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Factors influencing eating behavior among university students in Georgia: a qualitative study

Factores que influyen en la conducta alimentaria entre los estudiantes universitarios de Georgia: un estudio cualitativo

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: A healthy diet is crucial for human well-being and health. Unhealthy eating habits increase the risk of various diseases. University students are exposed to a variety of new personal and environmental influences. This transition period includes changes in physical and social status, along with lifestyle changes, which will affect their eating behavior. While some research has been conducted in Georgia to evaluate university students' eating habits, none has specifically focused on the factors that influence these behaviors. This study aimed to investigate the factors affecting students' eating behavior.

Methodology: The research used a qualitative method and an ecological theoretical framework to analyze the factors influencing students' eating habits. Using a semi-structured question guide, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 students and 1 expert at Caucasus University. A nonprobability sampling method and its most convenient type, snowball sampling, were used for the respondent selection.

Results: Eating behavior is influenced by individual factors (such as taste preferences), socioeconomic status, living conditions, social groups (friends, peers, family members, and relatives), physical environment (availability and prices), and the macro environment (media and advertising). Early formed incorrect eating habits, limited finances, and time constraints were found to be major barriers to healthy eating for students, shaping their dietary choices significantly.

Conclusions: As students represent a rather delicate social class with limited time and financial resources, the state needs to support and promote healthy eating and living among them. Providing affordable gym memberships and healthy food options in university facilities could help reduce stress and encourage students to establish healthier lifestyles.

Key words: Healthy lifestyle; Healthy eating; Eating behavior; Nutrition knowledge; University students.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Una alimentación saludable es fundamental para el bienestar y la salud humana. Los hábitos alimentarios poco saludables aumentan el riesgo de diversas enfermedades. Los estudiantes universitarios se encuentran expuestos a una variedad de nuevas influencias personales y ambientales. Este período de transición incluye cambios en el estado físico y social, así como en el

estilo de vida, los cuales afectan su comportamiento alimentario. Aunque en Georgia se han realizado algunas investigaciones para evaluar los hábitos alimentarios de los estudiantes universitarios, ninguna se ha centrado específicamente en los factores que influyen en estas conductas. El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar los factores que afectan el comportamiento alimentario de los estudiantes.

Metodología: La investigación empleó un enfoque cualitativo y un marco teórico ecológico para analizar los factores que influyen en los hábitos alimentarios de los estudiantes. Se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad a 12 estudiantes y un experto de la Universidad del Cáucaso, utilizando una guía de preguntas semiestructurada. Para la selección de los participantes se utilizó un método de muestreo no probabilístico, específicamente el muestreo en bola de nieve por su conveniencia.

Resultados: El comportamiento alimentario está influido por factores individuales (como las preferencias de sabor), el nivel socioeconómico, las condiciones de vida, los grupos sociales (amigos, compañeros, familiares y parientes), el entorno físico (disponibilidad y precios) y el macroentorno (medios de comunicación y publicidad). Se identificaron como principales barreras para una alimentación saludable la presencia de hábitos alimentarios inadecuados formados desde edades tempranas, las limitaciones económicas y la escasez de tiempo, elementos que inciden significativamente en las elecciones dietéticas de los estudiantes.

Conclusiones: Dado que los estudiantes constituyen un grupo social particularmente vulnerable, con recursos de tiempo y económicos limitados, es necesario que el Estado brinde apoyo y fomente la alimentación y el estilo de vida saludables entre esta población. Facilitar el acceso a membresías asequibles para gimnasios y ofrecer opciones alimentarias saludables en las instalaciones universitarias podría contribuir a reducir el estrés y promover estilos de vida más saludables entre los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Estilo de vida saludable; alimentación saludable; comportamiento alimentario; conocimientos sobre nutrición; estudiantes universitarios.

KEY MESSAGES

- El C-BASU es la primera herramienta diseñada para identificar las barreras en la alimentación saludable de universitarios mexicanos. Su estructura es válida y confiable; algunos de sus factores coinciden con la literatura del área y otros son novedosos.

INTRODUCTION

A balanced diet is foundational to a healthy life and disease prevention. Attitudes toward healthy eating can vary by age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic-cultural heritage, and lifestyle¹.

Unhealthy eating habits formed early in life may persist into adulthood, increasing the risk of various diseases². It is important to consider the specific social agents - parents, family, and peers. Parents model certain eating behaviors and transmit their attitudes to their children during upbringing³. Students living at home with their parents tend to consume more fruits and vegetables than those living away from their families⁴. When living in student housing, food costs become a key factor, leading to a stronger link between food prices and eating behavior among students living independently. There is a positive correlation between healthy eating and living with parents, as students who spend more time at home generally follow healthier diets⁵. Friends and peers also impact students' eating behavior. The attitudes and behaviors of friends and peers significantly influence adolescents' food choices⁶.

Studies show that students with healthy eating habits perform better academically, experience better mental health, and are less likely to develop chronic diseases⁷. Conversely, unhealthy and unbalanced diets contribute to obesity and overweight, leading to serious health issues⁸.

University students are exposed to a variety of new personal and environmental influences⁹. This transition period includes changes in physical and social status, along with lifestyle changes, which will affect their eating behavior¹⁰. To design effective interventions, it is essential to identify the factors that influence students' eating behaviors¹¹. Students are typically engaged in numerous social activities and academic responsibilities, which makes them more likely to choose fast, convenient, affordable, and ready-to-eat food options^{12,13}. Attitudes and beliefs play a crucial role in shaping dietary decisions at different stages of life. From the perspective of social psychology, attitudes are psychological tendencies that express a certain degree of favorability or disfavor towards food¹⁴. They can be represented in three ways: cognitive component - beliefs or knowledge about food (e.g., "vegetables are

healthy food"); affective component - emotions associated with food choices (e.g., liking sweets or aversion to spicy foods); behavioral component - a tendency to act in a certain way (e.g., refusing fast food due to health problems)¹⁵.

Beliefs, on the other hand, are deeply held ideas that individuals accept as true and are shaped by cultural, family, and social influences¹⁶. For example, the belief that "organic food is healthier" can influence purchasing behavior. These attitudes and beliefs determine decisions about food preferences and consumption frequency. They are influenced by factors such as parental, peer, media, and personal experiences¹⁷. Studying these factors in students is important because early intervention can shape long-term habits. Adolescence is a critical period for establishing lifelong dietary patterns. However, many dietary choices are based on misconceptions (e.g., "Carbohydrates are bad for you"), and educational programs can correct these¹⁸. Understanding attitudes allows for targeted interventions, such as awareness-raising campaigns. Research can, therefore, help develop strategies to address these gaps.

Understanding students' eating behaviors and the factors that shape them is valuable¹⁹. While some research has been conducted in Georgia to evaluate university students' eating habits, none has specifically focused on the factors that influence these behaviors²⁰.

The aim of this qualitative research is to examine students' attitudes toward healthy eating and the factors that influence their eating behaviors.

METHODS

Theoretical framework

This qualitative research study used an ecological theoretical framework to examine the various factors influencing students' eating habits. This approach considers multiple levels of influence, including individual, social, environmental, and university-related factors, that shape eating behavior among university students.

The ecological framework is particularly effective in understanding how the social environment influences personal choices. For example, individual factors (e.g., taste

preferences, self-discipline, time constraints) interact with social networks (e.g., peer influence, family eating habits, parental control), the physical environment (e.g., availability of healthy foods), and the macro-environment (e.g., media and advertising)²¹, as well as university-specific characteristics (exam schedules). By examining these interrelated factors, this qualitative research study provides an understanding of the challenges of healthy eating among university students.

Research design, data collecting

The qualitative in-depth interview method was used for data collection. The target segment consisted of undergraduate students at Caucasus University, one of the reputed universities located in Tbilisi (Georgia). The study involved second-, third- and fourth-year students from different faculties. Given the objectives of the study, students were selected using the snowball sampling method, a purposive nonprobability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research, where the researcher recruits a few initial volunteers who then recruit others.

The sample size was determined in accordance with the principle of data saturation - reaching the point where new themes or codes do not appear in the interviews. Twelve students participated in the qualitative research. Additionally, one expert was interviewed to provide valuable insights on the research topic. Participants were purposefully recruited for interviews, taking into account their nutritional behavior, experience, practice and perception. The interview questions were developed collaboratively with experts with relevant experience and were informed by reviewing pertinent literature (Table 1).

In-depth interviews with the respondents were conducted at the university at times convenient for both the students and the researchers. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted over two weeks.

Table 1. Guide for In-Depth Interview Questions

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Where are you from, and what's your name?2. Describe a healthy person.3. What comes to your mind about 'health in university students'?4. Think back of the last year(s) being a university student. Did your body weight and/or body composition change since you entered university?5. Did your health related habits change since you entered university?6. Which factors have caused these changes (or which factors influence current health behaviours)? What barriers and enablers of healthy behaviour can you identify?7. Which of the previously mentioned factors has had the greatest influence?8. Do you have any remarks, suggestions, additions?9. Soon, we will try to help students make healthier choices. Can you give us some advice on how to promote healthy eating behaviours in students?
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Data analyses

During the interviews, a voice recorder was used for audio recording. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word format and then cleaned and checked for precision. All transcriptions were encoded using the qualitative software program NVivo 9. Thematic analysis, chosen for its flexibility and suitability for qualitative studies, was employed to analyze the data²². Using an inductive thematic approach, recurrent instances within the data (quotes) were systematically identified and grouped using a structured coding system. Similar codes were consolidated into broader subcategories, which were subsequently organized into main categories. Thematic analysis ensures a systematic and transparent approach to identifying patterns within qualitative data while maintaining analytical rigor. To enhance the reliability of data interpretation, the analysis was conducted independently by two researchers, reducing potential bias and enhancing the credibility of findings.

Research ethics

Before starting the study, we received approval from the Research and Ethics Committee of Caucasus University (CU 39-21.01.24.). The research participants were informed about the research issue, their participation was completely voluntary and they could refuse to

participate in the research at any time. The respondents were aware that the study would be confidential, and they were informed that their voices would be recorded during the interview and that their opinions and evaluations would be used for analysis. There was no artificial incentive for their participation in the study.

RESULTS

Twelve students participated in the qualitative research, with an equal distribution of healthy and unhealthy eating habits. Using a "self-assessment question," each participant classified themselves into one of two groups. Six respondents identified as eating more healthily, while the other six considered their diets more unhealthy. Gender balance was maintained in each group, and all participants were second-, third-, and fourth-year university students with financial conditions ranging from average to good.

Table 2. Characteristics of participants (Mean \pm SD, %, n = 12)

Gender n (%)	
Male	6 (50%)
Female	6 (50%)
Age (yrs)	20.1 \pm 1.5
Body Mass Index (BMI) (kg/m ²)	23.1 \pm 4.2
Underweight (%)	7.5
Normal weight (%)	56.4
Overweight (%)	36.1
Study career (yrs)	3.0 \pm 1.0
Study discipline	
School of Business (%)	46.4
School of Humanities and Social Sciences (%)	22.3
School of Medicine (%)	31.3
Smoking (% smokers)	16.8
Self-reported health (% reporting poor health status)	12.1
Perceived physical activity level (% reporting little physical activity)	53.2
Perceived eating pattern quality (% reporting poor eating pattern)	23.6

Students' Beliefs About Healthy Eating

Respondents held generally similar beliefs about healthy eating, viewing it as a diet rich in proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. Most stressed the importance of balancing these nutrients, eating small portions throughout the day, and incorporating variety. Occasional treats, like sweets and baked goods, were considered acceptable, as students believe this helps the body adapt to different foods given limited access to purely healthy options.

"Eating healthily means balancing healthy foods with what's actually accessible. It's challenging to eat healthy on an average income."

– Male, group 1

"Healthy eating means four small meals with a varied diet, and it's okay to have fast food or sweets occasionally."

– Male, group 1

Those with unhealthier diets emphasized consuming vegetables, fruits, and water but felt that healthy eating required too many sacrifices, such as giving up enjoyable foods. The interviewed expert noted that these beliefs reflect societal stereotypes about healthy eating. According to the expert, a healthy diet doesn't mean monotonous or restrictive eating; instead, it involves balanced consumption and maintaining time intervals between meals.

"Healthy eating means eating lots of fruits and vegetables and avoiding junk food and sweets."

– Female, group 2

"Everything should be low-fat, sugar-free, and salt-free. But for me, that's the enjoyment factor. Without it, food is tasteless, and I don't know if I'll ever make that sacrifice."

– Male, group 2

Based on expert insights, a person who eats healthily typically has a structured diet, sufficient time and resources to prepare balanced meals, eats at regular intervals, and consumes calories that align with daily needs. Most respondents did not consider caloric balance, time intervals, or diet variety. Healthier-eating students were better informed on these aspects, though many still associated healthy eating with less tasty, low-calorie foods.

Social media, television programs, and advice from endocrinologists, nutritionists, and fitness instructors were the most common information sources on healthy eating. Some respondents also cited family and friends as their sources.

Attitude of students toward healthy eating

When discussing the benefits of healthy eating, nearly all respondents first mentioned maintaining good health. According to them, healthy eating is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of various diseases. Based on their experiences, students confidently stated that productivity is closely tied to food intake. As some pointed out, eating healthy leads to feeling more energetic and motivated, which supports daily tasks. Students also recognized that nutrition affects cognitive abilities and behaviors, impacting academic performance.

"Usually, when I eat healthy food, I feel more energetic and train well. If I eat fast food, I feel low energy, sleepy, and lazy."

– Female, group 1

Many students noted that eating healthily fosters self-respect, which enhances self-esteem and supports daily routines. One respondent highlighted that the feeling of self-control was a major motivator for healthy eating, contributing to increased self-esteem. Among female participants, maintaining a desirable body shape was another primary incentive.

"The positive is that you feel good about yourself when you eat healthy, as if you're achieving something and are ahead of others. The feeling of being in control makes a big difference."

– Female, group 1

"The main benefit is staying in good shape, maintaining weight, and looking good."

– Female, group 1

In addition to the physical benefits, students also emphasized the importance of healthy eating for mental health. One respondent noted that while initially challenging, the positive emotional and psychological effects of healthy eating become more apparent over time.

Several participants found it challenging to identify negative aspects of healthy eating. However, they highlighted the practical difficulties, especially the lack of financial and time resources. Healthy food was perceived as more expensive and less accessible than unhealthy options. According to the experts, limited time and financial constraints are major barriers to healthy eating, especially for students. Junk food, which is cheaper, easily accessible, and highly convenient, becomes a tempting choice and can lead to addiction. They observed that this type of food often results in fatigue and self-dissatisfaction, which in turn can cause various psychological issues.

"Eating right and healthy is more expensive. Eating unhealthily is cheaper – for example, I can buy beans, which are tasty and nutritious, for little money. But healthy eating requires ingredients, time, preparation, and a lot of money."

– Female, group 2

"The more you eat unhealthy food, the more your body becomes accustomed to it, and it becomes addictive. When you know it's bad and still eat it, you lose self-love, which negatively impacts self-esteem and can lead to psychological issues."

– Female, group 1

A few students had a different opinion, suggesting that the main drawback of healthy eating is the taste of certain foods. For these respondents, healthy eating is often associated with fruits, vegetables, and grains, and one respondent mentioned that he occasionally follows a healthy diet to lose weight. The interviewed expert noted that for such individuals, healthy eating is often associated with dieting, which may reinforce stereotypes about healthy eating. This view was shared by students who eat more healthily and believe it's a myth that healthy food is tasteless.

"I was eating healthy for a while to lose weight, but it felt like moral stress because healthy food didn't feel enjoyable. I now believe that healthy food can actually taste great."

– Male, group 2

"I've seen many videos showing you can eat healthy and delicious food. The stereotype that healthy food is tasteless is simply not true. The key is knowing the correct cooking techniques."

– Male, group 1

In conclusion, the majority of respondents held positive attitudes toward healthy eating, motivated by maintaining good physical and mental health, achieving a desirable body shape, boosting energy, improving concentration, and increasing self-esteem. Female respondents showed greater interest in nutrition and dietary control compared to males. Nearly all respondents cited limited financial resources as the primary difficulty in maintaining a healthy diet.

Nutritional behavior of students

Eating behavior is a complex phenomenon shaped by various factors, including upbringing, environment, and social influences, as highlighted by an expert interviewed in this study. The research revealed distinct differences in eating habits between groups of respondents. Those who consider themselves healthier reported eating more fruits, vegetables, and protein

sources, while those who identified as having less healthy diets leaned towards baked goods, sweets, pizza, beans, khachapuri, processed foods, and sugary treats as staples throughout the week. Few students in this category pay attention to the portion sizes or caloric content of their meals.

Conversely, students who consider themselves to eat healthily focus more on balancing their intake of fats, proteins, and carbohydrates throughout the day, rather than strictly counting calories. Only one participant actively tracked calorie intake using an app to ensure their daily calories didn't exceed their energy expenditure.

Following a structured eating regimen, which includes regular meal intervals, is challenging for most respondents. The expert recommends eating four times daily with set time intervals, explaining, "The interval between meals must be strictly observed, which is incompatible with the daily routine of most students." Students with less healthy eating habits found following this kind of schedule unrealistic, with some noting they might eat only once or twice a day, if at all. According to the expert, such irregular eating habits can be detrimental to the body and may lead to health issues in the future.

"Based on my schedule, it's just not possible; I can't control it. I don't know exactly what or when I'll eat. An endocrinologist might recommend eating five times daily at specific times with specific foods, but this regimen is nearly impossible for both students and the average person."

– Female, group 2

In contrast, students who identify as healthier eaters make efforts to maintain a consistent diet, typically eating at least three meals daily. Many female participants in this group reported having regular mealtimes and emphasized the importance of breakfast. The expert noted that, in his experience, women generally pay more attention to diet and nutrition than men, observing that most patients with metabolic disorders stemming from poor eating habits are men.

When it comes to planning meals for the week or day, most students reported eating spontaneously based on their schedules, as they find it difficult to predetermine their food choices. This issue is especially pronounced for students who work while attending university, as they rarely have time to prepare meals. These students explained that their diet often depends on the eating habits of the people they live with.

Determining factors of students' nutritional behavior

The study's results identified individual and social factors influencing students' eating behaviors. These include family, peers, societal traditions, socio-economic status, food accessibility, psychological state, personal willpower, awareness, past eating habits, daily schedules, and levels of physical activity.

Eating habits formed in childhood often persist into adulthood, underscoring the role of early-life socialization agents such as parents and family members. When asked about their childhood diets, participants largely attributed their current eating behaviors to their parents' influence. Respondents who ate healthily as children reported a continued sense of responsibility toward balanced eating, whereas those from households with less healthy eating norms struggled to adapt to healthier habits. Most respondents noted that although their parents made efforts to provide nutritious meals, many had misconceptions about what constitutes healthy eating. For instance, some parents equated "home-cooked" with "healthy," even if meals were high in fats, sugars, and salts. Students now aiming for a healthier diet often face challenges in overcoming ingrained habits. They suggested that parental beliefs about nutrition may have been shaped by limited access to nutritional information in the past.

"My parents thought that anything cooked at home was healthy, even if it was high in fat and salt. I think this generation has a different understanding of food."

– Male, Group 1

Students living away from home due to university studies commonly reported significant dietary changes. Many noted a shift towards convenience foods, such as baked goods and processed items, influenced by a busy schedule, lack of cooking skills, and limited time. University life also brought heightened stress, which many respondents said contributed to irregular eating habits.

"Back at home, I ate healthier. But once I was responsible for my meals, I started eating whatever was quick and easy, especially because I didn't know how to cook."

– Male, Group 2

This adjustment was particularly challenging during their first year, a period respondents referred to as a "food adaptation" phase. Due to morning lectures and hectic schedules, many missed meals or turned to inexpensive, easily available food options, finding university cafeterias unaffordable.

"When I started university, I lost control over my diet. The stress of a new environment and responsibilities made nutrition a low priority."

– Female, Group 1

Male respondents, in particular, noted that their diets were influenced by the eating habits of people they lived with, whether family or roommates. One participant observed that his diet remained unchanged because he still lived with family members who prepared traditional, high-calorie Georgian meals.

"If I lived alone, I'd make healthier choices. But I live with family, so traditional dishes are always part of our meals."

– Male, Group 2

Social gatherings and celebrations were cited as additional challenges to maintaining healthy eating habits. Financial limitations were another major barrier, with respondents noting that healthy food is often more costly and time-consuming to prepare. Fast, cheap, and tasty options, often unhealthy, were more practical for their student lifestyle. The interviewed expert echoed this view, pointing out that rising food prices in Georgia further hinder access to healthy food.

"The student lifestyle demands quick, affordable food, which usually means unhealthy options."

– Female, Group 2

A subset of respondents in more favorable financial situations reported better access to healthier diets. For example, one student working part-time noted that his financial independence allowed him to afford meal services offering balanced, ready-to-eat meals.

When asked what would help improve their eating habits, respondents cited factors like good habits established in childhood, strong willpower, motivation, and reduced stress. Healthier students identified family support, exercise, cooking skills, awareness, and self-management as key contributors to their diet. Physical activity, in particular, was a motivator for healthy eating among male students.

"When I work out, I'm more conscious of my diet, so I choose healthier foods."

– Male, Group 1

Eating behaviors are influenced by a range of factors, including age, gender, socio-economic status, upbringing, and education. According to the expert, higher education tends to promote healthier choices, as it enhances critical thinking and fosters self-care practices.

Early socialization, especially by parents, is foundational. When children grow up with varied and balanced diets, they are less likely to develop health issues tied to poor eating habits.

The expert also highlighted a widespread “unhealthy food culture” rooted in households and communities that often passes down to younger generations. Addressing this requires systemic support from national policies that incentivize healthy eating and promote correct dietary habits.

DISCUSSION

A healthy diet is crucial for human well-being and health. It supplies the body with essential nutrients, vitamins, and minerals that play a key role in enhancing the immune system. Family background and economic status influence one’s decision to consume nutritious foods.

Participants in this study indicated notable differences in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors toward healthy eating between students who follow healthy diets and those who do not. Students who lead a healthy lifestyle view a balanced diet as one that includes proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, along with occasional indulgences like baked goods and sweets, consumed in moderation. In contrast, students who consume less healthy foods often feel that healthy eating involves making significant sacrifices. The study suggests that these are misconceptions, as healthy eating does not mean eating bland food; rather, it emphasizes achieving a daily calorie intake that balances or remains below expenditure. Notably, students who follow a healthy diet report experiencing higher self-esteem.

Students who eat healthily also tend to have more knowledge about nutrition than their counterparts who do not. However, expert insights highlight that information about healthy eating is still not widespread among young people, underscoring the need for awareness efforts targeting this demographic.

Parents play a key role in shaping their children's eating behaviors, passing down specific dietary habits. Participants in this study indicated that students who live at home tend to be more influenced by their parents than those who moved out upon starting university. Those living with parents reported healthier diets, with a higher intake of fruits and vegetables.

Research in other regions, such as a study conducted in Italy, also emphasizes parental influence on dietary habits²³.

Beyond family influence, friends and peers also have a significant impact on eating behaviors, often through shared activities like dining out or snacking. A study in Australia by Pendergast et al. (2017) found that social settings are critical in determining food choices, with peer pressure sometimes leading to unhealthy eating patterns²⁴. Similarly, American research emphasizes the role of social norms and peer behavior in both promoting and deterring healthy eating habits²⁵.

Students consuming less healthy diets often perceive healthy eating as involving sacrifices or bland food, while healthy eaters view it as balanced and enjoyable. A Canadian study by Pelletier et al. (2016) found similar misconceptions among university students, noting that individuals with lower nutrition literacy are more likely to believe healthy eating is restrictive²⁶. This underscores the global need for improved education on the practical and enjoyable aspects of healthy eating.

Economic status impacts access to nutritious food, with healthier diets often associated with higher family income. Studies in low- and middle-income countries found that financial constraints limit access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins, leading to reliance on cheaper, less nutritious options.

The study suggests that students' academic backgrounds influence their eating behaviors. Medical school students had greater awareness of diet, nutrition, and health-related issues than business school or humanities and social sciences students. Previous studies have shown that medical students, due to their academic background, have greater nutrition knowledge and are, therefore, more likely to adopt healthy eating habits²⁷. In contrast, students from non-health-related disciplines may have different attitudes and perceptions about nutrition, which may lead to unhealthy food choices²⁸. However, differences in workload and academic pressure across disciplines play an important role in shaping students' dietary habits. For example, medical students often experience intense academic schedules and stress, which may contribute to healthy eating habits due to their knowledge or lead to irregular eating

patterns due to time constraints²⁹. On the other hand, students from business or humanities programs may face different lifestyle challenges that affect their food choices.

Students eating healthily possess greater nutritional knowledge, but the overall awareness of healthy eating among young people remains low. This finding is echoed by a South Korean study by Kim et al. (2020), which suggests the positive impact of nutrition education on improving students' dietary habits³⁰. However, gaps in awareness among youth are a recurring theme globally, emphasizing the need for targeted health campaigns.

Early exposure to diverse and healthy foods is a strong predictor of healthier eating patterns in adulthood. However, interventions during adolescence and young adulthood can still yield significant improvements in dietary choices.

Limitations of the study

When interpreting the findings of this study, certain methodological limitations should be taken into account. One such limitation is the use of a purposive sampling technique, which resulted in a relatively small sample size. All participants were students from Caucasus University in Tbilisi, so the findings may not be generalizable to other higher education institutions in different regions of the country.

The study used qualitative methods, which provide rich insights but may lack statistical generalizability. While qualitative data help explore students' perceptions in depth, they do not allow for broad conclusions. A mixed-methods approach incorporating quantitative surveys could strengthen the findings.

In addition, various contextual factors, including location, size, structure, and the surrounding environment, can influence university students' eating behavior and dietary intake, which may vary across different institutions. As a result, the findings of this study may not be broadly applicable to other settings. However, the study's primary goal was not to generalize the results but to gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping participants' eating habits. Additionally, this research provides a detailed insight into the key influences on university students' dietary behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study reflects global trends in factors influencing eating behaviors among university students, particularly regarding family and peer influences, socioeconomic challenges, and the critical role of education. Nonetheless, cultural nuances, such as specific dietary misconceptions and the role of household dynamics, provide unique insights into the Georgian context. Students make deliberate choices from the options available to them in their environment, and various factors, including socioeconomic status and living conditions, influence these choices. Social groups - such as friends, peers, family members, and relatives—also play a crucial role in shaping these choices.

These findings underscore the importance of tailored interventions to address cultural, social, and economic factors in promoting healthier eating among university students worldwide. Given that students are a socially vulnerable group with limited time and financial resources, state support is essential to promote healthy eating and lifestyle habits among them. Providing affordable gym memberships and access to healthy food in university facilities can help alleviate their stressful environment and increase their motivation to adopt and maintain a healthier lifestyle.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

TV and TP contributed equally to the design and experimental procedures of this study. Both authors have written and accepted the current version of this manuscript.

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COMPETING OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA

Data available on request to the author of the correspondence.

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