



Research Article

The Relationship Between Adolescents' Knowledge Levels and Approaches to Popular Diets and their Emotional States

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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine the relationship between the level of knowledge and attitudes of adolescent students in a high school about popular diets and their emotional states. This descriptive and cross-sectional study was conducted with 100 volunteers aged 10-19 between 15 January- 15 February 2024. A questionnaire form prepared by the researchers, including questions on demographic characteristics, anthropometric measurements, eating habits, knowledge, opinions, and emotional states regarding popular diets, was applied to the participants through face-to-face interviews. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 27, and the significance level was accepted as $p < 0.05$. Fifty point five percent of the participants were female and 49.5% were male. 45.0% of the participants stated that they had researched healthy eating, and 48.0% defined popular diets as 'diets known by everyone'. The most well-known popular diet was intermittent fasting (44.0%), and 36.0% of the participants stated that they had practiced this diet before. The most common source of access to popular diets was the media (67%). While 40.0% of the participants reported not experiencing significant mood changes after dieting, 30.0% reported experiencing changes. Female students had a significantly higher level of knowledge about popular diets than male students ($p < 0.05$). It was found that adolescents are interested in healthy nutrition, intermittent fasting is the most known among popular diets, and the media is the most effective source of information. In this context, it is recommended to monitor nutritional content in the media and conduct accurate information activities for adolescents.

Keywords: Nutrition, Adolescent, Popular diets, Intermittent fasting, Ketogenic diet, Mediterranean diet.

Özet

Bu çalışma, bir lisede öğrenim gören adölesan öğrencilerin popüler diyetler hakkındaki bilgi düzeyleri, yaklaşımları ve bu durumun duyu durumları ile olan ilişkisini saptamak amacıyla yürütülmüştür. Tanımlayıcı ve kesitsel tipteki bu araştırma, 15 Ocak-15 Şubat 2024 tarihleri arasında bir lisede öğrenim gören, çalışmaya katılmaya gönüllü 10-19 yaş arası 100 adölesan ile gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veriler, araştırmacılar tarafından hazırlanan, demografik özellikler, antropometrik ölçümler, beslenme alışkanlıkları, popüler diyetlere ilişkin bilgi, tutum ve duyu durumlarını sorgulayan bir anket formu aracılığıyla yüz yüze görüşme yöntemiyle toplanmıştır. İstatistiksel analizlerde SPSS 27 programı kullanılmış, anlamlılık düzeyi $p < 0,05$ olarak kabul edilmiştir. Katılımcıların %50,5'i kız, %49,5'i erkek öğrencilerden oluşmaktadır. Katılımcıların %45'i sağlıklı beslenme konusunda araştırma yaptığını belirtirken, %48'i popüler diyetleri 'herkes tarafından bilinen diyetler' olarak tanımlamıştır. En çok bilinen popüler diyet %44 ile aralıklı oruç (IF) olup, katılımcıların %36'sı bu diyeti daha önce uyguladıklarını ifade etmiştir. Popüler diyetlere erişim kaynağı olarak en sık medya belirtilmiştir (%67). Katılımcıların %40'ı diyet sonrası belirgin bir duyu durum değişikliği yaşamadığını, %30'u ise değişiklik yaşadığını bildirmiştir. Kız öğrencilerin popüler diyetler hakkında bilgi sahibi olma oranı erkeklere göre anlamlı derecede yüksek bulunmuştur ($p < 0,05$). Adölesanların sağlıklı beslenmeye ilgi duyduğu, popüler diyetlerden en çok aralıklı orucun bilindiği ve bilgi edinmede medyanın en etkili kaynak olduğu saptanmıştır. Bu bağlamda, medyada yer alan beslenme içeriklerinin denetlenmesi ve adölesanlara yönelik doğru bilgilendirme çalışmalarının yapılması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Beslenme, Adölesan, Popüler diyetler, Aralıklı oruç, Ketojenik diyet, Akdeniz diyeti



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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical life stage characterized by biological growth and psychological, emotional, and social development. The rate of physical and cognitive growth during this period is second only to that of infancy (Best & Ban, 2023). Poor-quality diets and inadequate nutrient intake are frequently observed among adolescents globally, and this deterioration in dietary quality is significantly influenced by behavior, individual health, social, and environmental factors (Moore & McNulty, 2023). Coping with dieting for adolescents can be a complex process, shaped by peer pressure, societal standards, and the development of self-esteem. With the proliferation of social media, adolescents can be confronted with misinformation and dietary advice that influence their eating habits. This exposure may leave them unsure of which sources to trust. Furthermore, a tendency toward restrictive diets among adolescents can be an indicator of body image dissatisfaction. Currently, popular diet plans such as the ketogenic diet, intermittent fasting, vegetarian/vegan diet, Mediterranean diet, and gluten-free diet are prominent. The ketogenic diet aims to induce ketosis with its high fat, adequate protein, and very low carbohydrate content. Although it offers potential benefits such as weight loss and reduction of hyperglycemia, it should be implemented in adolescents under the supervision of a healthcare professional due to side effects such as fatigue, headache, and constipation (Roehl, & Sewak, 2017; Partsalaki et al., 2012). Intermittent fasting includes models such as time-restricted feeding or alternate-day fasting. While spontaneous calorie restriction can lead to weight loss and improvements in cardiometabolic parameters, inappropriate practices can increase symptoms such as hunger and irritability (Dong, 2021; Patterson & Sears, 2017; Kunduraci & Ozbek, 2020; Cabo & Mattson, 2019). The Mediterranean diet, based on the consumption of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, olive oil, and fish, is associated with obesity and cardiovascular disease. It is one of the healthiest dietary patterns, proven to reduce the risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes (D'Innocenzo et al., 2019; WHO, 2017). A vegetarian diet is predominantly a plant-based diet, and long-term, unplanned adherence can lead to nutritional deficiencies (Altaş, 2017). A gluten-free diet, on the other hand, is designed for individuals with celiac disease or gluten sensitivity and, if followed unnecessarily, can lead to iron, calcium, vitamin B12, and vitamin D deficiencies (Melini & Melini, 2019; Jebeile et al., 2019).

Popular diets, particularly restrictive and food-reducing approaches, can negatively impact mood stability and increase depressive symptoms in adolescents (Quirk et al., 2013). Adolescents who opt for fad diets that promise quick results and have poor diet quality report more mood disorders and emotional eating (Shriver et al., 2021). In contrast, nutrient-rich diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, have been shown to be associated with better mental health and a lower risk of depression in adolescents (Salazar et al., 2022). Furthermore, inadequate nutrient intake can increase the mood sensitivity in adolescents through decreased neurotransmitter synthesis and changes in the gut-brain axis. Therefore, it has been emphasized that popular diets may affect the psychological well-being of adolescents, and nutritional education may be necessary (Sahril, 2023).

Adolescents' knowledge of popular diets and their dietary choices may influence their emotional well-being. Understanding these relationships is essential for identifying the potential impact of inappropriate dietary behaviors on mental health and for informing preventive interventions.

This study aims to scientifically assess the potential impact of information sources, beliefs, and perceptions that shape young people's dietary behaviors on their psychological well-being.

METHOD

Setting

This study is a descriptive and cross-sectional survey. The population of the study consists of 170 students between the ages of 10-18, who are considered adolescents and who are studying at a secondary school in Bilecik during the fall semester of the 2023-2024 academic year (Sacks, 2003). As a result of the sample calculation made with 95% confidence level, 80% test power and 0.35 effect size (Cohen's medium effect size), it was determined that 100 participants needed to be reached. The study was conducted with 100 volunteer participants between January 15th and February 15th, 2024.

Inclusion criteri:

Adolescents aged 10–18 years; participants who agreed to participate voluntarily and signed the consent form (including parental/guardian consent where applicable); individuals with knowledge of or experience with any popular diet (e.g., ketogenic diet, intermittent fasting, low-carb, low-fat, detox diets, etc.) within the last six months; and students actively continuing their education at the institution/school where the study was conducted.

Exclusion criteria were as follows:

Individuals with a diagnosed psychiatric illness or regular psychiatric treatment/medication use (as this may affect mood assessment); individuals diagnosed with a chronic disease that could significantly affect nutrition (e.g., diabetes, celiac disease, inflammatory bowel disease); and individuals who have been on mandatory dietary treatment for medical reasons within the last six months.

Data Collection Tools

The data form created by the researchers consisted of 3 sections. In the first section, participants' gender, age, anthropometric measurements, and the presence of chronic diseases were questioned. Participants' body weight (kg) and height (cm) were measured. Body weight measurement was performed using a calibratable scale with a sensitivity of 0.5 kg, in the morning on an empty stomach, after defecation, wearing thin clothing and without shoes. Body Mass Index (BMI) was obtained by dividing body weight (kg) by the square of height (m²). In the second section, a questionnaire was administered to inquire about participants' general eating habits, their thoughts on diet, and in the last section, the relationship between their knowledge levels and approaches to popular diets and their emotional states was investigated. Study data were collected using the "face-to-face survey" method. The questionnaire used in this study was originally designed by the researchers based on scales in the literature that measure existing knowledge and attitudes regarding nutritional attitudes, self-efficacy, health belief model, and popular diet approaches. The survey questions were structured to focus specifically on individuals' knowledge levels, perceptions, frequency of use, and emotional-behavioral effects regarding popular diets. While the questions were inspired by the structures of similar scales used previously, a direct scale was not used; instead, it was adapted to the research objective. (Acar, 2020; Karaduman, 2015)

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics 27 was used to analyze the research data. Normality distribution of the data was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test and kurtosis-skewness values. Descriptive statistics are presented as frequency (n), percentage (%), mean, and standard deviation. The chi-square test was used to examine the relationships between categorical variables. Statistical significance was accepted as $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows, the average age was found to be 16.74 ± 1.23 for women and 16.63 ± 0.94 for men. The average height was found to be $163.05 \text{ cm} \pm 5.47$ for women and $174.05 \text{ cm} \pm 8.81$ for men. The average body weight was determined to be $58.63 \text{ kg} \pm 11.96$ for women and $74.47 \text{ kg} \pm 12.70$ for men.

Table 1. Distribution of defining characteristics of individuals according to gender

Variable	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Mean \pm SD	Min.-Max.	Mean \pm SD	Min.-Max.
Age(year)	$16,74 \pm 1,23$	15-18	$16,63 \pm 0,94$	15-18
Height(cm)	$163,05 \pm 5,47$	150-175	$174,05 \pm 8,81$	140-190
Weight(kg)	$58,63 \pm 11,96$	40-90	$74,47 \pm 12,70$	40-100

SD: Standard Deviation

Table 2 shows the distribution of participants' research on healthy eating by gender. Accordingly, 50% of female students and 36.84% of male students had conducted research on healthy eating. Overall, 86.84% of participants had conducted research on healthy eating. Furthermore, a significant difference was found between men and women in conducting research on healthy eating ($p < 0.05$, Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of participants' research on healthy nutrition by gender

Variable	Category	Gender				p ¹
		Female		Male		
		n	%	n	%	
Healthy Nutrition Research	Yes	31	50,00	14	36,84	0,431
	No	15	24,19	11	28,95	
	Sometimes	16	25,81	13	34,21	
	p ²	<0.001		<0.001		

* p¹<0,05 Chi-Square Test

**p²: Significance between categories

The distribution of participants' knowledge levels of popular diet types and the sources from which they learned about popular diets by gender is presented in Table 2. It was found that 56.45% of females were most informed about intermittent fasting among popular diets, and that they learned this information mostly (72.58%) from TV, magazines, and media sources. It was also found that 31.58% of male students were most informed about intermittent fasting among popular diets, and that they learned this information mostly (57.89%) from TV, magazines, and media sources. It was determined that female students were significantly more knowledgeable about popular diets than male students ($p < 0.05$). However, there was no difference between female and male students in the sources from which they learned about popular diets ($p > 0.05$). It was seen that the majority of students (67%) learned about popular diets from TV, magazines, and media, and 19% of students learned about popular diets from a dietitian (Table 3).

Table 3. Participants' knowledge levels of popular diet types by gender and the distribution of sources from which they learned popular diets

Variable	Category	Gender				p*
		Female		Male		
		n	%	n	%	0,012
	Dukan Diet	2	3,23	0	0,00	
Intermittent Fasting	35	56,45	12	31,58		
Ketogenic Diet	4	6,45	9	23,68		
Gluten-Free Nutrition	8	12,90	4	10,53		
Vegetarian Diet	4	6,45	7	18,42		
Mediterranean Diet	9	14,52	6	15,79		
Popular Diet Learning Resources	Dietician	9	14,52	10	26,32	0,269
	TV, Magazine, Media	45	72,58	22	57,89	
	Neighborhood	8	12,90	6	15,79	

*p<0,05; Chi-Square Test

Participants' knowledge of popular diet types and the distribution of sources from which they learned about popular diets are presented in Table 3, according to gender. A significant difference was found in the responses to the statement "Popular diets are successful in weight management" ($p = 0.001$, $p < 0.05$). This indicated a significant difference in male and female agreement with this statement. Regardless of gender, the majority of overall responses (51%) were undecided (Table 4).

Table 4. Distribution of participants' opinions about popular diets by gender

Variable	Category	Gender				Total		p*
		Female		Male		n	%	
		n	%	n	%			
Popular Diet Phrase	Unhealthy Diet	5	8,06	4	10,53	9	9,00	0,868
	Lose Weight in a Short Time	13	20,97	9	23,68	22	22,00	
	Easy to Apply	5	8,06	4	10,53	9	9,00	
	Known to Everyone	30	48,39	18	47,37	48	48,00	
	Starvation Diet	9	14,52	3	7,89	12	12,00	
Popular diets are easy to follow.	Strongly Disagree	5	8,06	3	7,89	8	8,00	0,382
	Disagree	13	20,97	7	18,42	20	20,00	
	Undecided	32	51,61	15	39,47	47	47,00	
	Agree	9	14,52	7	18,42	16	16,00	
	Strongly Agree	3	4,84	6	15,79	9	9,00	
Popular diets are successful in maintaining weight control.	Strongly Disagree	4	6,45	2	5,26	6	6,00	0,239
	Disagree	11	17,74	6	15,79	17	17,00	
	Undecided	35	56,45	15	39,47	50	50,00	
	Agree	8	12,90	8	21,05	16	16,00	
	Strongly Agree	4	6,45	7	18,42	11	11,00	
Popular diets are a diet method based on scientific evidence.	Strongly Disagree	4	6,45	2	5,26	6	6,00	0,001*
	Disagree	16	25,81	3	7,89	19	19,00	
	Undecided	35	56,45	16	42,11	51	51,00	
	Agree	5	8,06	8	21,05	13	13,00	

	Strongly Agree	2	3,23	9	23,68	11	11,00	
Popular diets are beneficial in the treatment of some diseases.	Strongly Disagree	5	8,06	1	2,63	6	6,00	0,030*
	Disagree	13	20,97	5	13,16	18	18,00	
	Undecided	28	45,16	16	42,11	44	44,00	
	Agree	13	20,97	6	15,79	19	19,00	
	Strongly Agree	3	4,84	10	26,32	13	13,00	
Popular diets provide the required daily calorie intake.	Strongly Disagree	4	6,45	3	7,89	7	7,00	0,251
	Disagree	13	20,97	12	31,58	25	25,00	
	Undecided	32	51,61	12	31,58	44	44,00	
	Agree	11	17,74	7	18,42	18	18,00	
	Strongly Agree	2	3,23	4	10,53	6	6,00	
Popular diets are sustainable for a long time.	Strongly Disagree	11	17,74	3	7,89	14	14,00	0,287
	Disagree	15	24,19	9	23,68	24	24,00	
	Undecided	25	40,32	16	42,11	41	41,00	
	Agree	9	14,52	5	13,16	14	14,00	
	Strongly Agree	2	3,23	5	13,16	7	7,00	

*p<0,05; Chi-Square Test

The relationship between the mood swings experienced by participants who had previously followed popular diets and the long-term sustainability of these diets is presented in Table 4. Among those who did not believe that popular diets were sustainable for the long term, when the distribution of mood swings among those who had previously followed these diets was examined, the proportion of those who were undecided was found to be higher than in the other groups (41%). No statistically significant relationship was found between the mood swings experienced by those who had previously followed popular diets and the long-term sustainability of these diets ($p>0.05$, Table 5).

Table 5. The relationship between the mood changes experienced by those who have previously followed popular diet models and the long-term sustainability of popular diets

Variable	Category	Emotional Change After Applying Popular Diets						Total		p*
		Yes		No		Sometimes				
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
	I disagree	13	41,81	13	30,23	12	46,15	38	38.00	0,227
I'm undecided	9	29,03	21	48,84	11	42,31	41	41.00		

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine adolescents' knowledge and attitudes about popular diets, and their relationship to their mood. Our research findings indicated that female students were more likely to conduct research on healthy eating (50%) than male students (36.84%), but this difference was not statistically significant. The literature presents varying results regarding health information-seeking behaviors by gender. Ellul et al. (2009) reported that females use sources such as parents, package information, and friends more than males (Ellul et al., 2009), while Deslippe et al. (2023) demonstrated that male adolescents may have a higher tendency to seek health information online in some

circumstances (Deslippe et al., 2023). Studies have shown that females are generally more active in seeking health information (Martinović et al., 2023). Girls are constantly exposed to the thin and fit body ideal through sociocultural pressures and media; this, combined with body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem, increases dieting knowledge and behaviors. Furthermore, seeking peer and parental approval, eating behaviors as an emotional regulation strategy, and motivation for social acceptance all explain girls' greater interest in popular diets (Shriver et al., 2021). This may be due to girls being socially and culturally more oriented toward nutrition and body image issues, and their concerns about these issues being more pronounced.

Our study found that adolescents mostly obtain information about popular diets from media sources (TV, magazines, social media; 67%). This finding confirms the powerful influence of media on nutritional habits in today's digital age. Bayram and Öztürkcan's (2024) infodemiology study also identified intermittent fasting as one of the most popular dietary terms (Bayram & Öztürkcan, 2024). The widespread use of smartphones has become an ideal platform for interventions targeting adolescents (Schaafsma et al, 2024). The significantly higher rate of female students being aware of the 'intermittent fasting' diet, which is frequently featured in the media, compared to male students ($p < 0.05$), suggests that this group follows nutritional trends more closely. When participants' opinions about popular diets were examined, it was observed that they were uncertain about many issues. For example, nearly half of the participants expressed uncertainty about the success and sustainability of popular diets in achieving weight control. This suggests that adolescents lack sufficient and accurate information about the effectiveness and safety of these diets. While many popular diets promise quick results in the short term, they can pose long-term health risks due to nutrient restrictions and are unsustainable (Kosinski & Jornayvaz, 2017; Aydoğdu & Akbulut, 2020). Brinkworth et al. (2009) found that high-protein diets can increase gastrointestinal problems (Brinkworth, 2009). Navruz and Tek (2014) emphasized the need for caution regarding the short- and long-term effects of such diets (Navruz & Tek, 2014).

A notable finding of our study is that male students, compared to female students, agreed significantly more with statements that popular diets are "based on scientific evidence" and "helpful in the treatment of some diseases." This suggests that male adolescents may be more likely to believe claims about the health effects of diets or be more influenced by media content. A study by Karaduman (2015) found that females were less likely than males to believe in the reliability of popular diets for healthy weight loss (Karaduman, 2015). The literature indicates that body image is important for female adolescents and that they focus on the results of diets rather than their accuracy to achieve their ideal body (Obermayer et al., 2023).

In our study, no significant relationship was found between mood changes experienced after implementing popular diets and the belief that these diets are sustainable ($p > 0.05$). This finding suggests that despite the negative emotional experiences adolescents experienced during the diet (e.g., hunger, irritability), this did not directly influence their perceptions of the diet's sustainability. Shriver et al. (2020) stated that emotional eating behaviors are associated with the risk of overeating and obesity (Shriver, 2020). Adolescents' nutritional perceptions are shaped by media and family, and this may influence the sustainability of popular diets (Muha et al., 2024). The fact that popular diets are often short-term solutions and their long-term effects are overlooked may lead adolescents to perceive these diets as sustainable.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study revealed that adolescents are interested in healthy eating, that intermittent fasting is the most widely known of popular diets, and that the media is the most effective source of information. Girls have a higher level of knowledge about popular diets than boys. However, adolescents were found to be uncertain and/or misinformed about the effectiveness, scientific basis, and sustainability of these diets.

In light of these findings, the following recommendations can be made: School-based nutrition education programs should be expanded to ensure adolescents have access to accurate nutrition information. Regulations should be implemented to monitor and verify the accuracy of nutrition content in the media, especially on social media platforms. Media literacy training for adolescents should be developed to enhance their critical thinking skills and protect them from misinformation. Families, teachers, and health professionals (dietitians, doctors) should work collaboratively to play an active role in helping adolescents develop sustainable, adequate, and balanced eating habits. Adolescence is a critical period in which enduring eating habits are established. Misinformation and practices acquired during this period can lead to significant health problems later in life. Therefore, it is crucial that adolescents receive accurate information about healthy eating from reliable sources.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted with only 100 volunteer high school students, resulting in a limited sample size. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the entire adolescent population. Data were collected from only one secondary school. The exclusion of schools with diverse socioeconomic and cultural characteristics limits the diversity of the results. Because the study employed a cross-sectional design, associations between knowledge level, attitudes, and emotional state could be identified, but a causal relationship could not be established. Emotional states were assessed only through a limited survey. The lack of clinical assessment, psychological scales, or longitudinal observations diminished the depth of the emotional state findings. The survey form used was developed by the researchers. The measurement tool may have limited content validity and may not fully reflect students' actual knowledge of popular diets. The results suggest that media is an important source of information; however, because media types (social media, television, websites, etc.) were not categorized in detail, it was not possible to determine which media tools were more effective.

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Ethical Approval: The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, and ethical approval was received from the Istanbul Kültür University Non-Interventional Research Ethics Committee with decision number 2024/08 dated January 11, 2024. Participation in the study was voluntary. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and parental consent was obtained for participants under the age of 18.

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