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Exploring Challenges and Demands of Practising Healthy Eating in Young Adults: A qualitative study

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Abstract

The transition from adolescence to adulthood, especially for individuals aged 18 to 29, involves numerous challenges and demands. This research explores the key challenges and demands of the lived experiences of young adults aged 18 to 29 in practising healthy eating. A qualitative research methodology was employed, using a phenomenological approach to deeply investigate personal and subjective experiences. The study revealed five focused topics and 20 themes clustered into thirteen information categories reflecting the multifaceted nature of the challenges and demands faced by young adults. The study highlights a detailed knowledge of healthy eating practices among young adults aged 18 to 29 and the need for targeted support systems and interventions to assist young adults in managing these challenges.

Keywords: Challenges; demands; healthy eating; young adults

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1.0 Introduction

Growing rates of overweight and obesity have sparked a global concern about healthy eating. Due to the complexity of the modern world, finding evidence-based information and keeping up with health-related news has become difficult for people. As mentioned by Mete et al. (2019), this might cause people to make hazardous decisions when they are oblivious to their actions. A study by Singh et al. (2017) found that although modern lifestyles and lifestyle adjustments make living more comfortable, food security causes middle-class and upper-class people to consume more food.

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As emphasized by Wang et al., (2019), the alarming rates of obesity and non-communicable diseases in Malaysia are a pressing concern. Young individuals who make poor dietary decisions frequently eat erratically, skip breakfast (Baszczyk et al., 2019), have imbalanced diets, and consume a lot of highly processed foods and beverages (Rodrigues et al., 2017; Gustafson et al., 2017). The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that obesity and overweight contribute to approximately 2.8 million deaths annually. Chong et al., (2019) claimed that 48% of Malaysians are obese, making them the most obese people in Southeast Asia.

Although research indicates that Malaysians are still in the early stages of adopting healthy eating habits, the government's proactive measures are a cause for optimism (Chong et al., 2019). To promote healthy eating habits among the public, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has launched numerous programs and campaigns, including the "Healthy Lifestyle Campaign," "Reduce Sugar Intake Campaign," and "Guidelines on the Implementation of Healthy Eating in the Public Sector." These initiatives, if effectively implemented, could significantly improve the nation's dietary habits.

However, healthy eating campaigns have yet to persuade the public to adopt the desired behaviour successfully. Psychological factors (Hoque et al., 2018), social factors (Lee et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2018), and environmental factors (Menozzi et al., 2015) can all impact unhealthy eating habits. Malaysia has far more severe health issues than any other nation in the area, and understanding the obstacles and needs that impede Malaysians from adopting a healthy diet is crucial for facilitating desired lifestyle modifications.

2.0 Literature Review

Healthy eating is essential for overall well-being, contributing to longevity and quality of life (Veenhoven et al., 2018). It involves consuming a balanced diet rich in nutrients and low in unhealthy fats, sugars, and processed foods (Ronteltap et al., 2012). The principles of healthy eating focus on moderation, variety, and nutrient-rich foods, ensuring adequacy, nutritional balance, and calorie control (Pinatih et al., 2020; Wedu et al., 2018). Adopting these practices promotes long-term health, but challenges such as maintaining dietary discipline persist (Annabelle et al., 2022; Tischner et al., 2019).

For young adults, healthy eating is crucial for supporting growth and preventing future health issues (Micha et al., 2018; Serra et al., 2015). Establishing good eating habits early on can reduce the risk of chronic diseases and support overall well-being (Hruby et al., 2015). Despite rising obesity rates and health concerns, increasing awareness and improving food options can foster healthier eating behaviours (Lee et al., 2019; Abdullah et al., 2020). Understanding individual, social, and environmental factors is crucial in designing effective public health strategies (Contento et al., 2020; Zorbas et al., 2018).

2.1 Challenges influencing healthy eating practice

Sociocultural factors profoundly influence eating habits through cultural food practices and family traditions. These include meal rules and dietary preferences passed down within families and social groups, shaping attitudes toward food (Kelly et al., 2016). Cultural prohibitions and religious beliefs also affect nutritional choices, such as avoiding specific proteins or foods deemed unsuitable (Lindgren et al., 2018). Understanding and respecting these influences is crucial for promoting healthy eating in culturally sensitive ways and fostering a more empathetic understanding of diverse dietary practices.

Economic status plays a significant role in dietary choices. Individuals with lower incomes often need help accessing nutritious foods, relying on cheaper, less healthy options (Drewnowski, 2010; Jones et al., 2014). The cost of healthy foods and household financial resources impact affordability and food choices, highlighting the need for strategies to make healthy eating more accessible and equitable (Lee et al., 2021; Temple et al., 2018).

Environmental factors affect food choices through the availability and marketing of foods. Modern food systems and marketing have made ultra-processed foods more accessible and appealing, contributing to unhealthy eating patterns (Monteiro et al., 2013; Zobel et al., 2016). Food prices, store conditions, and broader economic and policy contexts influence dietary habits, emphasising the need to address these elements to encourage healthier eating (Caspi et al., 2012; Swinburn et al., 2013).

2.2 Demands for engaging in healthy eating practice

Food movements and traditional cuisines push for sustainable diets by emphasising ethical and emotional connections to food (Lang et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2011). The "slow food" movement advocates for health and environmental stewardship through local, unprocessed foods (Waters et al., 2022; Chaudhury et al., 2015). Radical food movements address class and racism, focusing on human rights and local agriculture (Navin et al., 2018). Multiculturalism supports healthy eating by celebrating diverse food practices and fostering community connections (Geetha et al., 2020).

Affording healthy food is a key concern, with price impacting diet quality and food security (Glanz et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2011). Economic approaches like subsidies and price reductions aim to make nutritious food more accessible (Davis et al., 2010; Tharrey et al., 2022). Programs such as SNAP and food banks help low-income populations, though the long-term effectiveness of these measures in sustaining healthier food choices is still under review (Loopstra et al., 2018; An et al., 2017).

Access to healthy food is essential, especially in remote or low-income areas where it can be scarce and expensive (Lowe et al., 2018; Whelan et al., 2018). Ensuring that healthy foods are available in community stores and within-store environments is crucial for improving diet quality (Cobb et al., 2015). Studies show mixed results on the impact of increased food availability on health outcomes, highlighting the need for continued research and effective interventions (Gittelsohn et al., 2017; Pablo et al., 2020).

2.3 The relation of healthy eating and health outcomes

Healthy eating is closely linked to improved health outcomes. Research indicates that a nutritious diet can significantly enhance physical and mental well-being. Studies have shown that consuming more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is associated with better health, increased happiness, and a reduced risk of chronic illnesses (Mujic & Oswald, 2016). In contrast, diets high in unhealthy foods, such as those high in fats and sugars, may lead to health issues and lower overall well-being (Tomiyaama et al., 2015).

Recent findings underscore that healthy eating not only supports immune function and cognitive abilities but also aligns with increased public awareness and willingness to invest in more nutritious food choices (Nguyen et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2019). Focusing on wholesome, nutrient-dense foods contributes to long-term health benefits and enhances quality of life (Hoque et al., 2018; Chong et al., 2019).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study Design and Setting

This phenomenological study targets young adults aged 18 to 29 in Selangor. The approach provides a deep understanding of participants' personal experiences and perspectives on healthy eating, highlighting the various cultural, economic, and environmental factors that affect their dietary choices.

3.2 Sampling

This study used purposive sampling to recruit 10 to 20 participants to capture a range of perspectives and achieve comprehensive data saturation (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Participants should be willing to participate, come from diverse backgrounds, and be bilingual in English and Malay. Exclusion criteria include severe cognitive impairments, intensive medical treatments, and individuals with specific dietary restrictions due to medical conditions.

3.3 Data Collection

The study used structured face-to-face interviews to gather informed consent from participants about healthy eating practices in Malay. The interviews took place in May and June of 2024 and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes each. The participants gave written and verbal consent, and an interview guide was created with the Health Belief Model insights and literature reviews. The audio was recorded using a voice recorder, and all data gathered will be kept confidential for the study.

Table 3.3: Interview questions guide

Topics	Questions
Definition	What do you understand about healthy eating?
Current practices	Can you share your typical dietary habits and food choices daily?
Challenges	Have you encountered any challenges in practicing healthy eating?
	a. How do sociocultural factors impact your ability to practice healthy eating?
	b. How do economic constraints impact your ability to practice healthy eating?
	c. How do environmental conditions impact your ability to practice healthy eating?
Demands	From your perspective, what support or resources are essential to help adopt and maintain healthy eating?
Recommendations	Based on your experiences and insights, what recommendations would be most effective for improving access to and awareness of healthy eating practices in Selangor?

3.4 Data Analysis

The present study utilised thematic analysis. The process began with familiarisation with data by reviewing and transcribing interview audio recordings. Initial codes were created and progressively refined as the transcripts were analysed. Repetitive codes were merged into primary codes and then carefully examined to identify subthemes. Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure a coherent structure, with consensus on the emerging codes and themes reached through a thorough review. After ten interviews, saturation was deemed reached as no new themes emerged, and the ideas became repetitive.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Profile of participants

The study involved ten participants, 80% females and 20% males, averaging 24 years old. 80% of the participants are active university students and 20% are employed. All of them are of Malay ethnicity.

4.2 Theme introduction

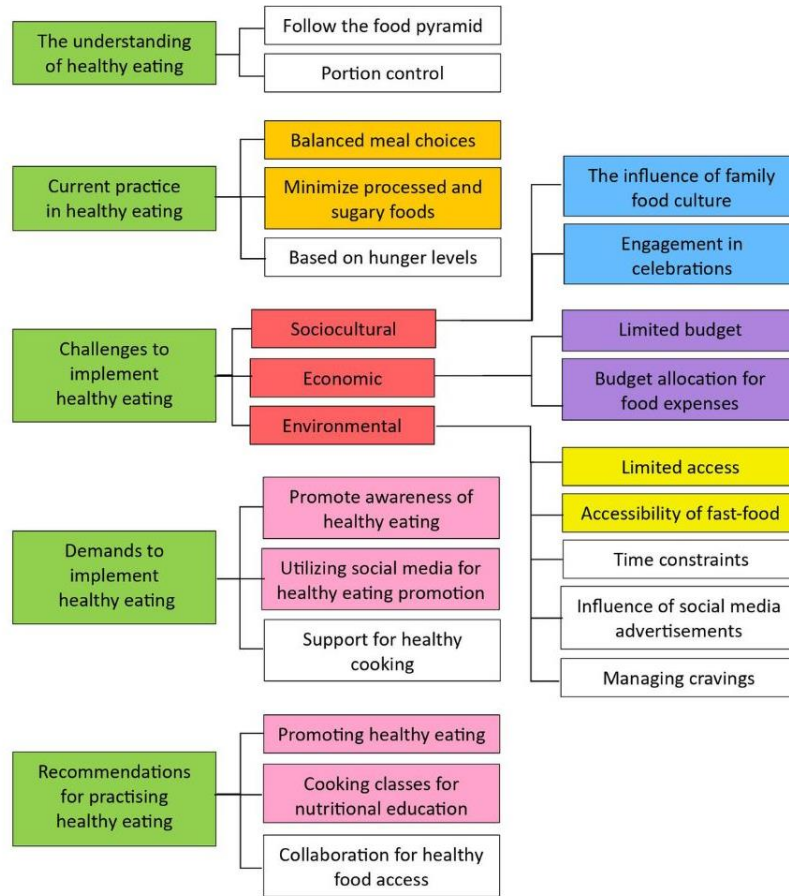


Fig. 4.2: Themes introduction

It identifies 20 themes, grouped into 13 categories with 37 subcategories, showing the challenges and strategies for promoting healthy eating. The main topics are highlighted in green, while subtopics are indicated in red. Each theme was associated with specific categories, and the same colour represented overlapping categories across different themes.

A. Understanding Healthy Eating

Theme 1: Follow the Food Pyramid. Participants emphasised a balanced diet according to the food pyramid, including all nutrient groups. "Healthy eating is about having all sufficient nutrients." - P1, Male.

Theme 2: Hydration and Whole Foods. Hydration is essential and complements a diet rich in whole foods over processed foods. "Healthy eating means including all nutrients and drinking enough water." - P7, Female.

B. Current Practices in Healthy Eating

Theme 1: Balanced Meal Choices. Participants included various foods in their meals and recognised the importance of breakfast. "Usually, I have rice with chicken and vegetables for lunch and dinner." - P1, Male.

Theme 2: Minimizing Processed and Sugary Foods. Participants aim to reduce processed and sugary foods due to health risks. "I try to reduce the consumption of processed or sugary foods." - P3, Female.

Theme 3: Eating Based on Hunger Levels. Participants eat based on hunger, avoiding snacking out of boredom. "I eat only when I am extremely hungry, not just for snacking." - P2, Male.

C. Challenges to Implementing Healthy Eating

Sociocultural Factors

Theme 1: Influence of Family Food Culture. Family food culture impacts dietary habits, often involving traditional dishes. "My family loves celebrating with food, so I cannot just watch." - P5, Female.

Theme 2: Engagement in Celebrations. Celebrations often involve consuming high-calorie foods. "During Eid events, organisers serve high-calorie, oily foods." - P2, Male.

Economic Factors

Theme 1: Limited Budgets for Healthy Eating. Participants face financial constraints in accessing healthy foods.

"I restrict my budget for groceries and food purchases, especially fruits." - P2, Male.

Theme 2: Budget Allocation for Food Expenses. Participants prioritise keeping food spending within a budget.

"I set a budget for food to ensure it does not exceed our allocated budget." - P7, Female.

Environmental Factors

Theme 1: Limited Access to Healthy Food Options. Participants need more transportation and more availability of fresh produce.

"I do not have transportation to a shop that is a bit far to buy fruits." - P2, Male.

Theme 2: Accessibility of Fast-Food Options. Fast food outlets and delivery services make it convenient to consume fast food.

"In the Shah Alam area, there are many fast-food outlets." - P1, Male

Theme 3: Time Constraints. Busy schedules make meal planning and preparation challenging.

"During classes, there are days when I have lunch late, almost merging it with dinner." - P1, Male.

Theme 4: Influence of Social Media Advertisements on Food Choices. Social media ads influence food choices, leading to cravings.

"I get caught up in social media ads that promote trendy noodle dishes." - P7, Female.

Theme 5: Managing Cravings. Participants struggle with cravings for sugary or fast foods.

"Sometimes I have cravings even though I have decided to cut sugar this month." - P3, Female.

D. Demands to Implement Healthy Eating

Theme 1: Promoting Awareness of Healthy Eating. Participants believe social media can raise awareness about healthy eating.

"Social media can promote awareness about healthy eating." - P1, Male.

Theme 2: Utilizing Social Media for Healthy Eating Promotion. Participants want social media to share healthy food menus, recipes, and tips.

"Social media can share how to eat healthy and provide food menus." - P5, Female.

Theme 3: Support for Healthy Cooking. Participants need programs that teach basic cooking skills and provide healthy meal ideas.

"There should be a basic cooking skill program teaching how to plan healthy meals on a budget." - P3, Female.

E. Recommendations for Practicing Healthy Eating

Theme 1: Promoting Healthy Eating Awareness. Participants stress the importance of educating the public about healthy eating.

"Raise public awareness about healthy eating to prevent high blood pressure and diabetes." - P4, Female.

Theme 2: Collaboration for Healthy Food Access. Collaboration with local businesses and government agencies can promote healthier eating habits.

"There should be a collaboration with local businesses to establish food courts selling healthy food." - P1, Male.

Theme 3: Cooking Classes for Nutritional Education. Participants suggest cooking classes to teach basic cooking skills and nutritional methods.

"Offer cooking classes because students do not know how to cook nutritionally." - P6, Female.

5.0 Discussion

This study examined the difficulties young adults encounter in maintaining healthy eating habits. It found that their understanding of healthy eating matches earlier research (Buckton et al., 2015; James et al., 2022). Participants defined healthy eating as consuming a balanced diet with fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains while avoiding processed and sugary foods. These views align with current dietary guidelines (Lawrence et al., 2023; Maryniuk et al., 2017; Nees et al., 2024).

Cultural and family food traditions significantly influence dietary choices. Participants mentioned that traditional cooking methods and family meals impact their eating habits (Lubna et al., 2021). The trend towards more eating out and reliance on convenience foods complicates efforts to eat healthily, as supported by Fulkerson et al., (2011).

Financial limitations also affect food choices. Participants noted that healthier foods tend to be more expensive, leading them to opt for cheaper, less nutritious options (Ashton et al., 2015; Munt et al., 2017; Micha et al., 2017; Pei et al., 2018; Ryu et al., 2018). Limited access to fresh produce in some urban areas further exacerbates this issue (Eng et al., 2022; Simpson et al., 2020). Additionally, the convenience of fast-food outlets influences eating habits, as Kamal et al. (2021) and Ilya et al. (2018) observed.

Social media significantly impacts food choices by promoting both healthy and unhealthy trends. While it can offer useful information and recipes (Chau et al., 2018; Klassen et al., 2018), it also spreads misinformation (Rodgers et al., 2020). Managing cravings for high-calorie foods is another challenge, with mindful eating techniques helping to address this issue (Vallis et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2018; Reichenberger et al., 2018).

The study highlights the importance of educating and supporting young adults to make healthier food choices. It suggests that cooking skills programs and practical advice are essential (Fertig et al., 2019; Ford et al., 2019; Policastro et al., 2023). Collaboration among local businesses, government, and community organisations is crucial to enhancing access to nutritious foods and supporting healthier eating habits (An et al., 2017; Barbour et al., 2022; Alderwick et al., 2021).

In conclusion, promoting healthy eating among young adults involves addressing financial, cultural, and environmental challenges. Effective strategies include education, support, and community collaboration to help individuals adopt and sustain more nutritious food choices.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

It highlights the necessity of community engagement as well as individual and parental involvement to promote healthy eating habits. The research emphasises the difficulties young adults, especially those living in rural areas, have in providing and obtaining nutritious dietary options.

To alleviate the burden on underprivileged individuals, practical recommendations include collaborating with local schools or colleges to offer government-funded or discounted healthy meal options, promoting healthy eating habits by individuals, parents and communities through initiatives like farmers' markets and community gardens, and supporting subsidies for healthy foods and policies promoting food security and nutrition education by policymakers.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study on young adults' challenges with healthy eating offers significant insights into the factors affecting dietary habits. By using a phenomenological approach, it reveals essential themes that deepen our understanding of the barriers faced by this group. The research identifies significant obstacles to healthy eating, including cultural influences, financial constraints, and limited access to nutritious foods. It highlights how cultural traditions and economic limitations impact dietary choices, providing a comprehensive view of the difficulties young adults encounter. It also sheds light on social media's dual role in influencing food choices. It can both promote healthy eating and encourage unhealthy trends. This finding suggests the need for targeted social media strategies to enhance healthy eating practices. Besides, this research suggests several practical interventions, such as cooking skills programs, increased public awareness, and community efforts. These recommendations aim to address the identified challenges and support young adults in making healthier food choices. Finally, the study emphasises the need for policy measures to improve food access and affordability. It advocates collaboration among local businesses, government agencies, and community organisations to develop effective public health strategies.

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