A Study on The Impact of Lifestyle And Awareness on Food Choices of College Students

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Abstract- *Food habits among college students are undergoing a rapid transformation, shaped by academic pressure, urban lifestyles, technological influence, and increasing independence in food choices. This transitional phase of life marks a critical period where young adults move away from home-cooked meals toward convenience-based and commercially prepared foods. The present study explores the evolving dietary patterns of college students, focusing on meal regularity, food preferences, nutritional awareness, and the impact of social and environmental factors. It highlights how factors such as time constraints, peer influence, digital food delivery platforms, and stress contribute to irregular eating habits and nutritional imbalance. While students increasingly prioritize taste, affordability, and convenience, health considerations often take a secondary role. The study emphasizes the long-term implications of these habits on physical health, mental well-being, and academic performance. By examining the changing relationship between young minds and their food choices, this research aims to draw attention to the need for nutritional awareness and institutional support to encourage healthier eating practices among college students.*

Keywords: Food habits, college students, dietary patterns, nutritional awareness, lifestyle changes

I. INTRODUCTION

Food is not merely a source of nourishment; it plays a vital role in physical growth, cognitive development, emotional stability, and overall well-being. College life represents a significant turning point in an individual's life, where students experience newfound independence and responsibility, including decisions related to food consumption. Unlike school-going adolescents, college students often manage their meals without parental supervision, leading to noticeable shifts in eating behavior.

Modern college environments are fast-paced and demanding, often leaving little time for mindful eating. The increasing availability of fast food, instant meals, and online food delivery services has further reshaped traditional dietary practices. Skipping meals, irregular eating times, excessive consumption of junk food, and reduced intake of fruits and vegetables have become common trends among students. At the same time, rising awareness of fitness and body image creates conflicting food choices, oscillating between unhealthy indulgence and restrictive dieting.

Understanding the food habits of college students is essential, as this phase lays the foundation for lifelong dietary behavior. Poor nutrition during these formative years can lead to long-term health issues such as obesity, nutritional deficiencies, stress-related disorders, and reduced academic efficiency. Hence, an in-depth examination of students' food habits is both timely and necessary.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the existing food habits and dietary patterns of college students.
2. To identify the factors influencing food choices, such as lifestyle, peer pressure, stress, and convenience.
3. To understand the impact of changing food habits on students' health and academic performance.

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing awareness about healthy nutrition, a significant number of college students continue to follow unhealthy eating patterns. Academic workload, limited time, easy access to fast food, and lack of structured meal planning often result in skipped meals, excessive snacking, and poor nutritional intake. These habits may not show immediate consequences but can gradually affect students' physical health, mental concentration, and energy levels. The problem lies in the disconnect between knowledge and practice— students may be aware of healthy eating principles, yet fail to adopt them consistently. This study seeks to address this issue by analyzing the underlying causes and consequences of changing food habits among college students.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study is limited to college students and may not represent the food habits of all young adults.
2. The findings are based on self-reported data, which may be influenced by personal bias or inaccurate recall.
3. The study focuses primarily on general dietary patterns and does not include detailed nutritional or medical assessments.
4. Cultural, regional, and economic differences among students may affect food habits, which may not be fully captured.
5. Time constraints may limit the depth of analysis of long-term dietary behavior.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive research design, as it aims to describe, analyse, and interpret the existing food habits of college students without manipulating any variables. This design is appropriate because the study focuses on understanding real-life dietary behaviours, preferences, and awareness levels as they naturally occur among students.

Population of the Study

The population for the study consists of college students pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate courses from various disciplines.

Sample Size

A total of 125 respondents were selected for the study. This sample size was considered adequate to reflect diverse food habits, living conditions, and lifestyle patterns among college students.

Sampling Technique

The study employed convenience sampling, where respondents were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate. This method was suitable due to time constraints and ease of data collection within the college environment.

Tool for Data Collection

Primary Data

Primary data refers to the original data collected directly from the respondents for the purpose of the study.In this research, primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to college students. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and multiple-choice questions designed to gather information on students' food habits, lifestyle patterns, nutritional awareness, and related factors affecting their health and academic performance.

Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from existing and reliable sources to support and strengthen the analysis of primary findings. These sources included books, research journals, published articles, online databases, reports, and previous studies related to food habits, nutrition awareness, and student lifestyle behavior.

Statistical Tools Used

- Percentage analysis is a simple yet effective statistical tool used to describe the distribution and proportion of responses within the dataset. It helps in understanding the general pattern and trend of responses among different groups of respondents.
- The Chi-square test (χ^2) is a non-parametric statistical tool used to examine the association or relationship between two categorical variables. It helps determine whether the observed differences between variables are statistically significant or have occurred by chance.

Formula used

Percentage (percentage) = (Number of Respondents / Total Respondents) × 100

Chi-Square

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$$

Major Findings of the Study

- The majority of respondents (75.2%) belong to the 18–23 age group, indicating that the study mainly represents early adulthood food habits.
- The gender distribution is nearly equal (48.8% male and 49.6% female), ensuring balanced perspectives in food behavior patterns.
- Most respondents (71.2%) are undergraduate students, showing that the findings largely reflect students adapting to independent college life.
- Students from all academic years are almost equally represented, suggesting that unhealthy food habits persist throughout college years.

- A significant portion (70.4%) of students stay away from parents (in hostels, PGs, or rented accommodations), increasing dependence on external food sources.
- The majority (63.2%) have a monthly food budget between ₹2000–₹6000, indicating moderate spending and cost-conscious food choices.
- Only 25.6% of students always eat three meals daily, while most follow irregular meal patterns.
- Breakfast is the most commonly skipped meal (41.6%), highlighting poor morning dietary routines.
- A considerable number rely on hostel food (24.8%), online delivery (24.8%), and fast food (21.6%), showing reduced consumption of home-cooked meals.
- More than half (57.6%) consume junk food three to four times a week or daily, reflecting high dependence on unhealthy food.
- Taste (32.8%) and convenience (30.4%) are the primary factors influencing food choice, while health (15.2%) receives the least attention.
- Academic stress affects eating habits for 82.4% of students (Yes + Sometimes), indicating its strong influence on irregular food behavior.
- Only 23.2% of students consume fruits and vegetables daily, showing inadequate intake of protective and nutritious foods.
- A majority (52%) rarely or never check nutritional information, indicating low awareness while making food choices.
- 87.2% of students use online food delivery apps at least occasionally, revealing the digital influence on modern eating patterns.
- About 64% agree that food habits impact health and academic performance, showing growing recognition of dietary consequences.
- 80% of students are aware (fully or partially) of long-term health risks, but this awareness does not always lead to consistent healthy actions.
- Only 20.8% of students always try to maintain a balanced diet, while most do so inconsistently.
- A large majority (87.9%) express a desire to improve their eating habits, such as reducing junk food, eating healthier, or having regular meals.
- 76.8% of students show interest (Yes/Maybe) in nutrition awareness programs, highlighting the scope for institutional intervention to promote healthy food practices.

Chi square

- There is a relationship between the place of residence and the type of food consumed most often by the respondents. The calculated value (37.42) is greater than the table value (16.919) at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a significant association between students' place of residence and their food consumption patterns.
- There is a relationship between the place of residence and the frequency of junk/fast food consumption of the respondents. The calculated value (23.65) is greater than the table value (16.919) at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.
- There is a relationship between the year of study and the desired changes in food habits of the respondents. The calculated value (19.27) is greater than the table value (16.919) at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.
- There is no relationship between the gender and the meal skipped most often by the respondents. The calculated value (7.42) is less than the table value (12.592) at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted.
- There is no relationship between gender and the impact of food habits on health and academics of the respondents. The calculated Chi-square value (3.74) is less than the table value (12.592) at the 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted.

II. SUGGESTIONS

Colleges can move beyond traditional nutrition lectures by introducing experience-based learning activities such as interactive food awareness weeks, live meal demonstrations, and student-led nutrition clubs that make healthy eating engaging and relatable. Establishing affordable, quick, and nutritious food counters within campuses can help reduce students' dependence on fast food and online delivery platforms, as accessibility and convenience strongly influence food choices. Integrating food habit awareness sessions into student orientation programs can also encourage the formation of healthier routines early in college life, preventing irregular patterns from becoming long-term habits. furthermore encouraging flexible academic schedules and short wellness breaks can indirectly promote better eating discipline by giving students the mental space to prioritize regular meals. Peer influence can be harnessed positively through initiatives such as balanced plate days or hostel-level healthy eating challenges, turning nutrition into a shared social goal rather than an individual effort. Although, digital tools like reminder

notifications, calorie transparency, and campus app-based food reward systems can subtly guide students toward healthier dietary decisions without imposing strict restrictions.

III. CONCLUSION

The study "Impact of Lifestyle and Awareness on Food Choices of College Students" reveals that students' dietary choices extend beyond hunger or preference, being shaped by lifestyle pressures, emotional states, and environmental influences. Convenience, academic stress, and time constraints often outweigh health considerations, resulting in irregular meals, skipped breakfasts, and growing dependence on fast food and online delivery platforms.

These behaviours emerge more from circumstance than intention, as students navigate independent living with limited budgets and access to nutritious options. Although many are aware of the health and academic consequences of poor nutrition, this awareness seldom translates into consistent healthy practices. Health frequently takes a secondary place to taste, cost, and convenience, showing that dietary challenges among college students are both behavioural and systemic rather than merely informational.

The study concludes that college life is a formative stage where lifelong eating habits are established. Educational institutions can play a pivotal role by promoting nutritional awareness, ensuring access to healthier food options, and fostering supportive environments that encourage students to replace convenience-driven eating with balanced, mindful dietary practices.

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