HEALTH, LIFESTYLE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINANTS OF FOOD CHOICE BEHAVIOUR AMONG UITM PERMATANG PAUH STUDENTS

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(Received 08th September 2026; revised 28th October 2026; accepted 02nd November 2026)

Abstract. Malaysian studies on student food choice have largely examined health, lifestyle, and environmental influences separately, with limited evidence of their combined effects. This study addresses this gap by investigating how these three factors jointly influence food choice behaviour among students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Permatang Pauh. A cross-sectional quantitative survey was conducted involving 400 students selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using a self-administered bilingual questionnaire (English and Bahasa Malaysia) distributed online, employing a six-point Likert scale. Health factors included nutritional beliefs, self-efficacy, and confidence in maintaining healthy eating habits. Lifestyle factors encompassed daily routines and examination-related stress, while environmental factors included food prices, campus food availability, and peer or media influences. The study was guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour, supported by the Health Belief Model, Health Promotion Model, and Social Cognitive Theory. Three hypotheses examined the positive influence of health, lifestyle, and environmental factors on food choice behaviour. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and multiple regression in SPSS version 30. The findings revealed that the three predictors collectively explained 46.7% of the variance in food choice behaviour ($R^2 = 0.467$; $F(3, 396) = 115.694$, $p < .001$), supporting all hypotheses. Health factors were the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.575$, $p < .001$), followed by lifestyle factors ($\beta = 0.124$, $p = .003$) and environmental factors ($\beta = 0.090$, $p = .045$). Additionally, 44% of respondents reported occasionally skipping meals during examinations, particularly breakfast (83.5%). Although the findings demonstrate significant associations, the cross-sectional design prevents causal interpretation, while convenience sampling limits generalisability beyond UiTM Permatang Pauh. The study highlights the importance of strengthening nutritional awareness, dietary self-efficacy, and affordable campus food accessibility to promote healthier eating practices among university students.

Keywords: *food choice behaviour, health factors, lifestyle factors, environmental factors, university students*

Introduction

Food choice behaviour refers to the practice of selecting and consuming foodstuffs based on the interaction of individual, social, and environmental factors, and for university students this is further complicated by emerging independence, varied schedules, and an intense learning environment (Li et al., 2022). Studies on Malaysian students reveal irregular meal schedules and high fast-food consumption despite good nutritional knowledge, with nutritional literacy and health awareness identified as key influences on academic and dietary outcomes (Asri et al., 2025), alongside lifestyle constraints such as time limitations and convenience habits that push students towards

high-calorie, low-cost foods (Deliens et al., 2014). Despite this global body of research, few studies have examined how health, lifestyle, and environmental factors jointly shape food choices among UiTM Permatang Pauh students, with Malaysian literature narrowly focusing on these factors without accounting for their interdependent effects (Salim et al., 2025). This study therefore examines these factors anchored on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), complemented by Health Belief Model (Rosenstock et al., 1994), the Health Promotion Model (Pender, 1982), and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) together forming a solid theoretical foundation for research in nutrition, consumer behaviour, and hospitality in academia.

The purpose of this study is to examine the joint influence of health, lifestyle, and environmental factors on food choice behaviour among UiTM Permatang Pauh students. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Do health factors significantly influence food choice behaviour among UiTM Permatang Pauh students? (2) Do lifestyle factors significantly influence food choice behaviour among UiTM Permatang Pauh students? (3) Do environmental factors significantly influence food choice behaviour among UiTM Permatang Pauh students? Guided by the theoretical framework above, three hypotheses are proposed: H1, health factors have a significant positive influence on food choice behaviour; H2, lifestyle factors have a significant positive influence on food choice behaviour; and H3, environmental factors have a significant positive influence on food choice behaviour. Testing these hypotheses is intended to clarify the relative weight of personal, behavioural, and structural determinants in shaping how students eat, and to inform targeted nutrition and food-environment interventions on campus.

Literature review

Food choice behaviour among university students is important to their health, education, and wellbeing. This transitional stage involves increasing independence in food choices while facing academic, social, and financial pressures. Understanding these factors can support effective health promotion programmes. This review focuses on health, lifestyle, and environmental factors influencing food choice behaviour. The framework is supported by the Health Belief Model (HBM), Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), and Health Promotion Model (HPM). The study therefore proposes that health (H1), lifestyle (H2), and environmental factors (H3) significantly influence food choice behaviour among university students.

Theoretical underpinnings

Several related theories underpin the proposed conceptual framework and help explain the complex phenomenon of food choice behaviour. The Health Belief Model (HBM) explains health-promoting behaviour, suggesting that people's willingness to engage in behaviours like healthy eating depends on their perceived susceptibility to health outcomes, the perceived benefits and barriers to the behaviour, and self-efficacy, making it a useful framework for understanding the link between health beliefs and food-related action (Deshpande et al., 2009). The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) builds on this by adding social influences, stating that intentions predict behaviour and that these intentions are shaped by attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ainol Murtaza et al., 2025), while the Health Promotion Model (HPM) further considers personal characteristics, past experiences,

and health-promoting cognitions. In addition, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) shows that personal factors, environment, and behaviour interact reciprocally, meaning food choice decisions are not purely conscious or based on internal cognition alone but are also shaped by observational learning, self-regulation, and external reinforcement (Asri et al., 2025) together, these theories provide a comprehensive base for understanding how health, lifestyle, and environment interact to influence food choice behaviour.

Food choice behaviour

The concept of food choice behaviour can be understood as the dynamic process of deciding what foods are consumed, when they should be eaten, how much is appropriate, and where meals will be eaten, involving various physical, mental, social, and environmental factors (Ogundele et al., 2023), as well as an interplay of personal tastes, culture, nutritional information, and situational factors. For students, this process undergoes huge changes as they establish new food habits and experience a completely different food environment at school, often eating more energy-dense but nutrient-poor foods, developing erratic eating patterns, and reducing fruit and vegetable intake (Asri et al., 2025; Avram et al., 2024). Using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) developed by Steptoe et al. (1995), research including that of Ogundele et al. (2023) reveals that people make food choices for many different reasons including health, mood, convenience, sensory properties, naturalness, cost, bodyweight control, familiarity, and ethics showing that multivariable studies are needed to fully understand food choice behaviour.

Health factors and food choice behaviour

Health remains a primary driver of food choice behaviour among university students, encompassing knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions regarding nutrition and well-being. Ogundele et al. (2023), in a study of 310 Nigerian university students, found health to be the top influence on food choices, with 74% rating "feeling healthy" as highly important, 48% citing weight control, and 46% avoiding additives. Using the Health Belief Model, Deshpande et al. (2009) further showed that perceived susceptibility, severity of health risks, and perceived benefits of healthy eating predicted healthy dietary intentions, with self-efficacy emerging as a particularly strong predictor. Similarly, Asri et al. (2025) found that students with higher nutrition knowledge exhibited better eating habits linked to improved academic performance (CGPA), a pattern consistent with Ogundele et al. (2023) Nigerian findings but demonstrated here within a Malaysian campus setting, suggesting that the health-consciousness pathway to food choice generalises across these two contexts even though the specific weight given to health-related motives (e.g., weight control versus additive avoidance) differs between them. Collectively, these findings support Hypothesis 1, confirming that health beliefs, perceived risk, self-efficacy, and nutritional knowledge are significant determinants of food choice behaviour.

Lifestyle factors and food choice behaviour

Lifestyle significantly shapes university students' food choice behaviour, as time management, academic stressors, and daily routines influence when, what, and how much they eat; Avram et al. (2024) found that among 166 university students, routine affected mealtimes, with stress-induced consumption of sweet foods during

examinations aligning with the emotional eating dimension of the TFEQ. Irregular eating schedules are similarly prevalent, as Ogundele et al. (2023) reported that 36% of students never ate breakfast and 41% never ate dinner daily, with 17% also reporting alcohol consumption as a lifestyle behaviour linked to diet quality, reflecting the difficulty of maintaining regular meal times amid university demands. Furthermore, Asri et al. (2025) observed a negative correlation between irregular, unhealthy eating and academic performance, indicating that lifestyle-driven food choices affect both physical well-being and cognitive functioning. These findings collectively confirm the second hypothesis, that lifestyle factors have a significant relationship with food choice behaviour among university students.

Environmental Factors and Food Choice Behaviour

Environmental factors including food availability, pricing, peer influence, and campus layout significantly shape students' food choice behaviour, independent of health attitudes. Ainol Murtaza et al. (2025), applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour and Health Promotion Model among Malaysian university students, found environmental factors to be the second strongest predictor of food consumption behaviour ($R^2 = 0.744$), with campus food access, affordability, and peer influence as the top predictors. Campus spatial arrangement also matters, as Avram et al. (2024) linked the distance between learning and eating spaces to disordered eating, since limited time between classes led students to eat hastily with reduced dietary awareness. Economic constraints further contribute, with Asri et al. (2025) noting that a high density of low-quality food options prompts students to prioritise affordability over nutrition, exacerbating food insecurity. Peer influence is similarly salient, aligning with Social Cognitive Theory's concept of social modelling, whereby students' food choices are shaped by the eating behaviours of their social group; this is further supported by Ismail et al. (2024), who found that peer influence and promotional factors significantly predicted Malaysian university students' food and beverage purchasing decisions, reinforcing the role of the social and marketing environment in shaping dietary choices. Collectively, this literature confirms that environmental factors encompassing peers, campus setting, pricing, and food availability significantly influence food choice behaviour, providing strong support for Hypothesis 3.

Theoretical framework

As illustrated in *Figure 1,* the proposed conceptual framework is adapted from the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by (Ainol Murtaza et al., 2025; Ajzen 1991), which serves as the main theoretical basis of this study, positing that food choice behaviour is driven by behavioural intention, shaped by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control thereby underscoring the role of lifestyle factors (H2) in determining food choice behaviour. TPB is further supplemented by three related theories: the Health Belief Model (Deshpande et al., 2009; Rosenstock et al., 1994) explains that food choices are also motivated by perceived health threats, benefits, barriers, and self-efficacy, supporting the influence of health factors (H1); the Health Promotion Model (Pender, 1982) complements TPB by emphasising personal characteristics, past experiences, and health-promoting cognitions; and Social Cognitive Theory (Asri et al., 2025; Bandura, 1986) broadens the framework by establishing the reciprocal interaction between behaviour and the external environment, thereby

supporting the role of environmental factors (H3). Together, these four theories provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation, establishing that food choice behaviour, as depicted in *Figure 1*, is strongly influenced by health-related (H1), lifestyle-related (H2), and environmental (H3) factors.

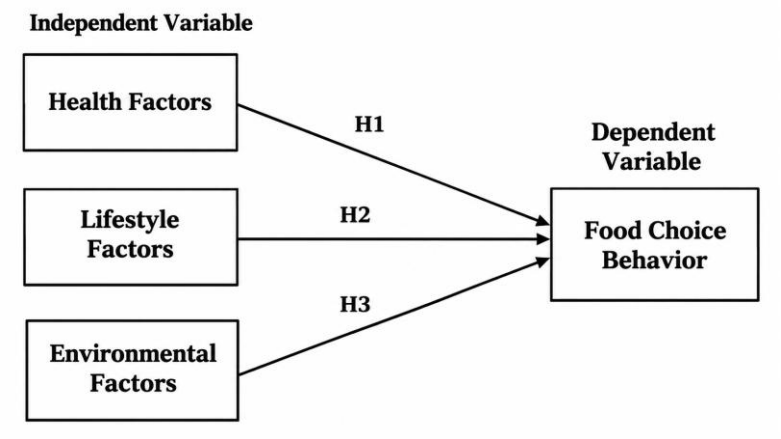


Figure 1. *Theoretical framework.*

Materials and Methods

Research design

This research examines the food-choice behaviour of university students, in terms of the influence of health, lifestyle and environmental variables, using a quantitative survey research approach. This allows the study to investigate the links between the defined variables by collecting data from the chosen population at one point in time.

Population and sampling

The participants of this study were 4,643 enrolled students aged 18 years and above who regularly ate at the campus of the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Permatang Pauh. Based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, the minimal sample size for this study was 355 respondents with 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. The respondents were picked via convenience sample technique as they were conveniently accessible and ready to participate in the study. The questionnaire was sent on the internet in numerous methods to enable the researchers to access a large number of students efficiently. The total usable replies were 400, which was higher than the required sample size and so contributed to the representativeness of the study.

Research instrument

Data will be collected using an online self-administered questionnaire adapted from the literature and translated into English and Bahasa Malaysia to minimise comprehension bias (Darmi and Albion, 2013). A six-point forced-choice Likert scale was used to avoid neutral responses and improve discriminant power (Allen and Seaman, 2007). The questionnaire comprised five sections: demographics (Section A); Health Factors (Section B, 5 items); Lifestyle Factors (Section C, 4 items); Environmental Factors (Section D, 5 items); and Food Choice Behaviour (Section E, 5

items). All items were adapted from established instruments and developed to suit the campus context.

Data collection

The survey was shared via Google Forms and circulated widely through social media channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and Facebook. Participants will be told at the start of the questionnaire about the academic research and that participation is optional.

Data analysis

All collected data was analysed with SPSS version 30 at the 95% confidence interval ($p < 0.05$). Descriptive analysis describes the demographic data of the participants. In addition, the reliability analysis will provide evidence of the validity of the measuring scales used. Finally, the inferential analysis will be completed with the help of a correlation test and multiple linear regression. It will provide the opportunity to identify relationships between the variables and predictors of food choice behaviour.

Results and Discussion

Demographic profile

Based on the analysis, a total of 400 respondents were involved in this study; most were female (61.3%), and males accounted for 38.8%. Also, most respondents were aged 22-25 (48.5%), while 41.8% were 18-21 years old, indicating that the sample consisted mainly of young adults. As for the monthly allowance, most respondents (42.0%) received RM501-RM1000, followed by 28.0% who received RM1001-RM1500, 22.5% received below RM500, and 7.5% received above RM1500. Daily food expenditure among respondents shows that most respondents spend RM11-RM20 per day (42.0%), while the second-highest food expenditure is RM21-RM30 (36.8%). Meanwhile, respondents who spend less than RM10 per day are 15.5%, while those who spend more than RM30 per day are 5.8%. In addition, 44.0% of respondents sometimes skip meals, 18.8% often, and 17.8% always, indicating that skipping meals is a common phenomenon among respondents. Only 7.0% of respondents never skipped their meals. In addition, the results showed that skipping breakfast (83.5%) was the most common type of skipping, compared with skipping dinner (8.8%) and lunch (7.8%).

Reliability analysis

The measurement tool in this study was piloted on 30 respondents to test its reliability and consistency using Cronbach's Alpha. According to Hair et al. (2018), the Cronbach's Alpha value greater than 0.70 represents fair reliability, and more than 0.90 represents exceptional consistency. This view is consistent with Gliem and Gliem (2003), who likewise held that a score higher than 0.70 is acceptable, and a score higher than 0.6 is questionable. The results of the pilot study indicate that all constructs have excellent reliability, with the values of Food Choice Behaviour ($\alpha = 0.946$), Health Factors ($\alpha = 0.961$), Lifestyle Factors ($\alpha = 0.916$), and Environmental Factors ($\alpha = 0.949$). High alpha coefficient ratings indicate that the items have good internal consistency in measuring their respective constructs (Gliem and Gliem, 2003).

Therefore the study equipment is reliable and appropriate to be used for further data analysis.

Table 1. *Reliability analysis.*

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Food Choice Behaviour	5	0.946	Excellent
Health Factors	5	0.961	Excellent
Lifestyle Factors	4	0.916	Excellent
Environmental Factors	5	0.949	Excellent

Note: Cronbach's alpha is greater than 0.6, and this indicates that the construct is reliable and consistent.

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed from 400 valid responses to analyse the central tendency and dispersion of the study constructs. Of all the constructs, the highest mean score was Environmental Factors (TOTAL EF) (M = 4.8895, SD = 0.54427). This was followed by Lifestyle Factors (TOTAL LF) (M = 4.7744, SD = 0.87136), Health Factors (TOTAL HF) (M = 4.5125, SD = 0.63186), and Food Choice Behaviour (TOTAL FCB) (M = 4.4225, SD = 0.68173). In general, these descriptive statistics indicate that respondents had positive perceptions of health, lifestyle, environmental factors, and food-choice behaviour.

Multiple regression analysis

The regression analysis in *Table 2* shows a R value of 0.683, which is a moderate but substantial positive correlation between the independent and dependent variables. The R-squared score of 0.467 shows that around 46.7% of the variation in the dependent variable is explained by the model predictor variables. The value of the adjusted R-Square of 0.463 indicates that the model does not improve in goodness of fit and the standard error of the estimate of 0.49955 suggests minimal average prediction error. Based on the ANOVA in *Table 3*, the multiple regression model is significant at the F (3, 396) level, F(3 & 396) = 115.694, $p < .001$. Given that the p-value is smaller than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the model is significant.

The multiple regression coefficients indicate that all three independent variables have statistically significant positive effects on the dependent variable. Total HF (Health Factors) is the most important predictor (B = 0.621, β = 0.575, t = 13.307, $p <.001$). Total LF (Lifestyle Factors) was also a statistically significant predictor (B=0.097, β = 0.124, t=3.002, p=.003). Total EF (Environmental Factors) was a significant predictor (B = 0.112, β = 0.090, t = 2.014, p =.045). All the p-values are less than 0.05 confirming the relevance of all the predictors. Hence, the null hypothesis of these predictors is rejected, and H1, H2, and H3 are all supported: health, lifestyle, and environmental factors each have a significant positive partial effect on food choice behaviour, in addition to the significant simultaneous effect established by the F-test.

Additionally, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed to investigate the associations between Food Choice Behaviour and the 3 predictor variables. The strongest link was with the Health Factors ($r = 0.665$, $p < 0.001$), a moderately strong positive correlation. Environmental Factors had the second largest connection with Food Choice Behaviour $r = 0.432$ ($p< 0.001$). The lowest, but still significant correlation was between Lifestyle Factors and Food Choice Behaviour, $r = 0.370$ ($p < .001$). Among inter-correlations between the predictor variables themselves, Health Factors is

moderately linked with Environmental Factors (r = 0.504) and Lifestyle Factors (r = 0.381), and Lifestyle Factors with Environmental Factors (r = 0.425). All the correlations are positive and statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ (1-tailed) level. The variables most significantly connected with Food Choice Behaviour were Health Factors followed by Environmental Factors and finally Lifestyle Factors.

***Table 2**. Coefficient values of the model (Model Summary).*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.683a	.467	.463	.49955

***Table 3**. ANOVA test result.*

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	86.615	3	28.872	115.694	<.001b
Residual	98.822	396	.250		
Total	185.437	399			

The finding that health factors emerged as the strongest predictor of food choice behaviour, despite environmental factors highlighting the highest mean score, suggests that while students perceive their surrounding food environment favourably, it is their internalised health consciousness, such as nutritional knowledge and dietary attitudes, that ultimately drives actual food selection, consistent with the notion that awareness alone does not necessarily translate into being the primary behavioural driver when stronger personal motivations are present. The significant influence of lifestyle factors, coupled with the alarmingly high rate of meal-skipping (44% sometimes skip meals, with 83.5% of these skipping breakfast), reflects the reality that time constraints and academic demands often override students' health intentions, indicating a gap between dietary knowledge and dietary practice. Meanwhile, the comparatively smaller yet still significant contribution of environmental factors implies that structural elements such as food availability on campus function more as facilitating or constraining conditions rather than primary motivators, reinforcing the idea that food choice behaviour is not driven by a single dominant factor but is instead shaped by the interaction of psychological, behavioural, and contextual influences.

Conclusion

This study confirms that health, lifestyle, and environmental factors significantly and positively influence food choice behaviour among UiTM Permatang Pauh students, with health emerging as the most salient determinant, followed by lifestyle-related challenges evident in the high prevalence of meal-skipping (particularly breakfast) despite most students having a moderate monthly allowance (RM501–RM1,000), and environmental factors highlighting the role of campus food accessibility. The findings suggest that student wellness programmes should prioritise nutrition attitudes and dietary self-efficacy while university stakeholders improve food affordability, accessibility, and structured breakfast initiatives. However, the study is constrained by its single-campus scope, self-administered questionnaire susceptible to social desirability bias, focus on only three determinants, convenience sampling, and cross-sectional design, which restrict generalisability and preclude causal inference; future research should therefore expand to multiple universities, incorporate additional factors (e.g., food knowledge, psychological influences, financial and cultural background), adopt longitudinal designs, and integrate qualitative methods to better understand the underlying reasons

behind student food choices. Overall, these findings affirm the multidimensional nature of food choice behaviour and underscore the demand of interventions addressing personal, behavioural, and structural determinants.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang for the resources and support provided during this research.

Conflict of interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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