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Evaluation of Eating Attitudes and Body Composition of University Students

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This study is summarized from Beyza Nur Karkaş's master's thesis" (Konya: Selçuk University Institute of Health Sciences, Department of Coaching Education; 2025).

Ethical Statement: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate the eating attitudes of university students according to their body composition and some demographic variables. The sample of the study consisted of a total of 364 university students, 181 women and 183 men, studying at the Faculty of Sports Sciences of Selçuk University. For this study, approval was obtained from the Non-Interventional Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Selçuk University, and informed consent forms were obtained from the participants confirming their voluntary participation. The study was conducted based on a survey model. Personal information forms prepared by the researcher and Eating Attitudes Test-26 scale forms designed to determine individuals' eating attitudes were administered to the participants face-to-face outside of class hours, with the necessary explanations. In addition, the body composition components of the participants were determined using a Tanita BC 545 device. The data obtained from the research were analyzed using the SPSS 29.0 software package. Since the assumption of normal distribution was not met in the analysis of the data, non-parametric tests were used in the statistical evaluation of the data. For this purpose, the Mann Whitney U test was used for comparing quantitative data between two groups; The Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for more than two groups. Post hoc multiple comparisons were performed to identify the differing groups in the Kruskal-Wallis H test. The significance level was accepted as 0.05 in the study. The analysis revealed that, according to the cutoff values of the eating attitude scale, 90.6% of women had normal and 9.4% had abnormal eating attitudes, while 88.5% of men had normal and 11.5% had abnormal eating attitudes. Furthermore, while no significant difference was found in body composition according to gender and the cutoff values of the eating attitude scale, statistically significant results were obtained in the sub-dimensions of the eating attitude test according to age, exercise status, number of daily main and snack meals, daily water consumption, appearance perception, and healthy eating perception. In conclusion, it can be said that regular exercise and healthy eating habits acquired during childhood positively influence the eating attitudes and body composition of young adults, especially those in university.

Keywords: Eating Attitudes Test, Body Composition, University Students.

Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Yeme Tutumları ve Vücut Kompozisyonlarının Değerlendirilmesi

Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinin yeme tutumlarını vücut kompozisyonlarını ve bazı demografik değişkenlere göre değerlendirmektir. Araştırmanın örneklemini, Selçuk Üniversitesi Spor Bilimleri Fakültesinde okuyan 181 kadın ve 183 erkek olmak üzere toplamda 364 üniversite öğrencisi oluşturmuştur. Bu çalışma için Selçuk Üniversitesi Spor Bilimleri Fakültesi Girişimsel Olmayan etik kurul kararı ve katılımcılardan çalışmaya gönüllü katıldıklarına dair gönüllü onam formu alınmıştır. Çalışma, tarama (survey) modeli temel alınarak gerçekleştirilmiştir. Katılımcılara araştırmacı tarafından hazırlanan kişisel bilgi formu, bireylerin yeme tutumlarını belirlemeye yönelik Yeme Tutum Testi-26 ölçek formları gerekli açıklamalar yapılarak ders saatleri dışında yüz yüze görüşme yöntemi ile uygulanmıştır. Ayrıca katılımcıların vücut kompozisyon bileşenleri Tanita BC 545 cihazı ile belirlenmiştir. Araştırmadan elde edilen veriler SPSS 29.0 paket programı kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Verilerin analizinde normal dağılım varsayımı sağlanmadığı için, verilerin istatistik değerlendirmelerinde non-parametrik testler kullanılmıştır. Bunun için niceliksel verilerin karşılaştırılmasında iki grup için Mann Whitney U testi; ikiden fazla grup için Kruskal Wallis H testi kullanılmıştır. Kruskal Wallis H testi için farklı olan grubun tespitinde post hoc çoklu karşılaştırma yapılmıştır. Araştırmada anlamlılık düzeyi 0.05 olarak kabul edilmiştir. Yapılan analiz sonucunda; Çalışmamıza katılan bireylerin yeme tutum ölçeği kesme değerlerine göre kadınların %90,6'si normal % 9,4 anormal, erkeklerin %88,5'i normal %11.5 anormal yeme tutum düzeyine sahip oldukları belirlenmiştir. Ayrıca cinsiyet değişkenine ve yeme tutum ölçeğinin kesme değerlerine göre vücut kompozisyonlarında anlamlı bir fark bulunmazken, yeme tutum testi alt boyutlarında yaşa, egzersiz yapma durumuna, günlük ana ve ara öğün sayısına, günlük su tüketimi, görünüş algısı ve sağlıklı beslenme algısına göre istatistiki açıdan anlamlı sonuçlar elde edilmiştir. Sonuç olarak, çocukluk yıllarında kazanılan düzenli egzersiz ve sağlıklı beslenme alışkanlıklarının özellikle üniversite çağındaki genç yetişkin bireylerin yeme tutum davranışlarını ve vücut kompozisyonlarını olumlu yönde etkilediği söylenebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeme Tutum Testi, Vücut Kompozisyonu, Üniversite Öğrenciler

INTRODUCTION

Nutrition refers to the intake of nutrients necessary to support growth, development, and the maintenance of life, as well as to preserve and improve health status. Nutritional knowledge encompasses the energy content of fats, carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, and minerals, as well as phytochemical components, and plays a decisive role in individuals' food choices and dietary intake behaviors (2). In recent years, the conditions imposed by modern life and the long hours spent in work or educational environments have led to the development of unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders in many individuals. However, healthy nutrition is essential at every stage of the human life cycle. University years, which are considered the beginning of young adulthood and often overlap with late adolescence, represent a critical period marked by significant biological and psychological changes in individuals. With the transition to university education, separation from the family environment, increased exposure to external influences, and greater independence in making lifestyle-related decisions-including dietary choices-initiate a new phase in students' nutritional habits. During this period, the acquisition and maintenance of healthy eating habits are of great importance for sustaining lifelong health, supporting academic performance, and preventing the development of chronic diseases in later life (11).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health not merely as the absence of disease or disability, but as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, which reflects a healthy lifestyle for an individual. Accordingly, individuals' healthy lifestyle behaviors and dietary patterns are of great importance (23). One of the main reasons for increased body weight and higher body mass index (BMI) is the adoption of unhealthy dietary habits and inappropriate eating attitudes, along with a decline in physical activity levels (21). In addition, weight gain is associated not only with reduced physical activity but also with unhealthy eating attitudes characterized by increased consumption of energy-dense foods and unhealthy products (5). Previous studies have demonstrated that eating disorders affect individuals of all ages and backgrounds, and they emphasize the importance of physical activity in both the prevention and treatment of problems arising from unhealthy nutrition driven by disordered eating attitudes (13).

One of the most important factors underlying the significant global increase in eating disorders is the influence of emotions on eating behaviors, including dietary practices. Individuals are profoundly affected by

their emotions in various aspects of eating behavior, such as portion size, meal frequency, and food choices (3). Eating attitudes represent a comprehensive construct encompassing thoughts, emotions, behaviors, beliefs, and relationships related to food. The development of eating disorders is closely associated with maladaptive eating attitudes and behaviors, which are often linked to obesity and disordered eating patterns. Eating habits are formed early in life and begin to take shape during adolescence and young adulthood. (30). University students tend to exhibit a strong preference for highly processed, palatable foods rich in refined carbohydrates, sugar, and fat. High consumption of these foods has been positively associated with an increased risk of obesity. Insufficient nutritional knowledge is considered a key factor influencing eating behaviors and dietary habits among university students (18).

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle and developing awareness of healthy nutrition among individuals in society fundamentally depend on the adoption of appropriate eating behaviors. Accordingly, it is important for young individuals to protect their health, recognize their eating attitudes, and engage in conscious self evaluation of body image concerns and weight related issues. Such awareness is expected to contribute to the development of a healthier society in the future. In addition, raising awareness of unhealthy eating attitudes and behaviors among young adults particularly those who are actively involved in sports is of considerable importance. Within this context, the present study, which integrates the disciplines of nutrition, dietetics, and sport sciences, aims to examine the eating attitudes and body composition of male and female university students.

METHOD

Population and Sample

The population of the study consisted of students enrolled at the Faculty of Sport Sciences at Selçuk University. The sample comprised a total of 364 healthy and voluntary university students 181 females and 183 males who were studying in different departments of the Faculty of Sport Sciences during the 2024–2025 academic year and had taken the course on sports nutrition. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Non-Interventional Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Sport Sciences at Selçuk University, and all participants were asked to complete a written informed consent form indicating their voluntary participation. The study was limited to the responses provided voluntarily and sincerely by the participants, who read and understood the questions included in the data collection instruments.

Data Collection Instruments

The first part of the study consisted of a Personal Information Form developed by the researcher, while the second part included the Eating Attitudes Test-26 (EAT-26), originally developed by Garner et al. (8) and adapted into Turkish by Ergürey Okumuş and Sertel Berk (6) to assess individuals' eating attitudes. In addition, body composition components of all participants were measured using the Tanita BC-545 body composition analyzer.

Personal Information Form: The Personal Information Form was designed by the researcher to collect participants' personal data and included questions related to gender, age, department and academic year, place of residence, physical activity status, number of daily main meals and snacks, daily water consumption, dietary habits, and satisfaction with body appearance.

Assessment of Body Composition: Participants' body composition parameters including body weight, body mass index (BMI), body fat percentage, total body water, muscle mass, and basal metabolic rate were measured using the Tanita BC-545 device. In addition, waist and hip circumferences were measured using a measuring tape, and waist-to-hip ratio values were calculated.

Eating Attitudes Test-26 (EAT-26): The Eating Attitudes Test-26 (EAT-26), developed by Garner et al (8) and validated and adapted into Turkish by Ergürey Okumuş and Sertel Berk (6), consists of 26 items and includes three subscales: eating preoccupation, dieting (restriction), and social pressure. The eating preoccupation subscale reflects individuals' cognitive and emotional attitudes toward eating and body image, indicating excessive mental engagement with thoughts and emotions related to food and body shape. Items in this subscale address desires for thinness, fear of weight gain, the importance attributed to eating, and feelings and thoughts related to eating, body image, and exercise. The dieting subscale includes items related to attitudes

toward dieting, restricting food intake, and avoiding specific types of food. The social pressure subscale comprises items reflecting difficulty eating in the presence of others and sensitivity to others' opinions regarding eating and body image. Responses are scored as follows: "Always" = 3, "Very often" = 2, "Often" = 1, and "Sometimes," "Rarely," or "Never" = 0. Item 26 is reverse scored, with "Sometimes" = 1, "Rarely" = 2, and "Never" = 3, while the remaining response options receive 0 points. Total scores of 20 or above indicate disturbed eating attitudes (Appendix B: Eating Attitudes Test).

Data Collection Procedure

This study was conducted using a survey research design to evaluate eating attitudes and body composition among students of the Faculty of Sport Sciences at Selçuk University. Data were collected by the researcher through face-to-face interviews conducted in classroom settings during participants' free time outside scheduled class hours in the spring semester of the 2024–2025 academic year. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures for completing the questionnaires. Completion of the forms took approximately 5–7 minutes. Body composition measurements were performed using the Tanita BC-545 device, with participants wearing light clothing.

Statistical Analysis

The data obtained from the study were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for Windows version 29.0. Descriptive statistical methods including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, median, minimum, and maximum were used to summarize the data. Normality of data distribution was examined using Q-Q plots, and skewness and kurtosis values within ±3 were considered indicative of normal distribution. As the data did not meet the assumptions of normality, non-parametric statistical tests were applied. The Mann–Whitney U test was used for comparisons between two groups, while the Kruskal Wallis H test was employed for comparisons involving more than two groups. Post hoc multiple comparison analyses were conducted to identify statistically significant group differences following the Kruskal Wallis H test.

FINDINGS

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	181	49.7
	Male	183	50.3
Age	18–20 years	169	46.4
	≥21 years	195	53.6
Department	Recreation	141	38.7
	Physical Education Teaching	33	9.1
	Coaching Education	161	44.2
	Sports Management	29	8.0
Year of Study	1st year	34	9.3
	2nd year	125	34.3
	3rd year	103	28.3
	4th year	102	28.0
Place of Residence	Student housing	48	13.2
	Living with family	162	44.5
	Dormitory	154	42.3
Regular Exercise (≥3 days/week)	Yes	236	64.8
	No	128	35.2
Number of Daily Main Meals	1	43	11.8
	2	185	50.8

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Variable	Category	n	%
	3	116	31.9
	≥4	20	5.5
Number of Daily Snacks	No snacks	59	16.2
	1	163	44.8
	2	113	31.0
	3	29	8.0
Daily Water Intake	<2 liters	204	56.0
	≥2 liters	160	44.0
Perceived Healthy Eating	I think I eat healthily	146	40.1
	I do not think I eat healthily	218	59.9
Body Appearance Satisfaction	Satisfied	264	72.5
	Not satisfied	100	27.5
Total		**364**	**100**

The demographic characteristics of the participants included in the study are presented in Table1.

Table 2. Evaluation of Participants' Body Composition by Gender

Variable	Gender	Mean (X̄)	SD	t	p
BMI (kg/m²)	Female	21.20	2.68	-7.049	<0.01**
	Male	23.34	3.10		
Body Fat Percentage (%)	Female	23.11	7.09	12.871	<0.01**
	Male	13.88	6.58		
Total Body Water (%)	Female	56.87	5.07	-10.221	<0.01**
	Male	62.42	5.28		
Muscle Mass (kg)	Female	41.90	5.02	-28.087	<0.01**
	Male	59.54	6.83		
Basal Metabolic Rate (kcal/day)	Female	1375.66	148.91	-24.706	<0.01**
	Male	1854.53	215.24		
Waist-to-Hip Ratio	Female	0.71	0.053	-16.344	<0.01**
	Male	0.80	0.049		

**p<0.01, BMI: Body Mass Index, BFP: Body Fat Percentage, BMR: Basal Metabolic Rate.

According to Table 2, statistically significant differences were observed between female and male participants in all body composition parameters. With respect to gender, BMI (t = −7.049), total body water (t = −10.221), muscle mass (t = −28.087), basal metabolic rate (t = −24.706), and waist-to-hip ratio (t = −16.344) were significantly higher in male participants, whereas body fat percentage (t = 12.871) was significantly higher in female participants (p<0.01).

Table 3. Comparison of Eating Attitudes Subscale Scores According to Demographic and Lifestyle Variables

Variable	Category	Eating Preoccupation (Mean Rank)	Restriction (Mean Rank)	Social Pressure (Mean Rank)
Gender	Female	174.13	175.70	188.43
	Male	190.78	189.23	176.63
	Z / p	-1.519 / 0.12	-1.247 / 0.21	-1.122 / 0.26
Age	18–20 years	170.26	180.87	177.50
	≥21 years	193.11	183.91	186.83
	Z / p	-2.081 / 0.03*	-0.279 / 0.78	-0.885 / 0.37
Place of Residence	Student housing	195.63	204.06	182.57
	Living with family	176.41	181.15	183.04
	Dormitory	184.81	177.20	181.91
	χ^2 / p	1.382 / 0.50	2.514 / 0.28	0.010 / 0.99
Regular Exercise	Yes	197.14	201.47	186.28
	No	155.50	147.53	175.52
	Z / p	-3.630 / 0.00**	-4.747 / 0.00**	-0.997 / 0.32
Number of Daily Main Meals	1	168.19	187.81	191.40
	2	173.94	183.31	185.18
	3	197.81	167.37	170.04
	≥4	203.65	251.38	210.85
	χ^2 / p	5.359 / 0.14	11.459 / 0.00**	3.856 / 0.27
Number of Daily Snacks	1	140.86	149.32	142.32
	2	163.24	159.30	162.08
	3	181.31	149.12	177.62
	χ^2 / p	7.693 / 0.02*	0.945 / 0.62	6.440 / 0.04*
Daily Water Intake	<2 liters	166.62	160.01	187.40
	≥2 liters	202.75	211.18	176.26
	Z / p	-3.274 / 0.00**	-4.681 / 0.00**	-1.051 / 0.29
Perceived Healthy Eating	Yes	200.13	219.32	187.42
	No	170.69	157.84	179.20
	Z / p	-2.633 / 0.00**	-5.554 / 0.00**	-0.776 / 0.44
Body Appearance Satisfaction	Satisfied	183.35	192.97	181.98
	Not satisfied	180.26	154.86	183.88
	Z / p	-0.252 / 0.80	-3.135 / 0.00**	-0.161 / 0.87

*p<0.05,**p<0.01.

According to Table 3, the subscales of the Eating Attitudes Test were evaluated across various demographic and lifestyle variables. The findings indicated that eating preoccupation increased with age. In addition, students who engaged in regular physical activity, paid attention to the number of daily main meals and snacks, monitored their water intake, and adopted healthy eating behaviors exhibited significantly higher scores on the eating attitudes subscales ($p<0.05$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, which evaluated university students' eating attitudes and body composition according to selected variables, statistically significant results were observed among all participants (female and male) in the eating preoccupation subscale of the EAT-26 with respect to age, regular exercise participation, number of

snacks, daily water intake, and perceived healthy eating. For the restriction subscale, group differences were detected by regular exercise, number of main meals, daily water intake, body appearance satisfaction, and perceived healthy eating, with higher mean ranks generally observed among participants reporting regular exercise, higher water intake, and healthier eating perceptions. In contrast, within the social pressure subscale, a statistically significant difference was found only for the number of snacks consumed.

Body composition refers to the proportion of fat mass and fat-free mass (bone and muscle) within body weight and is commonly used as a fundamental indicator in the assessment of health status, exercise capacity, physical fitness, and dietary habits (1). Nutritional behaviors have substantial effects on body composition, overall health, and athletic performance. The university period, which represents the transition from adolescence to adulthood, is characterized by eating disturbances with both physiological and psychological dimensions (9). Body composition in young adults is influenced by gender; males generally exhibit higher muscle mass, waist-to-hip ratio, and visceral fat levels, whereas females tend to have higher body fat mass and percentage (17).

Consistent with this evidence, the present study demonstrated significant gender-based differences in body composition parameters. BMI, total body water, muscle mass, basal metabolic rate, and waist-to-hip ratio were significantly higher in male participants, whereas body fat percentage was significantly higher in female participants. “These gender-related patterns (higher muscle mass and total body water in males and higher body fat percentage in females) are broadly consistent with previous reports in young adult populations (12).

The results of the present study further revealed no statistically significant gender differences in eating attitudes. Although some studies have reported that females may be more sensitive than males regarding eating behaviors and body image concerns (24-28), the current findings are consistent with other research reporting no gender-based differences. In this context, Jacob and Panvar (14) emphasized that eating awareness and dietary attitudes among young adults are more closely associated with age and lifestyle factors than with gender.

With respect to age groups, individuals aged 21 years and older exhibited higher levels of eating preoccupation. This finding suggests that awareness of nutrition and health-related behaviors may change as individuals age. Similarly, Timlin et al. (25) reported that adolescents who regularly consumed breakfast were more likely to develop healthier dietary habits in later life. Additionally, Gutierrez-Colina et al. (10) demonstrated that dietary restriction in young individuals may be associated with eating pathologies in subsequent periods. This pattern may reflect that eating-related concerns are linked not only to physiological characteristics but also to psychosocial factors that differ across age group.

Compared with individuals who did not skip meals, those who skipped meals exhibited higher levels of eating preoccupation and perceived restriction. Pendergast et al. (20) reported that meal-skipping behavior among young adults may increase irregular eating patterns and cognitive pressure related to eating over time. Similarly, Keski-Rahkonen et al. (15) found that restrictive eating behaviors were more prevalent among individuals with irregular meal patterns. In this respect, the present findings are largely consistent with trends reported in the literature.

The study also indicated that increases in water consumption and the number of main/snack meals were associated with higher levels of eating-related pressure. One possible interpretation is that individuals with more frequent eating patterns may report greater cognitive engagement or concern related to eating; nevertheless, longitudinal designs are needed to clarify directionality. Zhu and Hollis (31) reported that increased meal frequency may lead to higher energy intake and create a sense of control-related pressure. Likewise, Salari-Moghaddam et al. (22) demonstrated potential associations between water consumption, fluid intake during meals, and obesity. Furthermore, restrictive eating models developed by Van Strien et al. (26-27) support the notion that frequent eating may be linked to increased dietary restraint in certain individuals.

Previous research has predominantly focused on eating behaviors in relation to self-esteem, social approval, aesthetic concerns, body dissatisfaction, and the desire for thinness (4-16)In studies examining the relationship between eating behaviors and body composition, BMI has typically been the primary indicator assessed. In this regard, the present study differs from much of the existing literature by incorporating multiple body composition parameters. In conclusion, while gender differences appear to have a limited influence on eating

attitudes, factors such as age, meal regularity, and fluid intake seem to exert notable effects on eating preoccupation and perceived dietary restraint.

When compared with existing literature, the findings of the present study largely align with previous research; however, further empirical studies are needed to clarify the effects of meal frequency and water consumption on eating-related pressure (7-19-29). Future studies are therefore recommended to examine eating behaviors within a more comprehensive framework that accounts for age groups and lifestyle-related factors.

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