



Original Research Report

A Cross-Sectional Survey of Eating Self-Efficacy in Nigerian University Students

Vera Victor-Aigbodion^{1*} 

¹Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa

***Correspondence:** Vera Victor-Aigbodion, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa (Email: verav@uj.ac.za).

Abstract: A student's self-efficacy—defined as their belief in their capacity to succeed in particular circumstances—is a critical factor in their food decisions. Also a university's overall environment, including the presence of fast-food outlets and the nature of food marketing on campus, can shape undergraduate students' eating habits and self-efficacy. The primary purpose of this cross-sectional correlational study was to investigate eating self-efficacy in Nigerian public university students. A sample of 400 undergraduate students were surveyed at a Nigerian public university using validated instruments to assess their level of eating self-efficacy and identify the relationships between their eating self-efficacy and eating habits. The Eating Self-Efficacy Brief Scale (ESEBS)–8 items was used to assess students' level of difficulty in resisting the desire to eat. The researcher utilized the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT)–16 items to evaluate the students' eating habits. Statistical analysis was conducted at a significance level of $p < .05$. The results revealed that mean eating self-efficacy score (ESEBS-8) of 2.21 (SD=0.68). Regression analysis showed that gender, school environment, peer factor, and parental factor significantly predicted eating self-efficacy, $F(4,398)=9.17$, $p < .001$. Eating self-efficacy (ESEBS-8) was strongly positively correlated with eating habits (EAT-16), $r=.861$, $p < .001$. Regression analysis showed that ESEBS-8 significantly predicted EAT-16 scores, $B=1.399$, $\beta=.861$, $t=33.68$, $p < .001$. The findings highlight significant correlations between various factors and eating self-efficacy through the lenses of gender, school environment, peer influence, and parental factors, as well as the relationship between eating self-efficacy and eating habits.

Keywords: Cross-sectional Study, Eating Self-Efficacy, Nigeria, University Students

1. Introduction

Eating self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to make wise food choices, follow dietary recommendations, and resist eating in various physical, psychological, and social situations (Ames et al., 2012; Lombardo et al., 2021). Exploring eating self-efficacy among university students is essential, as this particular group frequently undergoes substantial lifestyle modifications that can influence their dietary patterns (Kukoyi & Amosu, 2020a). Nigerian university students encounter a range of obstacles that can impact their dietary patterns, such as academic stress, financial limitations, and social factors (Arulogun & Owolabi, 2011; Olaitan, 2015). Generally, there is a high food insecurity and economic barrier among Nigerian university students (Ukegbu et al., 2019), which can result in unhealthy eating habits and a decrease in confidence when making dietary decisions. In Nigeria, where dietary habits are shifting toward more fast food consumption (Bakare & Olumakaiye, 2016; Eze et al., 2017; Oladimeji et al., 2017), understanding students' self-efficacy in making healthy food choices is quite critical.

Self-efficacy in making healthy food choices can be significantly influenced by the level of one's understanding of nutritional information, according to Xazela, Chinyamurindi and Shava (2021). Students who possess greater eating self-efficacy are more inclined to adopt healthy eating habits, whereas those with lower self-efficacy may opt for fast food and unhealthy snacks as a result of convenience (Kukoyi & Amosu, 2020b). Uwameiye and Uwameiye (2019) also found a significant link between school environment, personal and peer factors and eating behavior among public university students. Thiruselvakumar et al. (2014) argued that attitudes, beliefs, and self-efficacy are all important psychological factors that determine students' eating behavior. According to Agwu (2014), unhealthy eating habits and other behaviors that compromise Nigerian university students' health may be linked to socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, university's overall environment, including the presence of fast-food outlets and the nature of food marketing on campus, can shape undergraduate students' eating habits and self-efficacy. Therefore, the current research project aims to investigate the eating self-efficacy of undergraduate students at a Nigerian public university.

1.1. Statement of Problem

Nigerian university students are going through a crucial period of life that is marked by an enormous shift in lifestyle and a rise in independence. This shift frequently results in the adoption of unhealthy eating habits, which can have a negative impact on the student's academic performance, mental and physical health, and overall well-being. Studies concerning eating habits among students are expanding (Umoke et al., 2020), but studies particularly addressing eating self-efficacy in Nigerian university students are limited. Unhealthy eating practices are associated with a number of health problems, such as obesity and other chronic illnesses, which are common among Nigerian university student population (Kayode & Alabi, 2020; Ukegbu et al., 2017). Against these concerns, this research examines the level of eating self-efficacy among university students in Nigeria and the factors that influence their eating self-efficacy.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate eating self-efficacy in Nigerian university students. Specifically, this study seeks to achieve the following:

- (a) To assess the level of eating self-efficacy among Nigerian university students.
- (b) To identify the factors influencing eating self-efficacy among Nigerian university students.
- (c) To explore the relationship between eating self-efficacy and eating habits among Nigerian university students.

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- (a) What is the level of eating self-efficacy among Nigerian university students?
- (b) What are the factors influencing eating self-efficacy among Nigerian university students?
- (c) What is the relationship between eating self-efficacy and eating habits among Nigerian university students?

1.4. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework concerning eating self-efficacy among Nigerian university students can combine various psychological and sociocultural propositions to explain this construct. The framework can address a number of factors that can influence students' eating self-efficacy, which are deducible from theories such as social cognitive theory, health belief model, and theory of planned behavior.

1.4.1. Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory elucidates the significance of observational learning, imitation, and modeling in behavior change (Bandura, 1986). It asserts that self-efficacy, or confidence in one's ability to perform specific behaviors, is critical for initiating and maintaining healthy dietary behavior (Torkan et al., 2018). In the case of Nigerian university students, peer influence, role models (e.g., family), and social norms can all have a significant impact on their eating habits and self-efficacy regarding healthy eating.

1.4.2. Health Belief Model

The Health Belief Model emphasizes the significance of individuals' perceptions of health risks and benefits (Becker, 1974; Deshpande Basil, & Basil, 2009). Understanding the health consequences of poor dietary choices, such as the risks associated with fast food consumption, can help Nigerian university students improve their self-efficacy. Moreover, psychoeducational interventions developed with the principles of the Health Belief Model to raise awareness about nutritional health outcomes may enable these students to make healthier eating choices (Eseadi & Victor-Aigbodion, 2022).

1.4.3. Theory of Planned Behavior

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, attitudes toward behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control all have an impact on behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1991). For university students, attitudes toward healthy eating, and the perceived availability of healthy food options on campus may all influence their intentions and self-efficacy in making healthier dietary decisions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design for the Study

This study was a cross-sectional correlational survey carried out among undergraduate students at a public university located in Southeast Nigeria. The use of a cross-sectional correlation survey design allows for the assessment of eating self-efficacy at a single point in time, which makes it easier to identify relationships between eating self-efficacy and dietary habits. The study is anchored on the positivist research paradigm as it relied on quantifiable data to draw conclusions (Rahi, 2017) about eating self-efficacy and its influencing factors.

2.1.1. Ethics Statement

This research project obtained ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria. Prior to completing the survey, the students were asked to give informed consent.

2.2. Area of the Study

The area of study was Enugu State, Nigeria. Enugu State covers an area of about 7,161 square kilometers and is bordered by Kogi and Benue states to the north, Ebonyi to the east, Abia to the south, and Anambra to the west. Based on the 2006 census data, the Igbo ethnic group constitutes the majority of the population of Enugu State. Enugu city, the capital of the state, serves as a hub for cultural endeavors. Enugu State is home to several tertiary institutions, including the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Enugu State University of Science and Technology. Agriculture plays a pivotal role in the economy of Enugu State.

2.3. Population and Sample

The target population consists of all undergraduate students aged 18 to 30 at a public university Enugu State, Nigeria. Students were selected using a method called stratified random sampling, which ensured that students from different faculties and years of study were included. The chosen sample size was 400 undergraduate students. The sample was representative of students from various backgrounds and academic fields.

2.4. Instrument for Data Collection and Study Procedure

Data was gathered through the utilization of a questionnaire that encompassed variables such as age, gender, year of study, course of study, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The Eating Self-Efficacy Brief Scale (ESEBS)–8 items (Lombardo et al., 2019) was used to assess students' level of difficulty in resisting the desire to eat in two distinct scenarios using a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not easy at all) to 5 (completely easy). The researcher utilized the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT)–16 items (Ocker et al., 2007) whose psychometric property was found to be of acceptable fit to evaluate the students' eating habits. The EAT utilizes a 6-point Likert scale that spans from 1 (Never) to 6 (Always). In this study, the ESEBS-8 had a reliability score of .614 Cronbach's alpha whereas the EAT-16 yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .956.

2.5. Data Collection Technique

The researcher administered and collected the questionnaire from students in person over a period of six weeks. The students were met at their lecture theatres prior to the start of their lectures, as well

as at the school canteens.

2.6. Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using the SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were employed to elucidate the demographic characteristics of the students, whereas inferential statistics which included regression analysis, were utilized to evaluate the association between eating self-efficacy and eating habits of the students. The researcher provided statistical measures of means and standard deviations to describe the self-efficacy and eating habit scores. The researcher examined the relationships between self-efficacy and eating habits by calculating correlations.

2. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Students' sociodemographic characteristics and ESEBS-8 and EAT-16 scores

Characteristics	Levels	n(%)	$P(x^2)$	ESEBS-8 M(SD)	$P(F)$	Eta	EAT-16 M(SD)	$P(F)$	Eta
Gender	Male	159(39.8)	<.001	2.33(.65)	.005	.141	2.82(1.08)	.009	.131
	Female	241(60.2)		2.13(.69)			2.52(1.10)		
School Environment	I have high access to the school canteens	230(57.5)	.003	2.30(.70)	<.001	.167	2.72(1.12)	.003	.148
	I have low access to the school canteens	170(42.5)		2.08(.62)			2.45(1.06)		
Peer Factor	Peers cannot determine my eating habits	179(44.8)	.036	2.09(.67)	.001	.164	2.40(1.07)	<.001	.193
	Peers sometimes determine my eating habits	221(55.2)		2.31(.67)			2.83(1.09)		
Parental Factor	Parents sometimes determine my eating habits	181(45.2)	.057	2.32(.67)	.002	.152	2.80(1.09)	.005	.139
	Parents cannot determine my eating habits	219(54.8)		2.12(.67)			2.50(1.09)		

Table 1 showed that female students had significantly lower eating self-efficacy (ESEBS-8) scores compared to male students ($p=.005$, $\eta=.141$). Unexpectedly, female students also had significantly lower eating habits (EAT-16) scores compared to male students ($p=.009$, $\eta=.131$). This indicates a moderate to large effect, suggesting that gender plays a crucial role in eating self-efficacy. Students with high access to school canteens had significantly higher ESEBS-8 ($p<.001$, $\eta=.167$) and EAT-16 ($p=.003$, $\eta=.148$) scores compared to those with low access. This suggests that the availability of healthy food options in school settings may enhance students' confidence in their eating choices and promote better eating habits. Students whose peers sometimes determined their eating habits had significantly higher ESEBS-8 ($p=.001$, $\eta=.164$) and EAT-16 ($p<.001$, $\eta=.193$) scores compared to those whose peers could not determine their eating habits. Students whose parents sometimes determined their eating habits had significantly higher ESEBS-8 ($p=.002$, $\eta=.152$) and EAT-16 ($p=.005$, $\eta=.139$) scores compared to those whose parents could not determine their eating habits. The mean eating self-efficacy score (ESEBS-8) was 2.21 ($SD=0.68$). These findings highlight the intricate relationship between gender, social influences, and access to resources in influencing eating behaviors and self-efficacy among students. Further investigation is warranted to delve deeper into these dynamics and devise efficacious interventions targeting diverse demographics to enhance students' eating habits. Previous findings showed that university students who occasionally placed a higher importance on nutrition exhibited elevated levels of eating self-efficacy in comparison to those who did not emphasize healthy eating (Yilmaz, 2014). In a previous study, students with better nutrition knowledge exhibited higher self-efficacy regarding healthy eating, which underscores the importance of educational interventions supported by parental guidance to improve eating habits among students (Ajlouni, Wahba & Almahaireh, 2023).

Table 2: Correlations of demographic factors with ESEBS-8 and EAT-16 among students

		ESEBS-8	EAT-16
Gender	<i>Pearson r</i>	-.141**	-.131**
School environment	<i>Pearson r</i>	-.167**	-.148**
Peer Factor	<i>Pearson r</i>	.164**	.193**
Parental Factor	<i>Pearson r</i>	-.152**	-.139**
ESEBS-8	<i>Pearson r</i>	—	.861**

**Correlation is significant

In Table 2, gender was negatively correlated with ESEBS-8 ($r=-.141$, $p=.005$) and EAT-16 ($r=-.131$, $p=.009$), indicating that females had lower scores. School environment was negatively correlated with ESEBS-8 ($r=-.167$, $p=.001$) and EAT-16 ($r=-.148$, $p=.003$), suggesting that low access to school canteens was associated with lower scores. Peer factor was positively correlated with ESEBS-8 ($r=.164$, $p=.001$) and EAT-16 ($r=.193$, $p<.001$), indicating that having peers who determined eating habits was associated with higher scores. Parental factor was negatively correlated with ESEBS-8 ($r=-.152$, $p=.002$) and EAT-16 ($r=-.139$, $p=.005$), suggesting that having parents who determined eating habits was associated with lower scores. ESEBS-8 was strongly positively correlated with EAT-16 ($r=.861$, $p<.001$), indicating that higher eating self-efficacy was associated with healthier eating habits.

The negative correlation between gender and both the ESEBS-8 and EAT-16 suggests that females may exhibit less confidence in their eating habits and potentially more disordered eating attitudes. This finding is in line with studies which have shown that gender differences often manifest in eating habits, with females typically displaying more restrained eating patterns and a higher prevalence of eating disorders compared to males (Khor, Cobiac & Skrzypiec, 2002). Conversely, a study of adolescent females in Kuwait showed that they exhibited a significant degree of self-efficacy regarding healthy eating and behaviors and held strong nutritional convictions. Nevertheless, they were unable to effectively put their beliefs into practice and adopt good nutritional habits (Al-Ghanim, L., & Alkazemi, 2021). The school environment's negative correlation with ESEBS-8 and EAT-16 suggests a supportive school environment, which includes access to healthy food options, may enhance students' eating self-efficacy and promote healthier eating attitudes. Looking at previous research, it can be inferred that school settings play a crucial role in shaping students' eating habits, with access to nutritious food being a key factor in fostering positive eating habits (Köse & Çıplak, 2019). The positive correlation between peer factors and both ESEBS-8 and EAT-16 suggests that supportive peer relationships can enhance eating self-efficacy and promote healthier eating behaviors. The influence of peers is significant during adolescence, where social dynamics often dictate dietary choices and attitudes towards food. As demonstrated in previous research, peer support can lead to improved dietary habits among students (Risti, Pamungkasari, & Suminah, 2021). The negative correlation between parental factors and both ESEBS-8 and EAT-16 suggests that parental control over food choices may undermine children's confidence in their ability to make healthy eating decisions. Previous study highlights that parental modeling—where parents demonstrate healthy eating behaviors—along with involving adolescents in food-related decision-making, fosters better eating habits; this involvement not only encourages healthier choices but also enhances the adolescents' eating self-efficacy (Fu, et al., 2021). The strong positive correlation between ESEBS-8 and EAT-16 underscores the importance of fostering self-efficacy in eating behaviors, as it can lead to improved dietary choices and overall health. Studies have shown that individuals with higher self-efficacy regarding their eating habits are more likely to engage in healthier eating behaviors and maintain a balanced diet (Boyle & LaRose, 2008; Kim, 2013).

Table 3: Regression analysis of participants' variables predicting ESEBS-8 scores of the students

Model	B	SE(B)	β	t	p
1 (Constant)	2.74	.205		13.353	.000
Gender	-.188	.067	-.136	-2.815	.005
School environment	-.198	.067	-.145	-2.973	.003
Peer Factor	.197	.066	.144	2.987	.003
Parental Factor	-.162	.066	-.119	-2.438	.015

Table 3 showed that gender ($\beta=-.136$, $p=.005$), school environment ($\beta=-.145$, $p=.003$), peer factor ($\beta=.144$, $p=.003$), and parental factor ($\beta=-.119$, $p=.015$) were significant predictors of eating self-efficacy (ESEBS-8) scores. Together, these variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in ESEBS-8 scores, $F(4,398)=9.17$, $p<.001$. Despite these findings, I would like to submit that in the

literature, not all studies revealed consistent results concerning the predictors of eating self-efficacy. It is possible that variability in methodologies, sample populations, and cultural contexts can lead to different conclusions, suggesting that while these factors are influential, their effects may not be universally applicable. For instance, it seems that the influence of gender extends to actual eating habits as well. Most studies suggest that women generally tend to consume more fruits and vegetables and are more likely to adhere to dietary guidelines than men (Robles et al., 2014). Conversely, men could often be associated with less healthy eating patterns, which can be attributed to lower self-efficacy in making healthy food choices (Khor, Cobiac & Skrzypiec, 2002). Another study indicated that the difference in healthy eating index scores between genders was more pronounced among those with low self-efficacy (Razaz et al., 2022), suggesting that interventions aimed at increasing self-efficacy could help bridge this gap.

Table 4: Regression analysis of participants' variables predicting EAT-16 scores of the students

Model		B	SE(B)	β	t	p
1	(Constant)	3.248	.335		9.702	.000
	Gender	-.281	.109	-.125	-2.577	.010
	School environment	-.276	.109	-.124	-2.533	.012
	Peer Factor	.390	.107	.176	3.625	.000
	Parental Factor	-.238	.108	-.107	-2.202	.028

In Table 4, results showed that gender ($\beta=-.125$, $p=.010$), school environment ($\beta=-.124$, $p=.012$), peer factor ($\beta=.176$, $p<.001$), and parental factor ($\beta=-.107$, $p=.028$) were significant predictors of eating habits (EAT-16) scores. Together, these variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in EAT-16 scores, $F(4,398)=8.97$, $p<.001$. Gender plays a crucial role in shaping eating behaviors (Chen, Sun & Levin, 2022). The school environment is another significant predictor of eating habits. A supportive school setting can positively affect students' eating behaviors, while negative experiences, such as low peer acceptance, can lead to unhealthy eating practices. Specifically, students in environments with low peer support may be more likely to engage in disordered eating behaviors, as they are more affected by social dynamics within the context (Chen, Sun & Levin, 2022). Based on the results, it is possible that the presence of supportive friends can mitigate unhealthy eating habits, while peer pressure to conform to certain body standards can exacerbate disordered eating. It is also possible that parents who are more involved and supportive regarding their children's dietary choices can foster healthier eating habits, while those who impose strict dietary controls may inadvertently contribute to disordered eating.

Table 5: Regression analysis predicting the relationship between eating self-efficacy and eating habits of the students

Model		B	SE(B)	β	t	p
1	(Constant)	-.452	.096		-4.704	.000
	ESEBS-16	1.399	.042	.861	33.676	.000

The results in Table 5 showed that eating self-efficacy (ESEBS-8) was a significant predictor of eating habits (EAT-16) scores ($\beta=.861$, $p<.001$). In previous studies, it was shown that students who possessed a higher sense of self-efficacy exhibited healthier habits, such as maintaining a balanced diet (Gacek, Kosiba, & Wojtowicz, 2023; Kim & Yun, 2017). Self-efficacy was a substantial predictor of health promotion behaviors in nursing students, as demonstrated by Kim and Yun (2017). Thus, it is necessary to establish initiatives that promote peer-led discussions and support groups centered on fostering healthy eating habits among undergraduate students. Universities can cultivate a culture of health and wellness by utilizing the beneficial impact of peers. Social media platforms have the potential to facilitate the promotion of positive eating behaviors among students. Utilizing peer testimonials and success stories in campaigns can serve as a powerful motivator for individuals to embrace healthier eating habits. It is necessary to develop programs that educate parents about the significance of endorsing their children's dietary preferences. Workshops that prioritize healthy meal preparation and emphasize the importance of positive reinforcement can effectively change parental attitudes towards healthier eating. It is important to promote transparent communication between students and their parents regarding food choices. This can aid in reducing adverse effects and promoting a nurturing domestic atmosphere conducive to nutritious eating. Further research should be conducted to investigate the enduring impact of self-efficacy in relation to dietary habits. Gaining insight into the progression of these factors over time can enhance the development of more efficient interventions. Future researchers must broaden research efforts to encompass a wide range of demographic groups within Nigerian universities in order to gain a clearer understanding of how sociodemographic factors impact individuals' confidence in their ability to make healthy eating choices and their actual eating behaviors.

4. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the level of eating self-efficacy, its influencing factors, and the relationship between eating self-efficacy and eating habits among Nigerian university students. Eating self-efficacy was lower in females and those with limited access to school canteens. Peers positively influenced self-efficacy, while parental influence was negative. Higher eating self-efficacy was strongly associated with healthier eating habits among Nigerian university students. Institutions should give priority to enhancing accessibility to school canteens, especially in regions where students currently encounter restrictions. This may entail augmenting the quantity of canteens, expanding the

range of food choices, and guaranteeing the accessibility of nutritious options. Furthermore, it is imperative to establish initiatives that provide students with knowledge on proper nutrition and the significance of self-confidence in making dietary decisions. Organizing workshops or seminars could be a viable approach to actively involve students and offer them practical guidance on adopting healthier eating habits.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

Author Contributions

All research activities pertaining to this article were carried out by the author.

Availability of Data Statement

The data from this research can be obtained upon reasonable request from the author.

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