

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EATING HABITS AND MENTAL HEALTH OF UNDERGRADUATES STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The major objective of the Study was to investigate the relationship between eating habits and mental health of undergraduates in the University of Nigeria. Specifically, the Study identified the eating habits of undergraduate students, assessed their mental health and determined the relationship between their eating habits and mental health. Descriptive cross-sectional research design was used. A total of 698 respondents were selected using multi-stage random sampling technique from Nsukka and Enugu Campuses. A structured questionnaire for eating habits and standardized instrument for Mental Health Continuum Short-Form was used to collect data. All data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.0, while Chi-square was used to determine relationship between variables. Results revealed that 33% of the respondents were critical eaters, 37.2% social eaters, 41.4% unconscious eater; 48% emotional eaters, 52.4% sensual eaters, 57.2% healthy eaters and 75.8% were habitual eaters. Respondents can belong to more than one eating habit category. Majority (49.1%) of the respondents had flourishing mental health, 42.1% had moderate mental health while 8.7% had languishing mental health. The finding showed that healthy, non-sensual and conscious eating habits were significantly ($p < .05$) associated with positive mental health. Majority of the respondents who were healthy, non-sensual and conscious eaters had flourishing mental health. While emotional, critical, habitual and social eaters were not associated with mental health because the P value was not significant ($p \geq .05$). Free Nutrition and mental health counseling services should be made readily available to the students upon resumption and follow up support groups should monitor and evaluate progress.

Keywords: *Mental Health, Consumption Pattern, Nutrition Education, Undergraduates.*

Introduction

The complex ways that diet can affect psychological well-being have been brought to light by the growing interest in the relationship between eating habits and mental health in recent years.

This may have led to a significant increase in research on the effect of nutrition and dietary habits on mental health of individuals (Granero, 2022). Understanding this connection may be one of the avenues to preventing mental health disorders in our society (Grajek, et al., 2022; Muscaritoli, 2021). To Granero (2022), there is an

existing controversy among nutritional and health scientists on the role of nutrition in the onset and progression of behavioural problems and mental health issues and how diet may contribute to the efficiency of therapy used in patients with different psychopathological conditions.

Historically, nutrition had been overlooked as a contributor to poor mental health, but there is an increasing focus to this relationship, largely due to understanding the fact that the central nervous system needs certain key nutrients for maintenance and to function optimally. The nutritional status of an individual is influenced by a variety of factor, including life stage,

environment, food access and socioeconomic status which in turn can influence mental health (Khalil, 2022; Stenfanska, et al., 2017).

The type of Food consumed influences to a great extent individual's disposition whereas the person's mood dictates their cravings and the type of nourishment they choose. To Constantin and Fonseca (2020), emotions affect eating while the nutritional properties of food impact on brain functions which relates to mood and feelings. They added that specific nutrition can affect cognitive processes and emotions whereas the lack of vitamins, essential fatty acids, minerals, some micronutrients and proteins may contribute to aggravating a poor psychological state. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that many young people have abandoned healthy indigenous diets for more westernized and ultra-processed foods (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023; Sitohang, 2022). Young people tend to exhibit dietary habits and eating habits acquired in adolescence, which are likely to persist throughout adulthood (Mahmood, et. al., 2021).

According to Medina et al. (2020), people's eating habits may be described as the intentional, group-based, and recurrent behaviors that affect people's selection, use, and intake of specific foods or diets. Included in this definition are the food's type, preparation, timing, and location of consumption. It involves eating a particular food on a regular basis and making consistent eating decisions in terms of food selection, quantity, and frequency. There are a few known conditions that influence people's eating patterns apart from family of orientation and culture, they include stress, lack of sleep, financial constraints, time constraints and changes in lifestyle (Sogari et al., 2018). There are six traditional types of eaters identified by St. Elizabeth Healthcare (2017). They include: Emotional eaters, unconscious eaters, habitual eaters, critical eaters, sensual eaters and energy eaters. These eating habits are further explained below.

Consuming food in reaction to feelings rather than physical hunger signals is known as emotional eating (Nair & Joseph, 2024). Emotional eaters usually eat when they are anxious, joyful, or depressed. When feeling depressed, eating foods heavy in fat or sugar may be very fulfilling and rewarding, providing a momentary reprieve from the negative emotions (Huntington, 2023). However, eating could also be a way to show contentment and joy. Unconscious eating, according to National Choice Medical Clinic (2021), occurs when the eater lacks awareness while eating due to certain factors which may cause them to be disinhibited from the eating experience. Five factors have been identified to contribute to unconscious eating namely; disinhibition, distraction, lack of awareness, emotional and external reasons (Cline, 2023). Habitual eating occurs when a person rarely deviates from their eating habits and finds comfort in routine; they buy and eat the same type of food repeatedly because the food they have chosen is convenient and easy to prepare (Cormier, 2020). While critical eating habit occurs when the eater is fully aware of the nutritional benefits of eating healthy food and has an obsessive dedication towards the food or diet. Finally, a sensual eater only enjoys trying out new food. Evidence abounds to suggest that there are categories of people who are social eaters, these group of people are those that social context exerts some pressure and persuasion on what and how much to eat (Higgs & Ruddock, 2020).

However, the ideal is the eating habit that promotes general health and well-being. A healthy eating habit involves regularly selection and consumption of a wide range of nutrient-dense meals in the right proportion (American Heart Association (AHA), 2021). This habit limits the intake of processed foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, salt and high fatty foods while emphasizing the consumption of whole or natural foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole

grains, lean proteins and healthy fats (AHA, 2021).

Freeman (2022) modified the WHO (2022) definition of mental health as a 'state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well, work well and contribute to their communities. This means that mental health is an integral component of health and well-being and more than the absence of mental disorder'. In other words, the statement "mental health is a necessary (but not sufficient) pre-condition for well-being" suggests that mental health plays a significant role in human health (Wren-Lewis & Alexandrova, 2021). WHO (2022) proposed six factors of mental health as physical, psychological, social, cultural, spiritual and other interrelated factors. These factors contribute to mental health and there are inseparable links between mental and physical health therefore, it is important to note that mental health is generally conceptualized as predominantly experiencing positive emotions, marked by feelings of happiness and sense of mastery over the environment (Obumse & Egenti, 2021).

Studies have shown that some eating habits and patterns are detrimental to health and well-being of population groups. Predominant among this poor eating habit is the increased intake of soft drinks, mostly sugar-sweetened beverages, fast and convenience foods, with the accompanying decrease in physical activity (Mizia, et al., 2021). This behaviour pattern has been identified mostly among adolescents and young adults (Chukwu & Dogbe, 2023). Majority of the University students in Nigeria are in their late adolescents and young adults.

Another major eating habit that affects the mental health of undergraduates is skipping meals, especially breakfast (Aldubaybi, 2024). In a related study by Pengpid and Peltzer (2020) among university students in 28 countries, results

revealed that breakfast skipping, whether uncommon or regular, was linked to melancholy, poorer happiness, posttraumatic stress disorder, loneliness, short and extended sleep, sleep problems, restless sleep, and sleep problems brought on by traumatic events. All these eventually resulted in poor academic performance. Some of the reasons adduced for skipping at least one meal in a day include: busy schedules, early morning classes, financial constraints, inability to cook, weight control, poor appetite and demands schooling (Aldubaybi, 2024; Omega & Omuemu, 2018). For instance, students who had to skip their breakfast in order to attend a 7:00am class and had other classes consecutively till 2pm has the tendency to start losing concentration mid classes, appear stressed and dull. When these students get back to their hostels most of them would be too tired to prepare nutritious meals instead they will fall back to fast food, sweetened beverages, junks or snacks thereby not providing the brain with the nutrients it requires for replenishment. At the same time, food insecurity among students in higher institutions has become a major issue with possible consequences for mental health and nutritional sufficiency (Payne-Sturges, et al., 2018). The stress of academic activities has direct and indirect adverse effects on health of students, and one way stress may affect students' health is by influencing their food choices. Examples of the relationship between foods and mental health include; carbohydrate consumption which seems to alleviate depressive moods and this has been viewed as part of the link for developing obesity (Annesi, 2023).

The major objective of this study was to determine the relationship between eating habits and mental health of undergraduate students in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). Specifically, the study examined their eating habits, evaluated the status of their mental health and determined the relationship between their eating habits and mental health status.

Method of the Study

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design. Undergraduate students of the Enugu and Nsukka campuses of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka constituted the population. Multi-stage random sampling technique was used to select a total of 698 respondents from the 17 faculties of the university using the WHO guideline for calculation sample size. Data was

Figure 1: Eating habits data of respondents

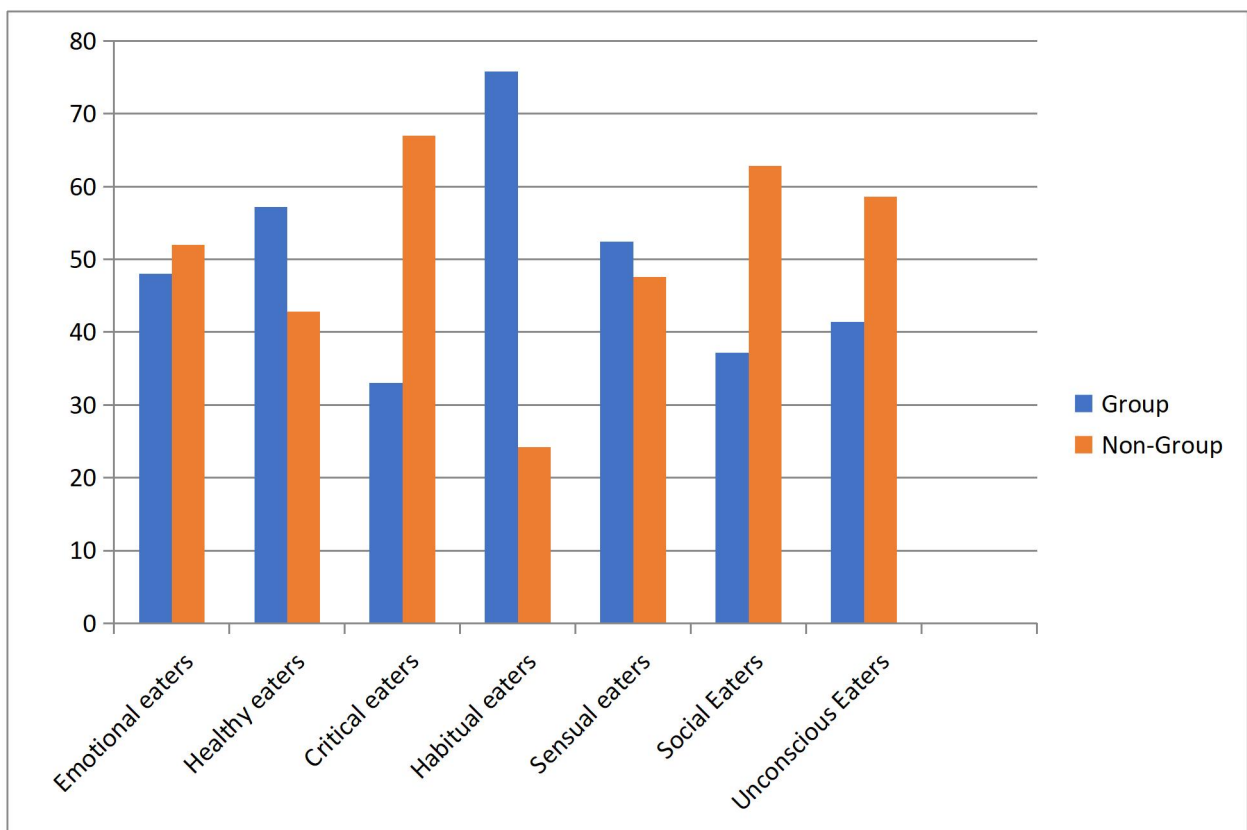


Figure 1 shows the eating habits of the respondents. Results shows that, 48% of them were emotional eaters, 57.2% of them belonged to the group of healthy eaters, 33% were critical eaters, 75.8% of the respondents were habitual

collected using two structured questionnaire to elicit information on eating habits and a standardized instrument for Mental Health Continuum Short-Form (MHC-SF). All data collected were analyzed using SPSS, version 23.0. While Chi-square analysis was used to determine relationship among variables.

Result

eatiers, 52.4% of them belonged to the group of sensual eaters, 37.2% of them were in the category of social eaters, and 41.4 % of them were unconscious eaters.

Fig 2. Mental health status of the respondents

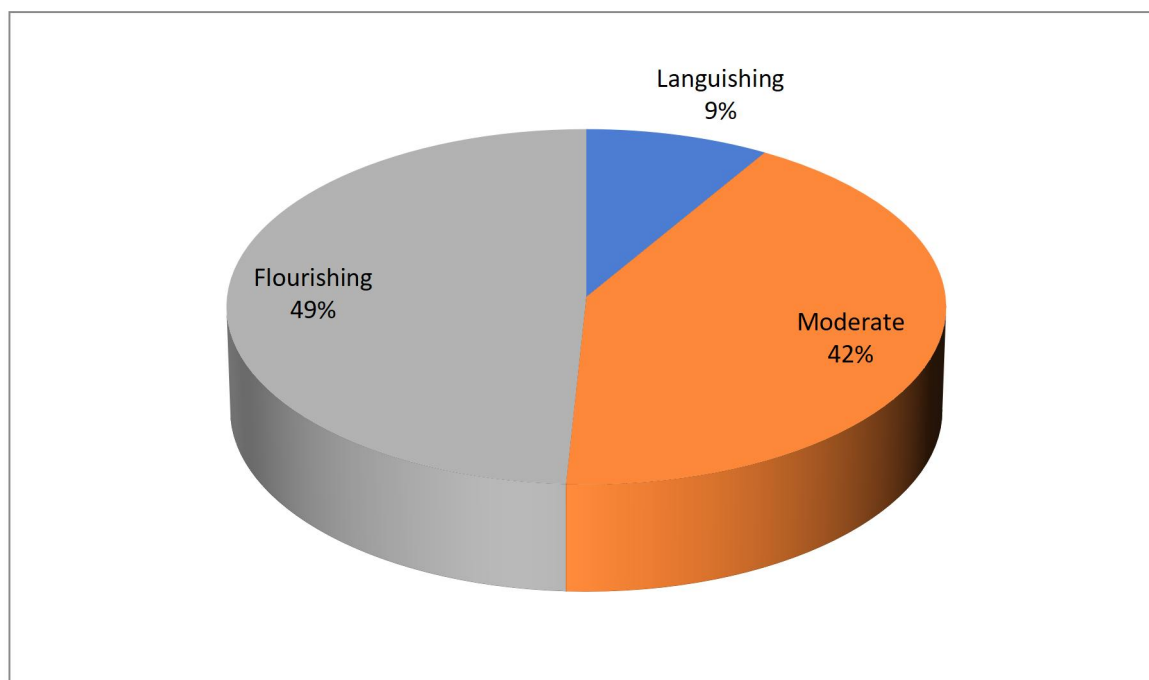


Figure 2 shows the mental health status of the undergraduates. From the figure above, almost half (49.1%) of the respondents had flourishing

mental health, 42.1% of the respondents had moderate mental health while 8.7% of the respondents had languishing mental health.

Table1: Relationship between Eating Habits and Mental Health of Undergraduates

Eating habits	Languishing F (%)	Moderate F (%)	Flourishing F (%)	X ²	P value
Emotional eaters	38 (11.3)	141 (42.1)	156 (46.6)	5.87	.53
Non-emotional eaters	23 (6.3)	153 (42.1)	187 (51.5)		
Healthy eaters	25 (6.3)	160 (40.1)	214 (53.6)	11.25	.004**
Non-healthy eaters	36 (12)	134 (44.8)	129 (43.1)		
Critical eaters	16 (7)	87 (37.8)	127 (55.2)	5.33	.070
Non-critical eaters	45 (45)	207 (44.2)	216 (46.2)		
Habitual eaters	49 (9.3)	223 (42.2)	257 (48.6)	.824	.662
Non-habitual eaters	12 (7.1)	71 (42)	86 (50.9)		
Sensual eaters	42 (11.5)	149 (40.7)	175 (47.8)	7.23	.027*
Non-sensual eaters	19 (5.7)	145 (43.7)	168 (50.6)		
Social eaters	29 (11.2)	108 (41.5)	123 (47.3)	3.08	.214
Non-social eaters	32 (7.3)	186 (42.5)	220 (50.2)		
Unconscious eaters	38 (13.1)	117 (40.5)	134 (46.4)	12.06	.002*
Conscious eaters	23 (5.6)	177 (43.3)	209 (51.1)		

Table 1 shows the relationship between eating habits and mental health of undergraduates. The finding shows that healthy ($\chi^2 = 11.25, p = .004$), non-sensual ($\chi^2 = 7.23, p = .025$), and conscious ($\chi^2 = 12.06, p = .002$) eating habits were significantly ($p < .05$) associated with positive mental health. More respondents who were

healthy, non-sensual and conscious eaters had flourishing mental health. Other eating habits such as; emotional, critical, habitual and social eaters were not associated with mental health because the P value was not significant ($p \geq .05$).

Discussion

Research suggests that undergraduates often fall into the category of unhealthy eaters due to factors such as time constraints, lack of cooking skills, limited budget or resources, convenient high calorie food, stress, high prices of healthy food, unhealthy snacking and easy access to junk food (Aldubaybi, 2024; Alsheweir, 2023; Sogari et al., (2018). The findings from this study are in alignment with this trend as the result showed that almost half of the respondents were unhealthy eaters. A good number of them were also unconscious eaters. Unconscious eating occurs when the eater is unaware and lacks knowledge that of eating but eat because certain factors are causing them to be disengaged from the eating experience, for instance, students often engage in unconscious eating while reading or during leisure. The findings of this study is in correlation with the study by Lopez et al. (2020) which reported that undergraduate students consume a large amount of food while multitasking and are less mindful of what they are eating. Almost half of the respondents were emotional eaters, which mean they eat food when happy, or eat for comfort when feeling sad or stressed. This supports a study carried out by Sogari et al. (2018) which discovered that undergraduates often engage in emotional or stress eating, which can lead to overconsumption of high-calorie and high-fat food. This behaviour could be a coping mechanism for dealing with academic pressures and other stressors experienced by undergraduates (Annesi, 2023; Sogari et al., 2018). The majority of the respondents were also found to be habitual eaters, habitual eating occurs when a person rarely deviates from their eating habits and finds comfort in routine; they buy and eat the same type of food repeatedly because the food they have chosen is convenient and easy to prepare (Cormier, 2020). For instance, some students have formed the habit of eating bread sandwiches popularly known as meshai regularly because it is convenient and easy to prepare. The findings of this study were in accordance with the study

findings by Nasir and Tahir (2017) who stated that the availability and easy access to convenient low-cost food on campus encourages undergraduates to develop habitual patterns of consuming convenient and less nutritious options. More than a third of the undergraduates belong to the category of social eaters. A social eater can be defined as an individual who enjoys eating in the company of others and tends to consume more food when in the company of others.

Sogari et al (2018) found that students ate more when they are dining in a group, especially with friends, compared to eating alone. A very low percentage of the respondent are critical eaters. The critical eating habit occurs when the eater is fully aware of the nutritional benefits of eating healthy food and has an obsessive dedication towards the food or diet but students do not care about the nutritional benefits of food instead they opt for quantity rather than quality. This suggests a potential absence of critical evaluation of the nutritional quality of the meals they consume. More than half of the respondents were sensual eaters, which mean that they prefer visual appearance, aroma and taste over the nutritional content of food.

According to Sogari et al (2018) study, 49.1% of the respondents had flourishing mental health which means they have optimal mental well-being which helps them function effectively in their daily activities in school, maintain healthy relationships and are able to adapt to stress. 42.1% of the respondents had moderate mental health, indicating occasional negative emotions while a few number of them had languishing mental health which reflects poor mental health. The research regarded flourishing mental health as the optimal state of health; hence any other mental state is regarded as sub-optimal. The findings of this study suggest that more than half of the respondents were not in the best state of emotional, psychological and social well-being. Previous studies among undergraduate students in

Nigeria similarly found a high prevalence of poor mental health among the students. This is in line with a study conducted by Amawulu and Eniyekedidei (2018) which reported a high prevalence of mental health illness among students of tertiary institutions in Bayelsa state. The findings of this study are also consistent with a study conducted by Anosike et al. (2022) which shows a high prevalence of poor mental health among undergraduates of health sciences in Nigerian universities. This may be attributed to high academic stress, financial difficulties and other personal and/or family-related challenges faced by students.

The relationship between eating habits and mental health is significant, and indeed several research studies have shown strong associations between eating habits and the mental well-being of individuals (Grajek, et al., 2022; Pengpid & Peltzer, 2020). Results from the present research reveal that mental health of the undergraduates was significantly associated with healthy, non-sensual and conscious eating habits. Majority of individuals who incorporate enough protein, fruits, vegetables, drink lots of water and are careful of the fats and carbohydrate they eat has flourishing mental health. More than half of the respondents who were non-sensual eaters had flourishing mental health. Significant number of the respondents who had conscious eating habit had a flourishing mental health. Although emotional, social and habitual eating was not associated with mental health, there were a significant number of non-emotional, non-social and non-habitual eaters who had flourishing mental health. Critical eaters are those who have a regular schedule for eating, are conscious of food preparation methods, follow a strict diet plan and eat food with nutritional quality; though it was not associated with mental health, the majority of people who were critical eaters had flourishing mental health.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Eating habits involves the regular consumption of certain types of food; and the consistent choices one makes regarding eating such as food choices, amount of food consumed, frequency of eating, etc. Mental health is currently one of the biggest challenges facing young people in every country. The mental health status of undergraduates assessed in this study was found to be mostly at a sub-optimal level, indicating a need for a deeper enquiry into specific factors that could be protective or risky to the mental well-being of students. Unhealthy, sensual and unconscious eating habits were associated with poorer mental well-being. Poor eating habits could be harmful to students' mental health while healthy, conscious and non-sensual eating habits could be protective of mental wellbeing.

Based on the findings from the study, it is recommended that the university in collaboration with NGOs periodically organize seminars, workshops and awareness campaign on the need to eat right to ensure flourishing mental health and wellbeing. There is also the need for free nutrition and mental health counselling services first on admission of students and periodically. Finally, the need to raise advocacy groups amongst the students after training as champions of eating right. They would be involved in campaigning for the consumption of fruits and vegetables to replace the high calorie conventional snacks on campus.

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