

EXAMINING THE GENDER DIFFERENCES IN EATING BEHAVIORS AND EATING BELIEFS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

The present study was designed to examine the relationship between eating behaviors and eating beliefs among young adults. It also aimed to analyze gender-based differences in the perception of these variables. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed. The data was gathered among the participants in the southern part of Punjab between January and June 2022. There were 300 young adults (152 of male gender and 148 of female gender) aged 18 to 25 years. To collect quantitative data, standardized instruments were used. The Adult Eating Behavior Questionnaire (Hunot et al., 2016) and the Eating Belief Questionnaire (Burton et al., 2018) were used to assess eating behaviors and the cognitive beliefs of the participants on eating behaviors. The results indicated a significant positive correlation between eating behaviors and eating beliefs. Male subjects showed a great difference in eating belief measures compared to female subjects, but there was a lack of difference in eating behaviors between the genders. The research highlights the importance of specialized treatment to address the maladaptive beliefs regarding eating and the identification of people who are prone to unhealthy eating habits.

I. INTRODUCTION

It has been argued that health is an important factor for academic achievement at school and in higher education. Consequently, in the context of universities or colleges, promoting the health and well-being of all members means promoting effective learning. University students represent a major segment of the young adult population. They typically enter a dynamic transitional period of new independence from their parents that is characterized by rapid, interrelated changes in the body, mind, and social relationships and experience a new environment that generally involves increased workload and stress, altered patterns of life, which are significant contributors to unhealthy lifestyles. The gender-based differences such as eating behaviors together with eating beliefs are important to understand in order to establish specific nutrition intervention and enhance healthy eating behaviors. The study of the perceptions of young men and women towards food and their interaction with it will enable researchers and health experts to design strategies specific to particular issues, which would promote the health of a person over a prolonged period. It studies the main differences in the eating habits and attitudes that are common among young adults and how the differences are based on psychological and social frameworks. The

analysis of eating behaviors and eating beliefs in relation to gender in young adults indicates that there exist marked differences that depend on their psychological and sociocultural aspects. Research has demonstrated that women tend to have more health-oriented diets than men and regularly put more fruits and vegetables on their meals and act according to nutritional recommendations (López-Gil et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, females also indicate elevated instances of maladaptive eating patterns and concerns regarding body image, which may precipitate the onset of eating disorders (Ivanova et al., 2017; Mendia et al., 2022). The Young adulthood is a transitional period when a particular diet is developed, which in most cases has long-term effects on well-being and health. At this age, the child gains more freedom on food preferences as well as negotiating social pressures and body image issues as well as psychological pressures that can affect their eating patterns. Studies have indicated that females have a greater propensity towards restrained eating patterns, as well as, emotional overeating, which is often linked with body dissatisfaction and the effects of sociocultural pressures. Conversely, men can be more utilitarian about their food habits and are more concerned with the size of food and muscle-building food, and less focused on restrictive diets and emotional factors. Mindful eating practices have been linked to the improvement of psychological health, which suggests that gender-specific intervention can lead to increased health rates in both genders (Gautam et al., 2024). Additionally, the nutritional habits of young adult females tend to change in order to attain a perfect body image, which may lead to nutritional deficiencies and unhealthy weight management (Yadav et al., 2018). The eating patterns and food beliefs as such are challenging phenomena, which are caused by a combination of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Empirical studies explain that gender has a significant influence on how people associate with food, and thus determine their eating habits, emotional reactions to food, and overall involvement in nutrition. Despite the differences in the eating practices among both sexes, there has been a significant variation in emotional eating, dietary restraint, and food preferences, which have been well recorded. There exists a complicated combination of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors that determines the differences in the eating habits and beliefs in young adults in relation to their gender.

According to research evidence, maladaptive eating patterns such as dietary restrictions and emotional overeating are more common in women, often driven by the fear of gaining weight and the pressure to follow particular body images (Grzymisławska et al., 2020; Purkiewicz et al., 2021). There is also a greater involvement of women in body weight control and more frustration of their nutrition patterns, which are due to the increased social pressure experienced by women (Grzymisławska et al., 2020). On the other hand, male citizens demonstrate an increased tendency toward the consumption of food with high fat levels and alcoholic beverages, which is motivated by the pleasure of its consumption, and show less commitment to healthy eating (Buning-Fesel & Ruckert-John, 2016; Grzymisławska et al., 2020). These habits often are conditioned by traditional gender roles, when foods like meat, alcohol are associated with masculinity, and fruits and vegetables are viewed as something feminine (Buning-Fesel & Ruckert-John, 2016). Moreover, men tend to have better eating belief questionnaires which implies that they have another set of beliefs and attitudes towards food than women (Mendia et al., 2022). Females have an especially high risk of developing an eating disorder, and almost 67 percent of young adults are at risk, which is why gender-specific prevention strategies should be used (Purkiewicz et al., 2021). Such results allow us to see the importance of considering gender-specific responses to the dietary intake and the need to adopt the individual approach in nutritional counseling and health promotion (Vari et al., 2017). Finally, it is important to recognize these gender variations so that effective interventions that will facilitate healthier eating habits and attitudes among young adults can be developed.

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between eating behaviors and eating beliefs among young adults.
2. To analyze gender-based differences in the perception of eating behaviors and eating beliefs.

Hypotheses

1. There will be a significant positive correlation between eating behaviors and eating beliefs among young adults.
2. Male and female participants will differ significantly in their eating behaviors and eating beliefs.

II. METHOD

Participants

The present research involved the use of a cross-sectional quantitative design to find out the distinction in eating behaviors and eating beliefs between the genders among young adults. A convenience sampling technique was employed to recruit participants for the study. The study sample was comprised of $N = 300$ individuals ($n = 152$ males and $n = 148$ females).

Instruments

[I] Adult Eating Behavior Questionnaire, (AEBQ) (Hunot et al., 2016): The AEBQ is a 35-item self-report questionnaire developed by (Hunot et al., 2016), which measures appetitive traits in adults. The AEBQ constitutes an instrument that is self-administered, specifically designed to evaluate appetitive characteristics, consisting of 35 discrete items, each paired with five potential responses measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree"). It also measures food approach behaviors for example, hunger, food responsiveness and also measures food avoidance behaviors for example, emotional undereating, satiety responsiveness. The AEBQ showed good internal consistency and Cronbach alpha coefficients of between .76 and .88 and good test-retest reliability where intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were between .73 and .91 (Hunot et al., 2016). **[II]** Eating Belief Questionnaire, (EBQ-18) (Burton et al., 2018) The EBQ-18 is an 18-item self-report questionnaire developed by (Burton et al., 2018), that measures beliefs about eating and urges to eat in the absence of hunger. Respondents rated the extent of their agreement with 18 statements using a scale that goes between 1 (meaning that they strongly disagree) to 5 (meaning that they strongly agree). EBQ-18 was also discovered to be a valid and reliable measure with high internal consistency and fair test retest reliability ($r = .87$) in the non-clinical sample (Burton et al., 2018).

Procedure

Participants were briefed about the study objectives and given an informed consent form. The AEBQ and EBQ-18 were administered in a structured setting. The individuals involved in the research were assured the safeguarding of their confidentiality and were permitted the freedom to disengage from the study at any time. Responses were collected and compiled for analysis. Descriptive statistical measures, particularly the arithmetic mean and standard deviation were calculated. All participants were informed before they were included into the study. All the data gathered were confidential and not used in any other way other than research. The data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 17.0). Pearson's correlation coefficient and Independent Samples t-test were applied.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Correlation between Eating Behaviors and Eating Beliefs among Young Adults (N=300)

Variables	1	2
1. Eating Behaviors	--	--
2. Eating Beliefs	.56**	--

** $p < .01$

The findings indicated that there was a moderate significant positive relationship between eating behaviors and eating beliefs ($r = .56$, $p < .01$).

Table II: Independent Sample t-test for Comparing Eating Behaviors and Eating Beliefs among Male and Female Young Adults (N=300)

Variables	Males (n=152)		Females (n=148)		t(298)	p	95%CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Eating Behaviors	110.62	14.36	108.81	12.31	1.17	.24	-1.25	4.85	.13
Eating Beliefs	57.55	11.86	50.61	12.06	5.21	.00	4.23	9.66	.58

** $p < .01$

Male participants ($M = 57.55$, $SD = 11.86$) exhibited significantly stronger eating beliefs in comparison to females ($M = 50.61$, $SD = 12.06$), $t(298) = 5.21$, $p = .001$, Cohen $d = .58$. However, the difference in eating behaviors between males ($M = 110.62$, $SD = 14.36$) and females ($M = 108.81$, $SD = 12.31$) was not statistically significant, $t(298) = 1.17$, $p = .24$, Cohen's $d = .13$.

IV. DISCUSSION

In this section, the findings of the present research are abbreviated and discussed. Focusing on the significance of the gender differences in eating behaviors and their beliefs among young adults. The present study adapted the adult eating behaviors and eating belief questionnaire. Furthermore, analysis was analyzed to assess gender differences in eating beliefs and behaviors among young adults and results were also embodied with prior literature in this area. The hypothesis is that, there is a direct and significant relationship between eating behaviors and eating beliefs among young adults. The findings of the current investigation indicate a moderately significant association between eating behaviors and eating beliefs in young adults. The researchers detected that the stronger the knowledge and positive attitudes toward healthy eating the better the eating habits, which implies that the education level can indeed positively influence healthier eating habits (Juwita & Mateha, 2024). This was also supported by Kretschmer and Loch who revealed that positive self-perception of health is linked to healthier eating behaviors, especially among young adults that eat more fruits and vegetables (Kretschmer & Loch, 2022). Furthermore, research evidence, based on metabolic syndrome, found that emotional eating behaviours are connected to higher health risks, and interventions that target such beliefs and behaviour are, therefore, required (Graybeal et al., 2023).

The hypothesis suggests that "males will demonstrate a higher frequency of eating behaviors as compared to females". In Table 2, the outcomes of the independent samples t-test examining the level of eating behaviors revealed a non-statistically significant difference among male and female young adults. Research indicates emotional overeating is the next common behavior reported in male subjects (Ju et al., 2024). Hypothesis 2 further suggests that "males will demonstrate a higher frequency of eating beliefs in comparison to females." Additionally, Table 2 explains that there exists a statistically significant difference in eating beliefs between male and female young adults. Regarding food and health, every individual has his/her own beliefs. These beliefs consist of different food choices as well as exercise and eating routines etc. Many people nowadays indulge in weight loss behaviors to maintain certain figures and body image or in other words to remain healthy and fit for certain reasons (Muazzam et al., 2019). There is a collective evidence herein presented to emphasize the fact that eating behaviors and eating beliefs have a direct and significant correlation among young adults. In this study, gender differences in eating beliefs are identified as being significant and the importance of emotional and cognitive influences that have an effect on eating behaviors is emphasized. The research should further consider these linkages in future to devise effective, gender sensitive measures that can facilitate such adaptive eating attitudes and healthier eating habits.

Recommendations

Develop and implement educational programs that focus on promoting healthy eating beliefs and eating behaviors among young adults. Introduce cognitive-behavioral techniques in dietary counseling to deal with maladaptive eating beliefs. Carry out awareness campaigns to create awareness about the effects of emotional conditions on eating behaviors and offer ways of coping in a better way that is healthy. Promote gender-oriented strategies in nutrition education to tackle distinct eating beliefs and eating patterns of males and females. Further studies to examine the sociocultural and psychological factors that define eating habits and attitudes in diverse population types should be encouraged.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Public health interventions can be tailored to target gender-specific eating beliefs to prevent maladaptive eating behaviors. Medical professionals and policymakers can use the findings of this study to develop more successful

nutrition education programs. Dietary counseling can be used to take into account emotional regulation techniques to handle emotional eating behaviors by mental health professionals. Nutrition and psychological well-being programs can be merged in universities and schools to encourage healthy dieting among students. This study provides a ground to other studies that will look into long-term effects of eating beliefs on nutritional habits and overall health condition.

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