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The Triple Burden Phenomenon and Eating Behaviors of Generation Z: A Phenomenological Study Among Health Science Students

Lutfiah Ramadhani, Nadya Ulfa Tanjung

Ilmu Kesehatan Masyarakat, Fakultas Kesehatan Masyarakat, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author:
Lutfiah Ramadhani,
Ilmu Kesehatan Masyarakat, Fakultas Kesehatan Masyarakat, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia
Email: lutfiahrmdni7274@gmail.com

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Abstract

The digital revolution has reshaped the consumption patterns of Generation Z and contributed to the triple burden of malnutrition, including overeating, which has become a growing concern among university students. This study examines the triple burden phenomenon in relation to the eating behaviors of Generation Z at the Faculty of Public Health, State Islamic University of North Sumatra. This qualitative phenomenological research involved 10 students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations, triangulated using a 3×24-hour food recall, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. Calorie requirement calculations based on Body Mass Index (BMI) criteria showed that seven participants exceeded their daily caloric needs, consuming an average of 2,102 calories per day—above the normal requirement. Social media food simulacra triggered visual cravings in eight participants, while mukbang content increased appetite by two to three times. Seven participants demonstrated low self-efficacy in controlling portion sizes. Eating patterns shifted from conventional meal structures to a grazing pattern (6–8 times per day), with fifty-eight percent of eating episodes consisting of snacking, indicating overnutrition within the triple burden context. Social media simulacra and low self-efficacy significantly influenced overeating among Generation Z, even among individuals with adequate nutritional knowledge. Social media creates a hyperreality that encourages consumption beyond biological needs, contributing to the complexity of the triple burden of malnutrition in the digital era. Strengthening digital literacy and self-efficacy is recommended to address the triple burden among Generation Z.

Keywords: body mass index; Generation Z; grazing pattern; social media; triple burden

Introduction

Indonesia faces a complex nutritional challenge known as the "triple burden of malnutrition," characterized by the coexistence of undernutrition, overnutrition, and micronutrient deficiencies within the same population (UNICEF Indonesia, 2023). This phenomenon is increasingly concerning given the rising prevalence of adult obesity, which increased from 21.8% in 2018 to 23.4% in 2023 (Indonesia Health Survey, 2023).

Generation Z (born 1997–2012), comprising 26.46% of Indonesia's population, is strongly defined by its digital identity. Świerkosz-Hołysz refers to them as the "C Generation" due to their high level of connectedness with the internet and digital technologies (Dolot, 2018). According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024), 34.40% of this generation are active internet users, reflecting a unique paradox in their eating behaviors. Despite broad access to nutritional information via digital platforms, international studies indicate that this generation remains vulnerable to unhealthy consumption patterns. Halicka et al. (2025) found that the digital-native characteristics of Generation Z expose them to fast-food advertising and food imagery on social media, making it difficult for them to maintain a balanced diet.

Global data show that 88% of consumers snack at least once per day, with the highest prevalence among Gen Z and Millennials (94%), who often snack while multitasking (State of Snacking, 2023). This trend is further supported by findings from Özbey et al. (2025), which revealed a significant relationship between social media addiction, BMI, and hedonic hunger among adolescents, creating a cycle of overeating that contributes to the triple burden of malnutrition.

Among health science students, this paradox becomes even more pronounced. Ariestiningsih and Has (2024) reported that Generation Z health students possess strong theoretical knowledge of nutrition but struggle to apply it in daily life, with taste, price, and social influence being the dominant factors shaping their dietary choices.

Baudrillard's theory of consumerism—particularly the concepts of simulacra and identity formation through consumption—provides a relevant lens for understanding this phenomenon. Social media constructs a hyperreality in which food is not merely a biological need but a symbol of social identity (Baudrillard, 1994). Meanwhile, Bandura's concept of self-efficacy helps explain how an individual's perceived ability to regulate their diet influences actual eating behavior.

Although previous studies have examined the triple burden of malnutrition and the eating behaviors of young people, there remains a gap in understanding how the unique characteristics of Generation Z—particularly among health science students—interact with this phenomenon. Prior research has not fully integrated the roles of social media food simulacra, self-efficacy, and behavioral modeling within the framework of the triple burden for this specific population.

This study aims to analyze the triple burden phenomenon and the eating behaviors of Generation Z at the Faculty of Public Health, State Islamic University of North Sumatra, focusing on the roles of social media food simulacra, self-efficacy, and eating behavior modeling in shaping social identity through food consumption. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the understanding of contemporary consumption dynamics and practically to the development of targeted nutritional interventions for digital-native generations.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore the meaning of lived experiences among Generation Z students at the Faculty of Public Health, State Islamic University of North Sumatra (UINSU) Medan. The research was conducted from March to May 2025. The participants consisted of 10 students selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: belonging to Generation Z, being active students, being willing to openly share information, and having sufficient time to participate.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations of eating patterns using a 3×24-hour food recall, daily caloric calculations based on each participant's BMI characteristics, and documentation of relevant aspects. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured technique to provide flexibility in questioning, while data validity was ensured through methodological triangulation. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Results

This study involved 10 participants who were members of Generation Z at the Faculty of Public Health, State Islamic University of North Sumatra, all of whom had completed the basic nutrition course.

Table 1. Characteristics of Generation Z Participants at the Faculty of Public Health, State Islamic University of North Sumatra

Variables	n	%
Age (years)		
20	2	20 %
21	7	70 %
22	1	10 %
Semester		
Three	2	20 %
Seven	8	80 %
Daily food allowance		
≤ 20.000	2	20%
>20.000	8	80%

(Source: Primary data, 2025; n=10)

The participants were examined based on their body mass index and the amount of daily intake they consumed. More detailed participant data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Generation Z Participants at the Faculty of Public Health, State Islamic University of North Sumatra

Variables	n	%
Body Mass Index		
Undernutrition	3	30 %
Normal	-	-
Overnutrition	7	50 %
Daily intake		
≤ 2000	6	60 %
> 2000	4	40 %

(Source: Primary data, 2025; n=10)

Based on Table 1, the descriptive analysis of Generation Z participants at the Faculty of Public Health, State Islamic University of North Sumatra, provides an overview of student characteristics within the productive age range. In terms of age distribution, the majority of participants were 21 years old (60%), followed by 20-year-olds (20%), and a smaller proportion aged 22 years (10%).

Based on Body Mass Index (BMI), half of the participants (50%) were classified as overnourished, while 30% were undernourished, and none had a BMI within the normal category. Daily intake patterns indicated that most participants (60%) consumed ≤2,000 calories per day, whereas 40% consumed more than 2,000 calories.

Self-Efficacy in Controlling Eating Behavior

Findings from the in-depth interviews revealed that the majority of participants (7 out of 10) had low self-efficacy in controlling their portion sizes. This lack of self-control appeared especially when participants encountered their favorite foods. A recurring pattern showed episodes of excessive eating, reaching up to four portions in a single sitting when presented with preferred foods. These findings indicate a relationship between food preference and diminished self-regulation, with favorite foods reducing individuals' capacity for control.

In contrast, participants with high self-efficacy demonstrated better control strategies. They maintained eating discipline by limiting consumption to a single portion, even when faced with tempting foods. These differences highlight significant individual variation in self-efficacy related to eating behavior among students.

Emotional conditions emerged as the dominant factor affecting participants' ability to regulate their eating behavior. Emotional stress consistently reduced their self-control capacity, resulting in compulsive eating patterns with no quantitative limits. The findings suggest that food functions as a maladaptive coping mechanism when individuals face psychological pressure, with eating continuing until stress subsides.

Economic factors also played a significant role as external regulators of eating behavior. Financial limitations—particularly near the end of the month—served as natural constraints that forced individuals to control their food consumption. Conversely, sufficient financial resources at the beginning to mid-month tended to trigger less controlled eating patterns. These findings indicate that external factors can serve as control mechanisms when internal self-efficacy is insufficient.

Modeling of Eating Behavior

The study identified two primary agents in shaping students' eating behavior: food influencers and peers. Food influencers, particularly mukbangers, had a notable impact on stimulating appetite through their visually appealing content. Imitation occurred directly, with participants adopting overeating behaviors after exposure to mukbang videos. Influencers such as Tzuyang, Hamzy, and Kkani were identified as the most influential figures due to their appealing food presentation and appetizing eating styles.

However, peers exerted a stronger influence than influencers or family in shaping students' eating habits. Peer group dynamics create a social environment that encourages excessive food consumption through social influence and conformity. This finding suggests that direct social factors have a greater impact than media in shaping students' eating behavior.

Experiences With Food Simulacra on Social Media

The data analysis revealed a consistent simulacra phenomenon experienced by all participants: a discrepancy between the visual representation of food on social media and its physical reality. This mismatch generated feelings of disappointment and reduced enthusiasm for eating when participants encountered the gap between media-driven expectations and actual consumption experiences. These findings suggest that social media food imagery has evolved into simulacra detached from its original reference.

The majority of participants (8 out of 10) reported experiencing "visual hunger" after exposure to food content on social media, even when they were physically full. Visual stimulation triggered physiological responses, including increased appetite that did not correspond to actual nutritional needs. This phenomenon demonstrates the powerful influence of digital visual cues on hunger perception and consumption urges, signaling a disconnect between natural physiological signals and external media stimuli.

Dynamics of Overeating

Analysis of overeating patterns showed substantial variation in frequency among participants, ranging from occasional episodes (1–2 days per week) to routine patterns triggered by specific stimuli. The study identified three main triggers for overeating: food-related digital content, financial availability, and social events.

Participants responsive to digital food content displayed consumption patterns that increased up to three times their normal portions after exposure to visual stimuli. Social eating events—particularly religious celebrations and family gatherings—were the most consistent contexts triggering overeating.

These findings suggest that situational and social factors play a dominant role in causing loss of control over food consumption, outweighing individual factors such as physiological hunger or nutritional needs.

Caloric Consumption and Eating Patterns (3×24-Hour Food Recall)

Objective data from the 3×24-hour food recall showed an average daily caloric intake of 2,102 calories, with substantial variation among participants. The majority (70%) consumed excess calories, with the high-surplus category displaying an excess of 1,134–1,790 calories per day and experiencing overeating episodes on 67–100% of observation days. The moderate-surplus category showed an excess of 192–324 calories with overeating on 67% of observation days.

Documented eating patterns revealed a significant shift from conventional meal structures. All participants had adopted grazing patterns, with 70% practicing extreme grazing (6–8 eating episodes per day) and an average frequency of 6.8 times daily.

Disruptions to eating rhythm were evident through consistent breakfast skipping, irregular meal timing, and substitution of main meals with snacks, which contributed an average of 38% of total daily caloric intake. These findings indicate significant disruption to structured eating patterns, with extended eating windows of 12–16 hours per day, potentially affecting metabolic regulation and natural appetite control.

Discussion

Eating Patterns and Behaviors of Generation Z Students

This study reveals complex eating patterns and behaviors among Generation Z students, strongly influenced by digital, social, and psychological factors. These findings align with recent literature highlighting shifts in eating habits among young people in the digital era (Sitoayu et al., 2023; Tahir et al., 2023).

General Overview of Eating Habits

The results show that only 30% of participants consistently consumed three main meals a day. The majority (70%) frequently skipped meals—especially breakfast—often due to limited time and a habit of waking up late. This pattern is consistent with studies identifying irregular eating habits among university students (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Participants' food preferences were dominated by instant foods (instant noodles, packaged snacks), fast food (fried chicken, meatballs, fried rice), and sugary beverages (milkshakes, jumbo sweet tea, corn-cheese iced drinks). This reflects broader dietary trends among Generation Z, who tend to choose practical and easily accessible foods, often with low nutritional value (Setyaningsih et al., 2024; Tahir et al., 2023).

The average daily spending on food and drinks ranged from IDR 35,000–50,000, suggesting that fast food and snacks may be economical choices for students with limited budgets—an increasingly relevant trend in Gen Z lifestyles (Malini, 2021).

Self-Efficacy in Controlling Eating Behavior

The relationship between self-efficacy and eating behavior demonstrates significant complexity, especially among Generation Z, who face unique challenges in the digital era. A recent study in *Frontiers in Public Health* (2022) revealed that students with high dietary self-efficacy are better at identifying and managing overeating triggers (Zhou et al., 2022).

Findings showed notable variation in participants' ability to control their eating behavior. Seven out of ten participants reported low self-efficacy in controlling portion sizes, particularly when faced with their favorite foods. Participants P1 and P2 explicitly expressed difficulty in self-regulation and resistance to limiting their favorite foods. P5 also described uncontrolled eating patterns, actively seeking food continuously.

Conversely, participants with high self-efficacy, such as P4, demonstrated effective control strategies, such as limiting consumption to a single portion despite tempting foods. This aligns with recent studies linking low eating self-efficacy with unfavorable eating behaviors among overweight and obese individuals (Oikarinen et al., 2023).

These consistent findings reinforce the argument that self-efficacy serves not only as a predictive factor but also as a protective mechanism against overeating. Emotional factors—particularly stress—emerged as dominant triggers of loss of control. P7 described stress-induced unlimited overeating as a coping mechanism. Financial constraints also functioned as an external regulator: P8 reported better self-control when "out of money." This suggests that self-efficacy is shaped by both internal beliefs and external emotional or economic conditions (Dakanalis et al., 2023; Syarofi & Muniroh, 2020).

Modeling of Eating Behavior

The study confirmed the strong influence of food influencers and peers in shaping student eating behaviors. Food influencers, especially mukbangers, had significant impact.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube serve as major channels influencing food preferences and eating habits, with influencers and celebrities strongly shaping food choices (Ragelienė et al., 2020).

Participant P2 imitated overeating behaviors after watching mukbang content—showing direct behavioral imitation. P7 also identified specific influencers who triggered increased appetite due to their appealing eating styles. Exposure to food content can directly increase consumption of the foods viewed (Dumlu Bilgin et al., 2024). Recent studies also show that the impact of social media on food consumption can be measured and predicted structurally (Patwardhan et al., 2024).

Peers showed the strongest influence—greater than that of influencers or family. P1 and P10 described how the presence of friends stimulated overeating and increased appetite. A recent scoping review found that peer influence within social environments has a powerful impact on adolescents' eating behavior (Chung et al., 2021; Ragelienė & Grønhøj, 2020). Individuals tend to adjust their food consumption to match their surroundings (Suwalska & Bogdański, 2021).

Unsupportive social environments or unhealthy dietary norms can promote poor eating habits, ultimately affecting nutritional status and adolescent health. Additional perspectives suggest that adverse early social and economic experiences increase the risk of overeating later in life (Bartoskova et al., 2024).

Food Simulacra on Social Media

All participants experienced a mismatch between the visual expectations of food seen on social media and the actual physical product. P3 described disappointment when the real food did not match the appealing online photos. This phenomenon mirrors Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality (2018), where visual representations surpass the value of the actual object, creating unrealistic expectations.

In this context, simulacra refer to the idea that food consumption is no longer driven by biological needs but by the desire to fulfill digital and social expectations (Bakti et al., 2019).

Food becomes a symbolic object that triggers overeating, driven by the urge to document and share eating experiences on social media. This demonstrates how simulacra and simulation create unhealthy cycles of consumption, where the visual and social value of food overrides its nutritional function (Makkuaseng & Fadilla, 2023).

The hyperreality created through social media blurs the line between nutritional needs and symbolic validation, turning food consumption into a structured performance of identity. Supporting studies show that female participants are significantly more likely to share food images on Instagram and Snapchat than male participants (Qutteina et al., 2019). Eight out of ten participants experienced "visual hunger" after viewing food content, even after eating.

P10 described intense cravings triggered by food videos, especially at night—illustrating how food simulacra act as "hyperreal triggers" that generate cravings based on visual constructs rather than physiological hunger. Recent studies indicate that prolonged exposure to social media is indirectly linked to uncontrolled eating through increased impulsivity (Filippone et al., 2022).

Dynamics of Overeating and Consumption Patterns

Participants demonstrated varied overeating patterns, ranging from occasional (P3) to habitual (P9), including extreme responses to media stimuli (P10). Social eating events—such as Eid celebrations or family gatherings—also emerged as major triggers for overeating, as reported by P4, highlighting strong environmental influence (Buksh et al., 2022).

Analysis of the 3×24-hour food recall confirmed significant overeating problems. Seven out of ten participants

(70%) exceeded daily caloric needs, with P9, P1, and P7 showing exceptionally high calorie surpluses. Consistent meal-skipping, especially breakfast, followed by later compensatory overeating reflects metabolic dysregulation. An average of 38% of daily calories came from snacks, indicating a fundamental shift from structured meals to snack-based consumption (Kilat et al., 2024).

The phenomenon of “extreme grazing” (eating 6–8 times per day at 1–3 hour intervals) occurred in 70% of participants, with P2 showing eight eating episodes within 15 hours. Snacking dominated up to 58% of all eating episodes, with extended eating windows of 12–16 hours. This highlights the loss of conventional structured eating and the influence of continuous digital visual stimulation, which triggers consumption even in the absence of physical hunger (Polivy & Herman, 2020).

Overall, these findings highlight that food simulacra on social media and low self-efficacy can override rational decision-making—even among individuals with adequate nutritional knowledge, such as public health students.

Conclusion

This study revealed distinct eating patterns and food consumption behaviors among Generation Z university students, with only 30% of participants consistently consuming three main meals a day. The majority (70%) frequently skipped breakfast due to limited time, late waking habits, and a preference for instant and fast foods. Self-efficacy in controlling portion sizes varied considerably, with many participants reporting difficulty—especially when presented with their favorite foods. Stress and financial constraints emerged as major factors influencing self-control, while food influencers and peers played highly significant roles in shaping eating habits.

These findings carry serious implications within the context of Indonesia’s triple burden of malnutrition. Irregular eating patterns may contribute to micronutrient deficiencies (undernutrition), while excessive caloric intake—observed in 70% of participants with surpluses of up to 1,790 calories—reflects a high risk of obesity (overnutrition). Additionally, reliance on ultra-processed foods indicates a risk of hidden hunger. Extreme grazing patterns and strong social media influence create a vicious cycle that exacerbates all three components of the triple burden, underscoring the need for holistic interventions to prevent the escalation of malnutrition in future generations.

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