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The Relationship Between Academic Stress And Eating Habits In Students of Generation Z

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ABSTRACT

Academic stress is a common challenge among Generation Z university students, who have distinctive characteristics related to digital lifestyles, psychological well-being, and health behaviors that may influence their eating habits. This study aimed to analyze the relationship between academic stress and eating habits among Generation Z university students. A quantitative study with a descriptive-analytic cross-sectional design was conducted online in Indonesia from March to April 2026. A total of 132 respondents were selected using quota sampling. Academic stress was measured using the Academic Stress Inventory (ASI), while eating habits were assessed using the Adolescent Food Habit Checklist (AFHC). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Fisher's Exact test. The results showed that all respondents experienced academic stress, with (81.06%) categorized as severe and (18.94%) as moderate. Most respondents had good eating habits (62.12%), although unhealthy behaviors, including frequent consumption of fried foods and difficulties in maintaining healthy eating habits, were still observed. Fisher's Exact test demonstrated a significant relationship between academic stress and eating habits among Generation Z university students ($p = 0.043$). These findings suggest that academic stress is associated with eating habits; however, the nature of this relationship may vary among individuals. The findings may support the development of campus health promotion programs, particularly those focusing on stress management, nutrition education, and healthy lifestyle interventions for university students. Further studies are recommended to include additional factors, such as emotional eating, sleep quality, physical activity, and socioeconomic conditions, as well as multivariate analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of eating habits.

Introduction

Generation Z university students are individuals born between 1997 and 2012 who have grown up in an era of rapid digital and technological advancement. The accessibility of information through the internet and social media has substantially influenced their lifestyle, communication patterns, learning behavior, eating habits, and psychological well-being (Haryana et al., 2023; Muhajirina et al., 2023). Compared with previous generations, Generation Z is more dependent on digital technology in daily life and is more likely to experience excessive gadget use, nomophobia, prolonged social media exposure, and self-diagnosis based on online information without consulting healthcare professionals

(Haryana et al., 2023; Gultom, 2023). These characteristics may increase their vulnerability to psychological problems and unhealthy lifestyle behaviors. Moreover, most university students aged 18–26 years are in the early adulthood stage, which is characterized by increasing independence, greater academic responsibilities, and preparation for future careers, making them more susceptible to psychological stress (Cahyono, 2019; Aulia et al., 2024). These characteristics distinguish Generation Z university students from previous generations and make them an important population for investigating the relationship between academic stress and health-related behaviors.

Although technological advancement facilitates access to educational resources, Generation Z university students continue to face substantial academic demands throughout their university education. Academic responsibilities, including examinations, numerous assignments, organizational activities, academic achievement expectations, and thesis completion, may become significant sources of academic stress (Barseli et al., 2017; Hatmanti et al., 2019). Previous studies have reported that first-year students commonly experience academic stress due to their adaptation to the university environment, whereas senior students experience greater stress associated with thesis completion and preparation for entering the workforce (Sagita et al., 2021). Furthermore, academic stress has been reported to be associated with eating behavior and nutritional status among university students (Khoiroh, 2022; Nuramalia et al., 2024). Consequently, academic stress has become an important public health concern because it may affect both students' psychological well-being and health-related behaviors.

The prevalence of academic stress among university students remains relatively high. A previous study in Indonesia reported that (43.5%) of final-year university students experienced academic stress, and more than half reported changes in eating behavior (Wijayanti et al., 2019). Another study found that approximately (62%) of university students experienced severe academic stress, indicating that academic stress occurs across different stages of higher education (Sagita et al., 2021). Similar findings have also been reported internationally. A cross-sectional study conducted among university students in Jordan demonstrated that academic stress was significantly associated with unhealthy eating behaviors, suggesting that this issue is not limited to a particular country but represents a global public health concern among university students (AL-Dalaeen et al., 2024). These findings highlight the importance of understanding factors associated with academic stress and eating habits, particularly among Generation Z university students.

Academic stress may influence eating habits through both physiological and psychological mechanisms. According to the physiological stress response, activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis increases cortisol secretion, which may alter appetite regulation by reducing leptin sensitivity and increasing ghrelin secretion. These hormonal changes may increase appetite and promote the consumption of foods high in sugar and fat, commonly referred to as emotional eating (Adam et al., 2017; Herman et al., 2021; Michels et al., 2023). From a psychological perspective, students often use food as a coping strategy to regulate negative emotions associated with academic demands. Consequently, academic stress may lead to either increased food consumption (emotional overeating) or decreased food intake (emotional undereating), depending on individual coping mechanisms and self-regulation abilities (Razzoli et al., 2017; Zulkarnain et al., 2023; Syarofi et al., 2020). A recent systematic review further concluded that stress is consistently associated with changes in eating behavior, although the direction and magnitude of these changes vary across individuals (Hill et al., 2022).

Changes in eating habits associated with academic stress may have important health consequences. Previous studies have shown that students experiencing academic stress tend to consume energy-dense foods that are high in fat and sugar while reducing the consumption of healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables (Nuramalia & Sumarmi, 2024; Putri et al, 2023). Such eating behaviors may contribute to nutritional imbalance and increase the risk of overweight, obesity, and other nutrition-related health problems (Multazami, 2022; Zain, 2023). Furthermore, poor dietary habits may negatively affect students' concentration, academic performance, and overall quality of life (Hatmanti & Septianingrum, 2019; Haryana et al., 2023). These findings emphasize the importance of maintaining healthy eating habits while managing academic stress among university students.

Nevertheless, most previous studies have focused on specific student populations, such as final-year students, students from particular study programs, or students from limited geographical areas (Wijayanti et al., 2019; Khoiroh, 2022; Nuramalia et al., 2024). Although several studies have examined academic stress and eating behavior separately, research investigating the relationship between academic stress and eating habits among Generation Z university students across different academic semesters and universities in Indonesia remains underexplored. Moreover, Generation Z has distinctive characteristics related to digital lifestyles, psychological well-being, and health behaviors that may influence the way academic stress is associated with eating habits (Haryana et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the relationship between academic stress and eating habits among Generation Z university students from public and private universities across Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that focused on specific student groups, this study included respondents from different academic semesters, study programs, and universities, thereby providing broader evidence regarding this relationship among Generation Z university students. The findings of this study are expected to support the development of campus health promotion programs by providing evidence for stress management initiatives, nutrition education, and healthy lifestyle interventions that may improve students' physical and psychological well-being.

Method

This study was a quantitative study with a descriptive-analytic approach and a cross-sectional design. This study was conducted online from March to April 2026 at several universities in Indonesia using Google Forms. The cross-sectional design was used to analyze the relationship between academic stress as the independent variable and eating habits as the dependent variable among Generation Z university students at one point in time.

The population of the study consisted of Generation Z university students who were actively enrolled at public and private universities in Indonesia and aged 18–26 years. The minimum sample size was calculated using the Lemeshow formula (1997) with a (95%) confidence level, a proportion of (58.3%), and a margin of error of (10%), resulting in a minimum required sample of 103 respondents. A total of 145 respondents were recruited. Thirteen respondents were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criteria or completed the questionnaire incompletely. Therefore, 132 respondents were included in the final analysis.

The sampling technique used was quota sampling. The inclusion criteria included active D4/S1 students, aged 18–26 years, and willing to participate as respondents through informed consent. The exclusion criteria included respondents with incomplete data, those who were married and formally employed, had eating disorders, were following a special diet, and had food allergies. This study

received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee of Universitas 'Aisyiyah Yogyakarta with approval number 5340/KEP-UNISA/III/2026.

Data collection was conducted online through a Google Form distributed via social media. The collected data included respondent characteristics, academic stress levels, and eating habits. Academic stress levels were measured using the Academic Stress Inventory (ASI) adapted from the version developed and modified by Nabilah (2024). No additional modifications were made to the instrument in the present study. The instrument consisted of 39 items rated on a 1–4 Likert scale. The ASI instrument had a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value of 0.896 and a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.90. Academic stress scores were categorized as mild (≤40%), moderate (41–59%), and severe (≥60%).

Eating habits were measured using the Adolescent Food Habit Checklist (AFHC) modified by Aura et al. (2025). No additional modifications were made to the instrument in the present study. The instrument consisted of 23 items assessing healthy and unhealthy eating habits with yes/no response options. The AFHC instrument had a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.83. The total score was converted into a percentage and categorized as good eating habits (≤48%) and poor eating habits (>48%).

The obtained data were processed through editing, coding, entry, and cleaning before analysis. Univariate analysis was used to describe the frequency distribution and percentage of each study variable. Bivariate analysis was conducted using Fisher's Exact test to determine the relationship between academic stress and eating habits. This test was selected because there were cells that did not meet the assumptions of the Chi-Square test. The level of significance used was p-value <0.05.

Results and Discussion

Respondent Characteristics

This study involved 132 Generation Z university students from various public and private universities in Indonesia, covering the areas of Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, Bali, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), and Papua. As presented in Table 1, the respondent characteristics included age, sex, educational level, semester, study program, university domicile, academic stress level, and eating habits.

The majority of respondents were aged 21–23 years (48.59%), female (63.38%), enrolled in bachelor's programs (72.54%), and in the eighth semester (40.91%). Most respondents were from health-related study programs (42.96%). The dominance of respondents within this age range indicates that most students are in the early adulthood phase, which is characterized by increasing academic demands, responsibilities, and preparation for entering the workforce. This condition may increase students' vulnerability to academic stress (Sagita et al., 2021).

Based on academic stress levels, the majority of respondents were in the severe stress category (81.06%) and moderate stress category (18.94%). Meanwhile, based on eating habits, most respondents had good eating habits (62.12%) and poor eating habits (37.88%). This condition indicates that although respondents experienced severe academic stress, some students were still able to maintain good eating habits. This might be influenced by good coping strategies in managing stress, thereby helping students maintain healthy behaviors, including eating habits (Immanuel et al., 2021).

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18 - 20	60	42.25%
21- 23	69	48.59%
24 - 26	3	2.11%
Sex		
Female	90	63.38%
Male	42	29.58%
Educational Level		
Bachelor's (S1)	103	72.54%
Applied Bachelor's Degree D4	29	20.42%
Academic Semester		
2	20	15.15%
4	39	29.55%
6	19	14.39%
8	54	40.91%
Study Program		
Health	61	42.96%
Art / Language	6	4.23%
Engineering	8	5.63%
Economics / Social Sciences and Humanities	45	31.69%
Food / Agriculture	7	4.93%
Religion	5	3.52%
University Domicile		
Sumatra Island	23	16.20%
Java Island	25	17.61%
Kalimantan Island	12	8.45%
Sulawesi Island	12	8.45%
Maluku Island	12	8.45%
Bali Island	12	8.45%
East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) Island	12	8.45%
West Nusa Tenggara (NTB) Island	12	8.45%
Papua Island	12	8.45%
Academic Stress Level		
Mild	0	0%
Moderate	25	18.94%
Severe	107	81.06%
Eating Habits		
Good	82	62.12%
Poor	50	37.88%

Source: Primary Data

Academic Stress Based on Academic Semester

The distribution of academic stress based on academic semester is presented in Table 2, showing that severe academic stress was most frequently observed among students in the eighth semester (40.91%). Overall, most respondents experienced severe academic stress (81.06%).

Table 2. Academic Stress Based on Academic Semester

Academic Stress	Semester								Total	
	2		4		6		8			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Severe	16	14.95	31	28.97	17	15.89	43	40.19	**107**	**100**
Moderate	4	16.00	8	32.00	2	8.00	11	44.00	**25**	**100**
Mild	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	**0**	**0**
Total	**20**	**15.15**	**39**	**29.55**	**19**	**14.39**	**54**	**40.91**	**132**	**100**

Source: Primary Data

The distribution of severe academic stress was most frequently found among students in semester 8 (40.19%) and semester 4 (28.97%). In the moderate stress category, the highest distribution of respondents was also found in semester 8 (44.00%) and semester 4 (32.00%).

The high level of academic stress among students was reflected in the dominance of agree and strongly agree responses to several statements in the Academic Stress Inventory (ASI). A total of (91%) of respondents stated that they were worried when their academic results did not meet their parents' expectations, (88%) stated that they had to spend a considerable amount of time searching for data and information for several courses, (82%) felt very worried when their academic results were not as good as those of their classmates, and (80%) were concerned about having to repeat compulsory courses if they experienced academic failure.

This condition is in line with previous studies showing that students face increasingly complex academic demands, especially in the final semesters, which are related to study completion and the achievement of academic targets (Sagita et al., 2021). In addition, other studies have reported that numerous assignments, pressure to achieve good academic performance, and the adaptation process to the university environment can also increase the level of academic stress among students (Barseli et al., 2017)

Eating Habits Based on Academic Semester

The distribution of eating habits based on academic semester is presented in Table 3. Good eating habits were most frequently observed among students in the eighth semester (42.68%) and fourth semester (24.39%), whereas poor eating habits were also most common among students in the eighth and fourth semesters (38.00% each).

The highest distribution of good eating habits was found among students in semester 8 (42.68%) and semester 4 (24.39%). Meanwhile, poor eating habits were also most frequently found among students in semesters 8 and 4, accounting for (38.00%) each. This condition is in line with previous studies showing that students' eating habits vary across semester levels and may be influenced by increasing academic demands and other activities that limit the time available to manage eating patterns (Syarofi et al., 2020).

Table 3. Eating Habits Based on Academic Semester

Eating Habits	Semester								Total	
	2		4		6		8			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Poor	7	14.00	19	38.00	5	10.00	19	38.00	**50**	**100**
Good	13	15.85	20	24.39	14	17.07	35	42.68	**82**	**100**
Total	**20**	**15.15**	**39**	**29.55**	**19**	**14.39**	**54**	**40.91**	**132**	**100**

Source: Primary Data

These findings can be observed from the dominant responses of students in the Adolescent Food Habit Checklist (AFHC) questionnaire. Among the respondents with good eating habits, (71.97%) stated that they consumed home-cooked meals more frequently than fast food. Meanwhile, in the poor eating habits category, (76.52%) stated that they did not choose grilled or boiled foods over fried foods, and (87.12%) stated that they frequently consumed fried foods. In addition, (82.58%) stated that they found it difficult to maintain healthy eating habits every day. These findings indicate that although most students reported good eating habits by consuming home-cooked meals more frequently than fast food, some respondents still exhibited unhealthy eating behaviors, including a preference for fried foods and difficulties maintaining healthy eating habits on a daily basis.

Relationship Between Academic Stress and Eating Habits

The relationship between academic stress and eating habits was analyzed using Fisher's Exact test (Table 4). The analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between academic stress and eating habits (p = 0.043).

Table 4. Relationship Between Academic Stress and Eating Habits

Academic Stress	Eating Habits				Total		*P-value*
	Poor		Good				
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Severe	36	33.64	71	66.36	**107**	**100**	
Moderate	14	56.00	11	44.00	**25**	**100**	0.043
Mild	0	0	0	0	**0**	**0**	
Total	**50**	**37.88**	**82**	**62.36**	**132**	**100**	

Source: Primary Data

The results of the analysis showed that there was a significant relationship between academic stress and eating habits among Generation Z university students, with a p-value of 0.043 (<0.05). Students with severe academic stress had good eating habits at (66.36%), whereas among those with moderate academic stress, poor eating habits were more frequently found (56.00%). These results are in line with a study that reported a relationship between academic stress and eating behavior among university students (Aulia et al., 2024).

According to the physiological mechanism underlying stress responses, academic stress can affect eating habits through the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which increases the secretion of the hormone cortisol. Increased cortisol levels can affect the hormones leptin and

ghrelin, which play a role in appetite regulation, where leptin functions to provide satiety signals and suppress appetite, while ghrelin stimulates hunger. Under stress conditions, increased cortisol levels may reduce leptin sensitivity and increase ghrelin secretion, thereby triggering an increase in appetite and a tendency to consume foods high in sugar and fat as a form of emotional eating (Adam & Epel, 2017 , Herman et al., 2021; Razzoli et al., 2017).

However, the results of this study revealed that most students with severe academic stress had good eating habits. This condition indicates that stress does not always have a negative impact on eating habits and may be influenced by good self-regulation abilities, adequate nutritional knowledge, and awareness to maintain health despite being under stress (Djie et al, 2023). However, poor eating habits were more frequently found among students with moderate academic stress, indicating that responses to stress are individual in nature and may be influenced by the ability to manage stress and control daily behaviors (Syarofi et al., 2020). This finding is also in line with previous studies stating that stress can cause different changes in eating habits among individuals.

This study has several limitations, including the use of a self-report questionnaire, which may lead to subjective bias, and the use of the AFHC instrument, which does not assess the type, frequency, and quantity of food intake in detail. In addition, this study did not consider other factors that may influence eating habits, such as coping strategies, emotional eating, sleep quality, socioeconomic conditions, social environment, and nutritional knowledge. Therefore, future studies are recommended to use more comprehensive dietary assessment methods, include these potential influencing factors, and apply multivariate analysis to better understand the relationship between academic stress and eating habits among Generation Z university students.

Conclusion

A significant relationship was found between academic stress and eating habits among Generation Z university students. Although most respondents reported good eating habits, unhealthy eating behaviors, including frequent consumption of fried foods and difficulties in maintaining healthy eating habits, were still observed. These findings suggest that the relationship between academic stress and eating habits may vary among individuals and highlight the importance of promoting both stress management and healthy eating behaviors among university students. Future studies are recommended to include additional factors, such as emotional eating, sleep quality, physical activity, socioeconomic conditions, coping strategies, and nutritional knowledge, as well as to apply multivariate analysis and more comprehensive dietary assessment methods to better understand the relationship between academic stress and eating habits.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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