

Trends and Health Perceptions of Fast-Food Consumption among Students at the University of Zambia Lusaka District

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the trends and health perceptions of fast-food consumption among students at the University of Zambia, Lusaka District. The objectives were to (a) examine the trends and patterns of fast-food consumption and (b) evaluate students' perceptions of the health risks associated with excessive intake. A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted, involving 210 students selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale and analysed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarise the findings.

Results indicated that fast food consumption was predominantly influenced by stress and social interactions. More than half of the respondents (53.6%) reported increased consumption during examination periods, while 53.3% consumed fast food for social enjoyment with family and friends. Only 22.1% regarded fast food as a status symbol, and 60.6% reported consuming portions similar to or smaller than those of home-cooked meals. Awareness of health risks was relatively high, with 71.1% recognizing the contribution of fast food to obesity and related health problems, and 56.6% acknowledging its high caloric content. However, 45.2% believed occasional consumption posed no serious health threat. Most students (64.4%) agreed that fast food consumption should be limited to improve overall health, though attitudes toward balancing fast food with healthier options were mixed.

The study concludes that while awareness of health risks is high, fast-food consumption remains prevalent, driven mainly by stress, convenience, and social factors. It recommends implementing targeted nutrition education and interventions to promote healthier eating behaviours among university students.

Keywords: Fast food consumption, University students, Health perceptions, Dietary patterns, Zambia

INTRODUCTION

Healthy eating and living are part of the essential requirements of life. Globalisation, urbanisation, busy lifestyles, and technological advancements have significantly impacted people's dietary habits and forced many to consume fancy and high-calorie fast foods (Yousra & Fahima, 2017). Fast food is a type of food that is quickly prepared and served quickly in most food operation establishments, such as drive-in restaurants, outlets, etc. Labensky et al. (1997, p. 47) defined fast food as "food dispensed quickly at an inexpensive restaurant generally offering a limited menu of inexpensive items, many of which may not be particularly nutritious; the food can be eaten on premises, taken out, or sometimes delivered." Fast food is typically processed and prepared in an industrial manner, using standard ingredients and methods for cooking. Fast food contains little or no vitamins, minerals, fibre, or amino acids, but it is high in calories (Didarloo et al., 2022). These foods may include hamburgers, hot dogs, sandwiches, French fries, and fish and chips but can also feature healthier options like salads and fruits. The defining characteristics of fast foods are their minimal preparation time, limited menu selection, the ability to eat them without utensils (finger foods), and the use of disposable serving ware. These traits distinguish fast foods from traditional dining practices, which typically involve more time, variety, and reusable utensils. The consumption of fast foods from home has significantly increased globally, particularly in developing nations, due to increased fast food outlets, aggressive food industry advertising, and rising disposable

income. (Chopera, 2018). The typical fast foods include burgers, French fries, pizza, fried chicken, sharwama, candy, gum, sweet desserts, alcoholic beverages, and doughnuts (Ahmed et al., 2024).

The trend of fast-food consumption among Zambians, as well as the number of fast-food restaurants in Zambia is considerably increasing (Malama, 2025; Mukanu et al., 2022). Restaurants like KFC, Hungary Lion, Debonair Pizza, Pizza Hut, and Nandos are all well-run international chains that are working in Zambia and, hence, playing their part in the growth of the fast-food industry as well.

Among all age groups, adolescents and young adults are found to be relatively more interested in fast-food consumption (Khan et al., 2021). The frequent consumption of fast foods among people in their teens and in their twenties might be attributed to the specific qualities of such types of foods that are fast to prepare, convenient, and relatively inexpensive. Eating out has become a routine for many people, mostly students, partly because of the time spent preparing meals at the hostels. It has been observed from many studies that students prefer fast food for convenience (Syed et al., 2024; Choppera, 2018; Indumathi & Shameem, 2020). Sequeira et al. (2014) showed that undergraduates' students were shown to have higher desire to eat junk food than graduate students

As the demand increases, the fast-food industry takes the opportunity to increase the number of outlets. Chopera (2018) concluded that fast food consumption by university students seems to be high, and this may mirror closely the behaviours in the rest of the population segments. University students are often seen as a significant consumer group for fast food due to their packed schedules and limited time for meal preparation (Tune et al., 2023). Fast food consumption among university students is a significant public health concern due to potential health and well-being impacts, particularly among those with limited time for meal preparation. Fast food is characterised by its quick preparation and low nutritional value and often contains high levels of fat, salt, sugar, and calories (Sharma, & Pangen, 2024). Fast food is also characterised by large portion sizes, high levels of saturated fat and added sugars (Emond et al., 2020), high energy content, salt and sugar, and low levels of micronutrients and fibre.

The health implications of fast foods cannot be overemphasised. Numerous studies have shown that consumption of fast food can affect health because it has been linked to a diet that is "high in calories, saturated fat, sugar, and sodium, as well as body fatness, weight gain, and increased body mass index" (Olivera & Raposo, 2024; Manaharan et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2021; O'Connor et al., 2020). Jahan et al. (2020), in their studies, reported that consumption of fast food, especially among the youth, has negative health consequences, including obesity-related risk. Malik et al. (2019) further state that fast food consumption has been associated with various adverse health effects, including an increased risk of obesity, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular diseases.

Among university students, the prevalence of fast-food consumption is a matter of increasing concern due to its potential impact on overall health and well-being. By examining the fast-food consumption trends and patterns among university students, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the potential health risks and challenges faced by this population. The findings may inform the development of targeted interventions and strategies to promote healthier dietary habits and contribute to the overall well-being of university students in Zambia.

Statement of the Problem

Research has demonstrated that regular consumption of fast foods can be detrimental to health, contributing to various adverse health outcomes (Manaharan et al., 2022; Harris et al., 2021). Fast foods, such as instant meals, chips, candy, sweet desserts, and alcoholic beverages, are typically high in fats and calories and lack essential nutrients. This dietary pattern increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and other chronic health conditions (Syed et al., 2024). Although global evidence on the health impacts of fast-food consumption is substantial, researchers have conducted limited studies on the dietary habits of university students in Zambia. This gap is particularly significant because students' personal health behaviours can influence their academic performance, long-term health outcomes, and overall well-being. Understanding the trends and patterns of fast-food consumption among university students is critical for developing effective interventions to promote healthier eating habits and prevent diet-related health issues.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the trends and patterns of fast-food consumption among students at the University of Zambia. This study seeks to provide valuable insights into the dietary behaviours of this population, which can inform strategies to improve their nutrition and wellbeing.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the trends and patterns in fast food consumption among students.
2. To evaluate students' perceptions of the risks associated with excessive fast-food consumption at the University of Zambia.

Research Questions

1. What trends and patterns characterize fast food consumption among students at the University of Zambia?
2. To what extent do students perceive the risks associated with excessive fast-food consumption?

Significance of the study

The study on fast food consumption trends among University of Zambia students offers significant academic and practical implications for public health, nutritional education, and policy formulation. The study may contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing insights into how fast food consumption habits are influenced by factors such as convenience, affordability, and lifestyle. This is a crucial demographic in developing countries like Zambia, where there is limited research on the dietary patterns of young adults, specifically university students.

This study's findings may guide health interventions aimed at promoting healthier dietary practices among university students, aiding in the development of nutrition education programs that encourage healthier food choices and combat negative health outcomes like obesity and cardiovascular diseases.

In addition, the study not only fills a gap in the literature on fast food consumption in the Zambian context but also provides valuable insights that may help improve the health and nutritional status of university students. It also may serve as a foundation for further research into the broader impacts of fast food consumption on young adults in Zambia and other similar settings. Furthermore, the study on fast food consumption in Zambia offers valuable insights for policymakers and university administrators to create supportive environments that promote healthy eating. It suggests providing healthier food options, raising awareness about fast food risks, and encouraging informed dietary decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The consumption of fast food has garnered significant attention due to its rising prevalence globally, particularly among younger populations, and its associated health risks. Fast food, typically characterised by its quick preparation and high-calorie content, has been linked to various adverse health outcomes, such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and metabolic disorders (Harris et al., 2021; Manaharan et al., 2022).

Global Trends in Fast Food Consumption

Food consumption patterns refer to the types and quantities of food eaten by people with certain intentions within a specific time. Fast food consumption has increased significantly in both developed and developing countries over recent decades. Globalisation, urbanisation, and lifestyle changes have contributed to the growing preference for fast food, as it is seen as convenient, affordable, and readily available (Yousra & Fahima, 2017). Globalisation has impacted food manufacturing, processing, sales, and utilisation, leading to increased consumption of snacks and fizzy drinks. The expansion of international fast-food chains into developing markets, including Africa, has further fuelled the consumption of fast food (Syed et al., 2024).

Chopera (2018) noted that the rising demand for fast food in developing countries is often driven by aggressive

marketing, urbanisation, and the perception of fast food as a status symbol. Increasingly busy lifestyles compound these factors, as people, especially students and working professionals, opt for fast food due to its convenience. In Zambia, the emergence of global chains such as KFC, Pizza Hut, and Nando's has played a pivotal role in altering local dietary habits, particularly among younger populations (Mukanu et al., 2022). Many researchers have found that people prefer fast food for convenience (Hesamedin Askari Majabadi et al., 2016), availability and convenience (Malama, 2025), flavour (Narayan & Prabhu, 2015), interaction with others (Anitharaj, 2018), and pleasure. The convenience of fast food, including its quick availability and ease of reheating, has become a significant determinant in consumer choice.

Fast Food Consumption among University Students

The prevalence of fast-food consumption is overwhelmingly high among adolescents globally (Smith et al., 2024). University students represent a key demographic for fast food consumption due to their busy schedules, limited cooking facilities, and financial constraints. Several studies have documented the frequent consumption of fast food among university students, highlighting convenience, cost, and accessibility as the main reasons behind their food choices (Indumathi & Shameem, 2020; Tunde et al., 2023). It has been shown that adolescents and young adults show more interest in fast food compared to other age groups. This could be because of its convenience, as most adolescents would have left their homes and started living alone, or the taste of fast food. A study done in India by Sequeira et al. (2014) revealed that undergraduate students tend to consume more fast food than graduate students, likely due to differences in living arrangements and time constraints. Similarly, Khan et al. (2021) observed that adolescents and young adults, particularly university students, have higher rates of fast-food consumption compared to older populations. This trend is concerning as it contributes to poor dietary habits, which may persist into adulthood, increasing the risk of chronic health conditions.

In the Zambian context, university students are often seen as one of the most significant consumer groups for fast food due to their packed schedules, limited time for meal preparation, and the growing availability of fast food outlets near academic institutions (Mukanu et al., 2022). Additionally, the shift from traditional diets to more Westernised food patterns has been noted among university students, driven by a combination of peer influence, advertising, and the perceived status associated with consuming fast food (Chopera, 2018).

Health Implications of Fast-Food Consumption

The literature clearly documents the health risks associated with fast food consumption. Fast food is often high in saturated fats, sodium, and sugars, while being low in essential nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and fibre (Emond et al., 2020). Such poor nutritional content is detrimental to both mental and physical health, especially in adolescents. Specifically, failure to meet nutrient requirements during adolescence can result in growth retardation, impaired organ remodelling, and micronutrient deficiencies. This dietary imbalance contributes to a range of health issues, including obesity, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases (Oliveira & Raposo, 2024; Malik et al., 2019).

Several studies have highlighted the detrimental effects of fast food consumption on public health. Jahan et al. (2020) reported that regular consumption of fast food among young people is associated with an increased risk of obesity, which is a precursor to other serious health conditions, such as metabolic syndrome and cardiovascular disease. Fast food's high caloric content, large portion sizes, and low nutritional value exacerbate these health risks, especially in populations with limited access to healthier food options (Sharma & Pangen, 2024). Among university students, these health risks are particularly concerning. With a high prevalence of fast-food consumption and limited awareness of the associated health risks, students may be unknowingly putting their health at risk. Ahmed et al. (2024) found that despite the convenience of fast food, many university students lack awareness of its long-term health implications, such as obesity and type 2 diabetes. This gap in knowledge highlights the need for targeted health education and interventions to promote healthier eating habits among this population.

Perceptions of Health Risks Associated with Fast Food

Despite the well-established health risks, many university students continue to consume fast food frequently,

often underestimating the potential negative consequences. Several studies have explored students' perceptions of the health risks associated with fast food consumption. Harris et al. (2021) found that while students were aware that fast food is generally unhealthy, they often viewed its consumption as a temporary lifestyle choice, without considering the long-term health impacts. This perception may contribute to the continued high rates of fast food consumption among young adults.

Furthermore, Tunde et al. (2023) identified a lack of awareness about the specific health risks posed by excessive fast food consumption, such as the risk of developing chronic conditions like heart disease or diabetes. This lack of awareness underscores the importance of educational programs that focus on improving students' understanding of nutrition and the long-term consequences of poor dietary choices.

The study examines fast food consumption trends among University of Zambia students, focusing on factors like frequency, type, and expenditure. It also examines health perceptions, consumption patterns, nutritional awareness, and health outcomes. The primary dependent variables are fast food consumption, which is expected to influence health perceptions, consumption patterns, and outcomes, such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and type 2 diabetes.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative research methodology, utilising a descriptive survey research design to investigate the trends and patterns of fast-food consumption among students at the University of Zambia. The target population consisted of all registered students at the University of Zambia, from which a sample of 210 students was selected using convenient sampling. Convenience sampling was appropriate for the study because it is not costly, not as time-consuming as other sampling strategies, and simplistic. Golzar et al. (2022) reported that convenience sampling offers several benefits, including reduced effort, lower costs, and less time investment, as participants are readily accessible, making it an efficient method for data collection. This allowed the researcher to gather data quickly and efficiently since students were readily available at the campus.

A well-structured questionnaire was used as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was designed with a five-point Likert scale to capture the respondents' opinions on various aspects of fast-food consumption, including frequency, preferences, consumption patterns, and perceptions of health risks. The Likert scale provided a range of options that reflected the respondents' likely views on the issues presented.

Data collected from the survey were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 20. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were employed to examine the frequency of fast-food consumption, preferred types of fast food, expenditure patterns, and students' perceptions of the health risks associated with fast food consumption.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study adhered to strict guidelines to ensure the protection of participants. Confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents were maintained throughout the research process. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the research.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Demographics

Table 1: Frequency and percentage characteristics of teachers (n=210)

Background characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	114	54.3
Female	96	45.7

Age groups		
18-20 years	82	39
21-22 years	50	23.8
23-24 years	47	22.4
24-26 years	29	13.8
Above 26 years	2	1
Level of study		
1st Year	143	68.1
2nd Year	23	11
3rd Year	14	6.7
4th Year	29	13.8
Master's degree	1	0.5
Total	210	100

The table displays demographic characteristics of a sample of 210 students who participated in the study. Of these, 54.3% were males, and 45.7% were females, indicating a male-majority group. The largest age group is between 18-20 years (39.0%), followed by 21-22 years (23.8%), 23-24 years (22.4%), and a smaller portion aged 24-26 years (13.8%).

In terms of study level, the majority of students are in their first year (68.1%), with progressively fewer students in higher years: 11.0% were in second-year, 6.7% third-year, and 13.84% fourth-year students. Only 0.9% of the sample is pursuing a master's degree. This distribution suggests a predominantly younger student body, with most participants at the early stages of their studies.

To examine the trends and patterns in fast food consumption among students

Trends and patterns in fast food consumption among students was examined through a series of statements rated across five levels to which respondents indicated their level of agreement and disagreement.

Table 2: Responses on statements related to Trends and Patterns in fast food consumption among students

Statements on Trends and Patterns	Response					Cumulative agree & disagree	
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Agree	Disagree
I consume fast food more often during exam periods or when stressed	51 (24.4%)	61 (29.2%)	29 (13.9%)	34 (16.3%)	34 (16.3%)	112 (53.6%)	68 (32.6%)
Fast food is consumed as a status element	12 (5.8%)	34 (16.3%)	65 (31.3%)	68 (32.7%)	29 (13.9%)	46 (22.1%)	97 (46.6%)
I consume fast food mostly in the evenings or late at night	22 (10.7%)	58 (28.2%)	45 (21.8%)	56 (27.2%)	25 (12.1%)	80 (38.9%)	81 (39.3%)
I tend to eat larger portions when i eat fast	16 (7.6%)	31 (16.8%)	(14.9%)35	78 (37.5%)	48 (23.1%)	47 (22.6%)	126 (60.6%)

food compared to home-cooked meals							
I like to eat fast food with my family and friends for fun and enjoyment	30 (14.4%)	81 (38.9%)	36 (17.3%)	36 (17.3%)	25 (12.0%)	111 (53.3%)	61 (29.3%)

Table 2 shows students' responses regarding trends and patterns in fast food consumption. The cumulative percentage shows that a significant portion of students (53.6%) broadly agreed consuming more fast food during stressful times, such as exams, highlighting stress as a trigger for fast food consumption. Social aspects also play a role, with cumulative percentage showing that 53.3% agree they enjoy eating fast food with family and friends. However, fast food as a status element was found to have less impact, as only 22.1% broadly agreed with this statement, while 46.6% disagreed. Late-night or evening consumption showed mixed responses, with similar percentages agreeing (38.9%) and disagreeing (39.3%). Additionally, most students (60.6%) broadly disagree that they eat larger portions of fast food compared to home-cooked meals.

To evaluate students' perceptions of the risks associated with excessive fast-food consumption at the University of Zambia

Table 3: Responses on statements related to knowledge of the health effect of fast foods Perception of Health Risks among students

Statement on knowledge of the health effect of fast foods Perception of Health Risks	Response					Cumulative agree & disagree	
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Fast food is not good for health	46 (22.7%)	48 (23.6%)	52 (25.6%)	32 (15.8%)	25 (12.3%)	94 (46.3%)	57 (28.1%)
Fast food outlets provide good quality foods	10 (4.9%)	49 (23.8%)	83 (40.3%)	46 (22.3%)	18 (8.7%)	59 (28.7%)	64 (31.0%)
I believe eating fast food occasionally does not pose a serious health risk	23 (11.2%)	70 (34.0%)	39 (18.6%)	42 (20.4%)	32 (15.5%)	93 (45.2%)	74 (35.9%)
Fast food contains a lot of calories	40 (19.5%)	76 (37.1%)	58 (28.3%)	21 (10.2%)	10 (4.9%)	116 (56.6%)	31 (15.1%)
I am aware that fast food is unhealthy and contributes to obesity/health problems	66 (32.4%)	79 (38.7%)	27 (13.2%)	16 (7.8%)	16 (7.8%)	145 (71.1%)	32 (15.6%)

Table 3 shows students' awareness and perceptions of the health risks associated with fast food consumption. The cumulative findings show that a large majority (71.1%) agreed that they are aware of the health risks and potential contribution of fast food to obesity and other health issues. Additionally, 56.6% agreed that fast food contains a lot of calories, further reflecting understanding of nutritional content.

While 46.3% agree that fast food is generally unhealthy, 28.1% disagreed, showing mixed perceptions on the overall health impact. Regarding quality, only 28.7% felt that fast food outlets provide good quality food, with

31.0% disagreeing and a substantial portion (40.3%) remaining neutral. Interestingly, 45.2% believe that eating fast food occasionally does not pose a serious health risk, though a notable 35.9% disagree.

Table 4: Responses on statements related to attitudes toward healthy eating among students

Statement on Attitudes Toward Healthy Eating	Response					Cumulative agree & disagree	
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Fast food consumption should be limited to improve overall health	56 (27.3%)	76 (37.1%)	40 (19.5%)	17 (8.3%)	16 (7.8%)	132 (64.4%)	33 (16.1%)
I often feel guilty after consuming fast food due to its potential health impact	22 (10.7%)	54 (26.3%)	49 (23.9%)	59 (28.8%)	21 (10.2%)	76 (37.0%)	80 (39.0%)
Fast food provides all necessary nutrients	7 (3.4%)	23 (11.2%)	50 (24.4%)	72 (35.1%)	53 (25.9%)	30 (14.6%)	125 (61.0%)
I try to balance fast food consumption with healthier food options	36 (17.6%)	49 (23.9%)	48 (23.4%)	41 (20.0%)	31 (15.1%)	85 (41.5%)	72 (35.1%)

The table reflects students' attitudes toward healthy eating, particularly in relation to fast food. Cumulatively, the findings revealed that a strong majority (64.4%) broadly agreed that fast food consumption should be limited to improve health, indicating a general awareness of the need for moderation. However, attitudes on guilt after consuming fast food were more divided; 37.0% feel guilty about its health impact, while 39.0% disagree, suggesting varied responses to potential health concerns.

Regarding nutritional value, only 14.6% broadly agreed that fast food provides all necessary nutrients, while a significant 61.0% disagreed, reflecting an understanding that fast food lacks comprehensive nutritional benefits. Lastly, 41.5% of students try to balance fast food with healthier options, though a considerable 35.1% do not prioritise this balance, suggesting mixed commitment to integrating healthier eating practices.

DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a comprehensive discussion of the findings of the study, which investigated the trends, patterns, and perceptions associated with fast food consumption among students at the University of Zambia. The discussion is organised according to the study objectives, aligning the results with relevant literature.

Trends and Patterns in Fast Food Consumption

The findings from the study revealed that fast food consumption is common among students, with specific patterns driven by lifestyle, stress, and social factors. Over half of the respondents agreed that they consume more fast-food during exam periods or when stressed. This aligns with research by Khan et al. (2021) and Sequeira et al. (2014), which found that stress and time constraints are major contributors to increased fast food consumption among students and young adults. The preference for fast food during stressful academic periods underscores its perceived convenience and ability to save time during high-pressure periods.

Additionally, social factors were highlighted indicating that students consume fast food for fun or enjoyment with family and friends. This suggests that beyond sustenance, fast food plays a social and recreational role in student life. This finding is consistent with previous literature (Syed et al., 2024; Indumathi & Shameem, 2020), which notes that peer influence and social outings contribute significantly to fast food consumption among the

youth. Late-night eating emerged as another pattern, although the responses were evenly split, indicating that while some students consume fast food in the evenings or at night, others do not share this habit. The split opinion may reflect differing daily routines and availability of alternative food sources.

Interestingly, a significant proportion of students disagreed that they consume larger portions of fast food compared to home-cooked meals. This contradicts research by Emond et al. (2020), which found that portion sizes in fast food restaurants tend to be larger and contribute to excess calorie intake. The discrepancy may be attributed to students' perception of portion size or differences in local fast-food servings compared to international chains. Notably, fast food consumption as a status symbol was largely dismissed. This contradicts views in some contexts where fast food is seen as a marker of modern lifestyle or affluence. It suggests that among Zambian students, practicality rather than social image drives food choices.

Students' Perceptions of Health Risks Associated with Fast Food

The findings indicate that a large majority of students are aware of the health risks linked to excessive fast-food consumption. They agreed that fast food contributes to obesity and health problems. This reflects a relatively high level of nutritional awareness among students, which aligns with findings from Olivera & Raposo (2024) and Jahan et al. (2020), who reported that young people are increasingly aware of the health dangers associated with fast food, including obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and metabolic syndromes.

More than half also agreed that fast food contains a lot of calories, further demonstrating awareness of its nutritional content. Despite this, a notable number of students believed that eating fast food occasionally does not pose serious health risks, highlighting a perception that moderation offsets potential harm. This belief may encourage continued consumption despite awareness of health risks, a behaviour pattern echoed in the work of Sharma & Pangen (2024), who emphasise the challenge of translating nutritional knowledge into healthy dietary behaviour.

On the issue of food quality, responses were varied. While others agreed that fast food outlets offer good quality food, others disagreed and still others remained neutral. This ambivalence reflects uncertainty or mixed experiences with food hygiene, freshness, or nutritional quality at different outlets. This ambiguity could be an area for further research and targeted public health messaging.

Attitudes toward Healthy Eating

Students' attitudes toward healthy eating reflect a blend of awareness, concern, and ambivalence. A strong majority agreed that limiting fast food consumption would improve health, indicating positive attitudes towards healthier eating practices. However, when asked whether they feel guilty after consuming fast food, responses were split: only some agreed, while others disagreed. This suggests that while students are aware of the risks, their emotional response to consumption varies. Furthermore, majority disagreed with the notion that fast food provides all necessary nutrients. This finding aligns with studies by Didarloo et al. (2022) and Malik et al. (2019), which highlight the nutritional deficiencies of fast food, particularly in vitamins, minerals, and fibre.

Despite this awareness, respondents reported that they attempt to balance fast food intake with healthier options, while others did not. This suggests a gap between knowledge and practice echoing Harris et al. (2021), who argue that behavioural change among young adults often requires more than knowledge; it requires structural and environmental support to encourage healthier choices. In summary, the study reveals that fast food consumption among students at the University of Zambia is influenced by academic stress, convenience, and social factors. While students show high awareness of the associated health risks, this does not always translate into healthier dietary behaviour.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the trends, patterns, and perceptions surrounding fast food consumption among students at the University of Zambia. The findings revealed that fast food consumption is notably prevalent among students, especially during high-stress periods such as examinations. The convenience, affordability, and social appeal of

fast foods significantly contribute to their popularity. Despite the high frequency of consumption, the study found that most students are aware of the health risks associated with excessive fast-food intake. A majority acknowledge that fast food contributes to obesity, contains high calories, and lacks essential nutrients.

Additionally, although students recognize the need to limit fast food for better health, many still struggle to consistently balance fast food intake with healthier food choices. The observed attitudes suggest a moderate level of health consciousness but also highlight the influence of lifestyle, academic pressure, and limited food preparation time on dietary behaviours. The findings call for comprehensive, multi-level interventions that combine education, institutional support, and policy-level actions to promote healthier eating habits among university students.

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