraie et al., 2025).

Mood

The mood dimension showed a similarly high percentage score of 83.78%, highlighting the strong influence of emotional and psychological factors on food choice. At the item level, students reported choosing food that helps them cope with stress, feel more relaxed, maintain alertness, support daily activities, and improve overall mood. These indicators illustrate that food is perceived not merely as a source of nutrition, but also as a tool for emotional regulation and cognitive functioning.

This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that university students often rely on food to manage emotional states, particularly in response to academic pressure and daily stressors (Asioli et al., 2017; Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000). The prominence of mood-related motivations suggests that emotional well-being is a central component of food choice behavior among students, reinforcing the idea that interventions promoting healthy eating should also consider psychological factors rather than focusing solely on nutritional education.

Convenience

Convenience was perceived as a highly influential determinant, with a percentage score of 83.63%. Item-level indicators emphasize ease of preparation, simple cooking processes, minimal time requirements, and easy access to food near students' residences or campus. These responses reflect students' preference for food options that fit efficiently into their daily routines and academic schedules.

This pattern aligns closely with previous studies showing that time constraints and academic workload significantly shape food choices among university students (Almoraie et al., 2025; Marinova & Bogueva, 2022). The strong emphasis on convenience suggests that even students with high health awareness may prioritize quick and accessible food options when faced with competing demands. Consequently, improving the convenience of healthy food options may be a more effective strategy than expecting students to alter their eating habits through knowledge-based interventions alone.

Sensory Appeal

Sensory appeal obtained a high percentage score of 83.58%, confirming the central role of hedonic attributes in food selection. Item-level indicators related to aroma, visual attractiveness, texture, and taste demonstrate that students strongly value the sensory experience associated with food consumption. Among these indicators, taste appears to be particularly salient, reinforcing its importance as a decisive factor in food choice.

Consistent with existing literature, sensory appeal often outweighs health considerations in food choice decisions, especially among young consumers (Asioli et al., 2017; Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000). This finding suggests that efforts to promote healthier eating among university students should not neglect sensory quality. Instead, healthy food options should be designed to meet students' expectations regarding taste and overall eating experience.

Natural Content

The natural content dimension received a percentage score of 79.56%, indicating that students value food made from natural ingredients and free from artificial additives. Item-level indicators show a clear preference for foods that do not contain food additives, artificial substances, or synthetic ingredients, reflecting growing concern for food purity and minimal processing.

This finding aligns with broader consumer trends related to clean-label products and the "real food" concept, which emphasize naturalness and transparency in food production (Asioli et al., 2017; Marinova & Bogueva, 2022). However, the slightly lower score of this dimension compared to convenience and price suggests that while students appreciate natural food attributes, practical constraints may limit their ability to prioritize natural content consistently in daily food choices.

Price

Price emerged as the most influential determinant, with the highest percentage score of 86.28%. Item-level analysis indicates that students strongly prioritize affordability, low cost, and perceived value for money when selecting food. These indicators reflect the economic realities faced by university students, who often operate under limited financial resources.

This finding is strongly supported by previous research showing that price sensitivity is a dominant factor in food choice behavior among students and young adults (Geuens, 2023). Importantly, the emphasis on value for money suggests that students do not simply seek the cheapest options, but rather food that they perceive as worth the price paid, highlighting a rational economic dimension in their food selection.

Weight Control

The weight control dimension obtained a moderate percentage score of 72.39%, indicating that concerns related to calorie intake, fat content, and weight management are present but not dominant. Item-level indicators reveal selective attention to low-calorie and low-fat foods, suggesting that weight-related motivations may be situational rather than central to daily food choices.

This pattern is consistent with previous studies reporting that weight control motivations tend to be more salient among specific subgroups, such as individuals actively dieting, rather than among the general student population (Asioli et al., 2017). For most students, immediate factors such as taste, price, and convenience appear to outweigh long-term weight management considerations.

Familiarity

Familiarity achieved a relatively high percentage score of 82.44%, indicating that students prefer foods that are familiar, commonly consumed, or similar to foods eaten during childhood. Item-level indicators suggest that familiarity provides a sense of comfort and reduces uncertainty in food selection.

This finding highlights the role of cultural background and past experiences in shaping food choice behavior. For students living away from their families, familiar foods may serve as emotional comfort and a means of maintaining cultural identity. Similar findings have been reported in previous research, emphasizing the importance of familiarity in reducing perceived risk and enhancing food acceptance (Geuens, 2023).

Ethical Concern

Ethical concern was the least influential determinant, with a percentage score of 68.83%. Item-level indicators related to country of origin, political considerations, and environmentally friendly packaging suggest that ethical issues

are recognized but not prioritized in daily food choices. This finding reflects a commonly observed attitude–behavior gap, where positive attitudes toward ethical and sustainable consumption do not consistently translate into actual purchasing behavior.

Previous studies have similarly reported that ethical considerations tend to be secondary to more immediate practical concerns such as price and convenience, particularly among students with limited financial resources (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022). This result indicates that ethical food choices may require stronger institutional support and structural incentives to become more influential in students' daily decisions.

Overall, the results indicate that price emerged as the most influential determinant of daily food choices among university students, followed by mood, convenience, sensory appeal, health, familiarity, natural content, weight control, and ethical concern. The dominance of price reflects the economic realities faced by university students, who typically operate under limited financial resources and must prioritize affordability and value for money in their daily consumption decisions. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that price sensitivity often overrides health and sustainability considerations among students and young adults (Gültekin & Veuphuteh, 2023).

The high importance of mood, convenience, and sensory appeal further suggests that food choices among students are strongly driven by immediate psychological and situational needs rather than long-term health goals. Theoretical perspectives on food choice behavior emphasize that individuals tend to prioritize factors that offer instant gratification, emotional comfort, and practical efficiency, especially in environments characterized by time pressure and academic demands (Asioli et al., 2017). The strong influence of mood-related indicators indicates that food functions not only as nourishment but also as a coping mechanism for stress and emotional regulation among university students, a pattern widely reported in studies on young adult eating behavior (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022).

Although health ranked relatively high, its position below price and convenience highlights a persistent intention–behavior gap, where awareness of healthy eating does not necessarily translate into consistent healthy food choices. Previous research has shown that health motivations are often constrained by external factors such as cost, accessibility, and taste preferences, particularly in student populations (Gültekin & Veuphuteh, 2023). Similarly, the moderate importance of natural content suggests growing awareness of clean-label and minimally processed foods, but this awareness appears secondary to practical considerations in daily decision-making.

The lower prioritization of weight control indicates that weight-related concerns are not central to everyday food choices for most students, aligning with findings that such motivations are more prominent among individuals actively dieting rather than the general student population (Asioli et al., 2017). Finally, ethical concern ranked as the least influential determinant, reflecting a common pattern in which ethical and sustainability considerations, although positively perceived, have limited impact on actual purchasing behavior when competing with economic and convenience-related factors. This outcome supports prior evidence of an attitude–behavior gap in ethical consumption among young consumers (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022).

Taken together, these findings suggest that university students' food choices are shaped by a complex interaction of economic constraints, emotional needs, and practical considerations, with health and ethical values playing a secondary role. This pattern underscores the importance of structural and environmental interventions—such as affordable, convenient, and appealing healthy food options—rather than relying solely on nutrition education to promote healthier eating behaviors among students.

Cultural and Habitual Context Shaping Perceived Food Choice Determinants

Although cultural background and eating habits were not measured as independent variables in this study, they provide an important contextual framework for interpreting students' perceptions of food choice determinants in the Indonesian setting. Food choice behavior among university students is embedded within broader cultural norms and habitual practices that influence how individuals perceive and prioritize different determinants in their daily food decisions.

Indonesian food culture is characterized by strong reliance on staple foods such as rice, frequent consumption of familiar home-style dishes, and the widespread availability of affordable ready-to-eat foods sold by street vendors and small food outlets. These cultural characteristics help explain why price, convenience, and familiarity emerged as highly influential perceived determinants in this study. Foods that are affordable, easily accessible, and familiar align closely with students' everyday experiences and expectations.

Habitual eating patterns formed during childhood and reinforced within family settings also shape students' food perceptions. Familiar foods reduce uncertainty and cognitive effort in food decision-making, particularly in

environments with abundant food options such as university areas. Previous studies have shown that habitual food choices often operate automatically and can outweigh deliberate health considerations, especially among young adults (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2025).

Economic and social contexts further reinforce these perceptions. The dominance of price as the most influential determinant is consistent with the widespread availability of low-cost food options around Indonesian university campuses, including *warung makan* and street food vendors. These food environments shape students' perceptions of what constitutes a "reasonable" and "acceptable" food choice. Research in developing and middle-income countries similarly highlights that economic accessibility and food availability strongly influence food choice perceptions more than nutritional knowledge alone (Gültekin & Veephuteh, 2023).

In contrast, ethical considerations related to sustainability and country of origin were perceived as less important. This may reflect cultural norms in which ethical food attributes are not yet deeply embedded in everyday food decision-making, as well as limited access to affordable ethically labeled products. Although awareness of sustainability issues is increasing among young Indonesians, such considerations remain secondary to immediate practical needs, a pattern also reported in previous studies (Marinova & Bogueva, 2022).

This contextual interpretation suggests that students' perceived food choice determinants are shaped not only by individual preferences but also by culturally embedded food environments and habitual eating practices. Understanding this context is essential for interpreting the findings of this study and for designing culturally appropriate interventions to promote healthier food choices among university students.

CONCLUSION

This study examined university students' perceived determinants of daily food choices using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ). The findings indicate that students' food choices are primarily influenced by price, followed by mood, convenience, and sensory appeal, while ethical concern was perceived as the least influential factor. Although health and natural content were considered important, their influence was secondary to practical and emotional considerations. These results suggest that students' food choices are shaped by a complex interaction of economic constraints, psychological needs, and situational factors, reflecting an intention–behavior gap in which health awareness does not consistently translate into healthy eating practices.

Based on these findings, efforts to promote healthier food choices among university students should extend beyond nutrition education and focus on improving the affordability, accessibility, and sensory quality of healthy food options, particularly within campus environments. Future initiatives should also consider students' cultural food preferences and habitual eating patterns to ensure greater acceptance and sustainability. Further research is recommended to involve a more diverse student population and to integrate behavioral or qualitative approaches in order to gain deeper insights into the relationship between perceived determinants and actual food consumption behavior.

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