



Received: 14-03-2026
Accepted: 24-04-2026

ISSN: 2583-049X

Food Choices and Factors Influencing Dietary Behavior among Students of University of Abuja, Nigeria

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62225/2583049X.2026.6.3.6199>

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Abstract

This study examined the food choices and factors influencing dietary behaviour among students at the University of Abuja, Nigeria. University students often experience increased autonomy in food decisions while economic constraints, campus food environments and lifestyle pressures may shape their dietary patterns. The study aimed to describe students' socioeconomic characteristics, identify their common food choices and examine the factors influencing their food selection behaviour. A snowball sampling technique was employed to recruit 71 students across different faculties of the university. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics and Likert-scale analysis. The results show that the majority of respondents were between 23 and 26 years of age, with a relatively balanced gender distribution. Most students relied

on their parents or guardians as their primary source of income, while a large proportion lived off campus. The average monthly allowance was approximately ₦38,593.98. The majority of students chose food prepared at home or in the hostel while a few chose fast food, street food and processed food. The students' favourite foods were rice, bread, snacks and cereals. The students showed low intake of fruits, vegetables and protein. Several factors influenced the students' food habits. The factors were hygiene, safety, cost, personal income levels, taste and availability. Convenience, time and cultural factors also influenced students' food habits. This study indicates that economic factors have a major impact on university students' food habits and thus recommends awareness campaigns to help them adopt a more balanced diet.

Keywords: Food Choices, Dietary Behaviors, Influencing Factors, Dietary Intake, University Students, University of Abuja

Introduction

The dietary behaviours of university students constitute a pressing public health issue in Nigeria where rapid urbanisation, economic challenges and the ongoing nutrition transition have reshaped food consumption patterns (Falade *et al.*, 2024; Sosanya *et al.*, 2024) [7, 12]. Such decisions have a substantial impact on nutritional status, academic performance, cognitive ability, as well as the likelihood of Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs). This also includes an increase in malnutrition cases (Olumakaiye *et al.*, 2026) [11]. University students for the first time in their lives are exposed to a variety of factors that influence their food choice considering the availability of convenient food options. These types of food options are always less nutritious when compared to healthy food options (Ologele *et al.*, 2021) [10]. The intricacies of the factors as seen in recent studies also show that for undergraduates in southwest Nigeria, taste and sensory attributes are major food choice influences. Economic factors, availability, convenience, health perceptions and moods are also major food choice influences for undergraduates (Ogundele *et al.*, 2023) [9]. Students also have their own pattern of meals. This pattern involves skipping meals such as breakfast. Students also eat home-made as well as shop-bought food due to their busy schedule as well as financial constraints.

Another factor is socioeconomic factors. A study was carried out with the objective of exploring the dietary intake among adolescent girls in schools. The study showed that a larger family size was associated with a high quality of dietary intake in terms of the food group, thus helping in the prevention of NCDs. On the other hand, living in an urban area was associated with low quality of dietary intake as well as a high quality of NCD-promoting foods as explained by Olumakaiye *et al.* (2026) [11]. Daily allowances for school increased the intake of certain staple foods but reduced overall adherence to global dietary guidelines (Olumakaiye *et al.*, 2026) [11]. Regional differences were clear. Southeast region had a better quality of diet compared to other regions. Economic factors, such as low levels of parental income and price of food, affect the availability of a variety of nutrient-dense foods. This led to the intake of low-cost food products such as rice, beans, pasta, and noodles

(Falade *et al.*, 2024) [7].

With regard to secondary school students in Ekiti State, Nigeria economic factors were found to have the most impact on their food choice. Environmental, traditional and personal factors were found to have equal importance. This led to a difference in self-confidence related to healthy food habits (Falade *et al.*, 2024) [7]. Moreover, gender factors were found to affect the challenges related to food choice. This is because women do not have independence. In rural northern Nigeria, embodied knowledge perceptions linking foods to strength, growth, satiety, or body image for marriage prospects guide selections, yet girls face limited autonomy due to parental or spousal oversight, reduced mobility and biased intrahousehold allocation favouring boys (Sosanya *et al.*, 2024) [12]. Affordability issues in various market settings limit diversity, even though vegetables and animal-source foods are available (Sosanya *et al.*, 2024) [12]. Qualitative insights reveal additional personal factors, such as limited nutritional knowledge, strong preferences for taste and texture, and social influences. These influences include parental restrictions and gifts during courtship that provide occasional protein-rich items (Sosanya *et al.*, 2024) [12].

Campus environment, taste, cultural norms and biological & social pressures interact with these factors, often favoring fast foods and ultra-processed products. This happens despite awareness of health risks (Ologele *et al.*, 2021; Falade *et al.*, 2024) [10, 7]. Biological, economic and social factors strongly connect to unhealthy choices among Nigerian undergraduates (Ologele *et al.*, 2021) [10]. While these findings highlight broader trends at secondary and tertiary levels, specific data for the University of Abuja, a federal institution with a diverse student population in the Federal Capital Territory are still lacking. This study aimed to address this gap by describing the socioeconomic characteristics of students in the area, identifying their food choices and examining the factors that influence these choices. The results are expected to support evidence-based interventions that promote healthier eating habits among Nigerian students.

Materials and Methods

The Study Area

This study was conducted at the University of Abuja in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Nigeria. The University of Abuja's main campus is in the Gwagwalada Area Council, along the Lugbe-Giri route. Abuja covers an area of 8,000 square kilometers and sits in the center of Nigeria. It lies between longitudes 6°45' and 7°45' E and latitudes 8°25' and 9°25' N (Anyanwu & Solomon, 2015) [2]. Because of its central location, the vegetation includes both tropical rainforest elements from Nigeria's south and the savannah grassland typical of the north and central regions. Founded in 1988 in Gwagwalada, the University of Abuja (UniAbuja) is an important federal institution in Nigeria's capital. It offers various undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Recognized as a leading university, it serves over 40,000 students across 12 faculties including Law, Science and Education. The university offers both traditional and distance learning options. Its suburban campus accommodates many activities. Though students can enjoy numerous on-campus experiences, these can sometimes feel crowded. The area has fertile soil for farming and a mild climate, with temperatures ranging from

35 °C to 22 °C throughout the year (Anyanwu & Solomon, 2015) [2]. There are two main seasons: a dry season and a wet season. The wet season lasts from the end of March to the end of October. Meteorological records show that rainfall can start as late as April in some years, peaking between August and September. Annual rainfall varies from 1,000mm to 1,600mm. The dry season runs from November to March with December and January usually being cold and dry due to North-East winds that bring the harmattan.

Sampling Technique

The study employed a snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. An initial group of students from the University of Abuja was identified and asked to refer other students within their academic networks to participate in the survey. Through this process, 71 students were sampled from across the university's faculties. This approach enabled the study to reach students across diverse academic disciplines and capture varied perspectives on food choices.

Results and Discussion

1. The Socioeconomic Characteristics of Students in the Study Area

Table 1 presents the socioeconomic characteristics of the students surveyed in the study area. The distribution of respondents across faculties shows that more than half (53.52%) were from the Faculty of Agriculture, while smaller proportions were from the faculties of Science (12.68%), Engineering (7.04%), and Social Sciences (7.04%). The remaining respondents came from various faculties, including Management Sciences, Education, Veterinary Medicine, and Arts. The large number of respondents from the Faculty of Agriculture might reflect the academic networks that helped the snowball sampling process grow. Similar patterns have been observed in studies using non-probability sampling methods, in which participants often cluster around the initial contact groups (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016) [6]. Although this concentration can affect the representation of disciplines, it still offers valuable insights into student food choice behaviour across different academic backgrounds.

The results also show that the number of male and female respondents is nearly equal, with males accounting for 50.70% and females for 49.30%. This balanced gender composition provides a fairly neutral perspective when analyzing students' food choice behaviour. Studies by Deliens *et al.* (2014) [5] and Ogundele *et al.* (2023) [9] have opined that female students often demonstrate greater concern for health and nutritional value, while male students may prioritise taste and convenience.

The age distribution of respondents shows that the majority of students were between 23 and 26 years (39.44%) and 28 years or older (38.03%), with a mean age of approximately 25.19 years. Only a small proportion of respondents were aged 18 years or below (2.82%). This age profile shows that university students are mostly young adults. Research on food choice behaviors among university students indicates that most respondents were in their early and mid-twenties. It is during this period that individuals have more control over food choice behaviors. Food choice behaviors have a significant impact on individuals' long-term food habits (Anetor *et al.*, 2021) [1]. It is during this period that individuals start to choose what they eat.

Regarding respondents' marital status, most respondents

were single, accounting for 76.06%, while 23.94% were married. This indicates that most university students are single. Research by Anetor *et al.* (2021) [1] indicates that most undergraduate students in Nigeria are single. This is due to their school commitments and age. Individuals' marital status influences food choice behaviors. Married individuals have a more structured food choice pattern compared to single individuals in universities who mostly use convenient food choice behaviours. The distribution of study levels indicates that postgraduate students constituted the largest proportion of respondents (38.03%), followed by students in the 400 level (19.72%) and the 200 level (18.31%). Students at other levels, such as the 300 and 500 levels, accounted for smaller proportions. Research (Gligorić *et al.*, 2021) [8] has shown that academic workload and study level can influence food choices as students in higher levels often face greater academic demands that may affect meal timing and food preferences.

The findings further reveal that respondents' average monthly allowance was approximately ₦38,593.98. More than half of the students (50.70%) reported receiving monthly allowances of ₦50,000 or more, while smaller proportions received lower allowances. Financial resources are known to influence students' food purchasing decisions. Anetor *et al.* (2021) [1] found that students with higher disposable income tend to have greater flexibility in food selection, while those with limited financial resources often prioritise affordability over nutritional quality. Table 1 showed that parents or guardians were the primary source of financial support for 43.66% of the student respondents. This finding is consistent with an earlier study by Ogundele *et al.* (2023) [9] which found that most Nigerian university students depend largely on family support for their daily expenses, including food purchases. Other income sources includes personal business (25.35%), part-time jobs (15.49%), scholarships (5.63%), civil service employment (7.04%) and project staff positions (2.82%).

The result also revealed that the majority of students (81.69%) lived off campus, while 18.31% resided on campus. Off-campus residence may influence food choices due to differences in food availability, cooking facilities and access to commercial food outlets.

Table 1: Socioeconomic characteristics of the students

Factors	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
Faculty			
Faculty of Management Sciences	3	4.23	
Faculty of Science	9	12.68	
Environmental sciences	1	1.41	
Faculty of Agriculture	38	53.52	
Faculty of Veterinary Medicine	2	2.82	
Faculty of Arts	1	1.41	
Communication and Media Studies	1	1.41	
Faculty of Engineering	5	7.04	
Faculty of Law	1	1.41	
Faculty of Education	3	4.23	
Faculty of Social Science	5	7.04	
Age of the Household Head (Years)			
≤ 18	2	2.82	
19 – 22	14	19.72	
23 – 26	28	39.44	
≥ 28	27	38.03	

Sex			
Male	36	50.70	
Female	35	49.30	
Marital Status			
Single	54	76.06	
Married	17	23.94	
Level of Study			
100 Level	3	4.23	
200 Level	13	18.31	
300 Level	7	9.86	
400 Level	14	19.72	
500 Level	7	9.86	
Postgraduate	27	38.03	
Average Monthly Allowance			₦38,593.98
Below ₦9, 000	8	11.27	
₦10,000 - ₦19,999	8	11.27	
₦20,000 - ₦29,999	12	16.90	
₦30,000 - ₦40,000	7	9.86	
₦50,000 and above	36	50.70	
Primary Source Income			
Parents/Guardians	31	43.66	
Personal business	18	25.35	
Part-time job	11	15.49	
Scholarships	4	5.63	
Project staff	2	2.82	
Civil Service	5	7.04	
Place of Residence			
Off-campus	58	81.69	
On-campus	13	18.31	
Total	71	100	

Source: Computed from field survey (2026).

2. The Various Food Choices Among the Students in the Study Area

The results in Table 2 present the various food choices and commonly consumed meals among students in the study area. The results revealed that the majority of students (69.01%) reported consuming home or hostel-cooked meals as their primary food choice. This suggests that many students still rely on meals prepared in their residence rather than purchasing ready-made food outside. This pattern may be associated with cost considerations, personal food preferences and the availability of cooking facilities in off-campus residences. According to Anetor *et al.* (2021) [1], students living off-campus often prepare their own meals to manage food expenses better. Fast food consumption accounted for 14.08% of respondents indicating that a notable proportion of students rely on commercially prepared meals. Fast food outlets are often attractive to students due to convenience, quick service and taste preferences. Academic workload and busy schedules may limit the time available for cooking, leading some students to choose fast food as an alternative.

Street food consumption represented 9.86% of respondents while packaged or processed foods accounted for 7.04%. Street food is widely available on many Nigerian university campuses and is often relatively inexpensive, making it attractive to students with limited financial resources. Ogundele *et al.* (2023) [9] found that students frequently purchase street food due to its accessibility and affordability, although the nutritional quality of these foods varies widely. Processed foods form part of the students' diet though not included in this study. Processed foods can be easily stored and their preparation is minimal. In addition, processed foods are readily available in stores within and around the school.

The type of food mostly eaten by students is rice as 64.79% of students sampled love eating rice. In Nigeria, rice is a staple meal eaten by most Nigerians. Rice is a favourite meal for most students, as it is easy to prepare and can be prepared in various ways such as jollof rice, fried rice, rice with stew etc. Bread, snacks and cereals were the next most popular meal choice eaten by 18.31% of respondents. These items are preferred because they are quick to grab and do not require much preparation time. Students might have bread and snacks as quick meals or breakfasts, especially when they are busy before classes or other activities. Ogundele *et al.* (2023) [9] have similarly found that snack foods are widely consumed among university students due to their convenience and accessibility.

Smaller proportions of respondents consumed other meal categories. Beans dishes accounted for 7.04% while meat, fish or eggs were reported by 4.23% of students. Yams or cassava products, fruits and vegetables each accounted for only 2.82% of responses. The relatively low consumption of fruits and vegetables is consistent with the study by Deliens *et al.* (2014) [5], which documented inadequate intake of fruits and vegetables among university students. This pattern may be attributed to factors such as cost, availability or preference for energy-dense foods that provide greater satiety.

Overall, these findings suggest that students' food choices are largely shaped by affordability, convenience, and the availability of familiar staple foods. While many students rely on home or hostel-cooked meals, their diets appear to be dominated by carbohydrate-based foods such as rice and bread, with relatively low consumption of fruits and vegetables; similar dietary patterns have been reported by Anetor *et al.* (2021) [1], Deliens *et al.* (2014) [5], and Ogundele *et al.* (2023) [9] in the study of university students in Nigeria.

Table 2: Various food choices among students

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Food Choices Among Students		
Packaged/processed food	5	7.04
Home/hostel cooked meals	49	69.01
Fast food	10	14.08
Street food	7	9.86
Common Meals Consumed		
Rice dishes	46	64.79
Bread/snack/cereals	13	18.31
Yam/cassava products	2	2.82
Beans dishes	5	7.04
Meat/fish/egg	3	4.23
Fruits and vegetables	2	2.82
Total	71	100

Source: Computed from field survey (2026).

3. The Factors Influencing Food Choices Amongst Students in the Study Area

The result of the factors influencing students' food choices in the study area is presented in Table 3. The results indicate that several economic, environmental and personal factors play important roles in shaping students' food selection behaviour. Among the identified factors, food hygiene and safety recorded the highest mean score (3.87), indicating that students generally consider food cleanliness and safety before making consumption decisions. This finding suggests that students are conscious of the potential health risks associated with unsafe food preparation and handling. Similar observations have been reported by Suhaimi *et al.*

(2024) [13], which indicate that concerns about food safety significantly influence food purchasing and consumption decisions among young adults.

For places where people often purchase food from street vendors or food establishments within a campus, issues concerning hygiene have a significant impact on food decisions. Food price is another factor that most respondents considered significant and scored an average of 3.84. This shows that most respondents agree with this factor. The average score shows that it is based on the financial status of the students. Most students have limited financial resources and often decide what food to purchase based on what they can afford. This may be a reason why rice and bread are often consumed in large quantities, as observed in previous studies. Personal income is another factor that is often associated with food price and scored a high average of 3.83. This shows that the money available to students affects the types of food they eat. Students with higher allowances or extra income can choose from a wider variety of foods while those with less money tend to focus on cheap options. Similar findings were reported in the study by Biediger-Friedman *et al.* (2016) [3]. On student nutrition behaviour, where financial capacity significantly shapes food purchasing decisions and dietary quality. Taste and personal preference were important factors in food choice, with a mean score of 3.70. This shows that sensory appeal is a key factor in students' choice of meals. Even when considering health, students often choose foods that taste better or are more familiar.

The availability of food options also played a significant role with a mean score of 3.61. This means that what students choose to eat is influenced by what is easily accessible around them. In university settings, the types of meals available in campus cafeterias, hostels and nearby food outlets can greatly affect what students eat. Caruso *et al.* (2025) [4] observed that food environments in the campus setting have a significant impact on students' dietary habits. In this study, the average score of "convenience/time constraints" was 3.59. The students have a tight schedule, which affects the time taken in cooking the food. Therefore, this factor affects the food choice because the students need food that is convenient, i.e., the food needs less time in cooking. On the contrary, the score of "Nutritional Value" was 3.26, which is neutral. This shows that even though the students take the nutritional value of the food into account, this factor is not significant while choosing the food that is eaten. Other researchers have observed that the university students have a trend while choosing the food that is eaten. The taste, price and convenience of the food are more significant factors compared to the nutritional value while choosing the food (Anetor *et al.*, 2021) [1]. The score of "Cultural/Religious Beliefs" was 2.90, which is neutral.

Finally, peer influence scored the lowest average at 1.97. This shows that students generally disagreed that their friends significantly impact their food choices. This finding contrasts with the results of Deliens *et al.* (2014) [5] which highlighted the role of social interactions and peer behaviour in shaping dietary habits among young adults. However, students in this study may perceive their food choices as more individually driven rather than socially influenced. Overall, the findings suggest that economic factors, food safety concerns, taste preferences, and food availability are the most important determinants of students' food choices in the study area.

Table 3: The factors influencing food choices

Constraints	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total	Mean	Remark
The price of food influences my food choices	130 (49.06)	96 (36.23)	24 (9.06)	8 (3.02)	7 (2.64)	265	3.84	Agreed
The availability of food affects my choice of meal	115 (46.18)	68 (27.31)	48 (19.28)	10 (4.02)	8 (3.21)	249	3.61	Agreed
Taste and preference influence my food choices	115 (45.10)	96 (37.65)	27 (10.59)	8 (3.14)	9 (3.53)	255	3.70	Agreed
Convenience and time constraints affect my food choices	110 (43.82)	88 (35.06)	36 (14.34)	6 (2.39)	11 (4.38)	251	3.59	Agreed
Nutritional value influences my food selection	80 (35.09)	76 (33.33)	45 (19.74)	14 (6.14)	13 (5.70)	228	3.26	Neutral
Cultural or religious beliefs influence my food choices	80 (39.41)	44 (21.67)	39 (19.21)	20 (9.85)	20 (9.85)	203	2.90	Neutral
Food hygiene and safety influence my food choices	160 (59.04)	72 (26.57)	24 (8.86)	6 (2.21)	9 (3.32)	271	3.87	Agreed
My income determines the type of food I eat	150 (55.97)	80 (29.85)	21 (7.84)	8 (2.99)	9 (3.36)	268	3.83	Agreed
Peer influences my food choices	20 (14.71)	20 (14.71)	33 (24.26)	28 (20.59)	35 (25.74)	136	1.97	Disagreed

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, U = Undecided, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Source: Computed from field survey, 2026.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study concludes that students' food choices at the University of Abuja are largely influenced by economic factors, food safety concerns, taste preferences and the availability of food within their environment. Many students rely on meals prepared at home or in hostels. However, their diets mostly include foods high in carbohydrates, with only a small amount of fruits, vegetables, and protein. Concerns about nutrition often take a backseat to affordability and convenience.

The study suggests that universities should promote nutrition education programs and make healthy, affordable food options easier to access on campus. In addition, awareness campaigns and supportive food policies should assist students in choosing more balanced diets.

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