WELLBEING OF STUDENTS LINKED TO LIFESTYLE SLEEP AND EATING HABITS

Dr. Soundarya Mahalle
Independent Researcher

Abstract : Student wellbeing is increasingly recognized as a critical component of academic success and personal development. This study explores the interconnections between lifestyle patterns, sleep routines, and dietary habits among university students and their collective impact on overall mental and physical wellbeing. Using a qualitative approach, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with 35 students aged 18–45 from various academic backgrounds. Thematic analysis revealed that irregular sleep cycles, high fast-food intake, and prolonged screen time were commonly associated with fatigue, reduced concentration, and emotional instability. Conversely, students who maintained consistent sleep and healthy eating habits reported greater mental clarity, improved mood, and higher energy levels. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive wellness programs that integrate sleep hygiene, nutritional awareness, and lifestyle education within academic institutions. Promoting holistic wellbeing through behavior modification could significantly enhance students' academic performance and long-term health.

Keywords: Student wellbeing, Lifestyle habits, Sleep patterns, Dietary habits, Mental health, University students, Qualitative research, Holistic health

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INTRODUCTION

University students often experience significant lifestyle transitions that can impact their overall wellbeing. The demands of academic performance, social adjustments, and independence frequently lead to irregular sleep schedules, poor dietary choices, and sedentary behavior, all of which contribute to physical and psychological distress (Beiter et al., 2015). As students navigate these challenges, their lifestyle behaviors—particularly sleep quality and eating patterns—play a pivotal role in shaping mental clarity, emotional regulation, and physical vitality (Mikolajczyk et al., 2009).

Sleep deprivation is increasingly prevalent among young adults, especially students, due to academic stress and excessive screen time. Poor sleep hygiene is associated with impaired cognitive performance, increased irritability, and heightened risk for depression and anxiety (Hirshkowitz et al., 2015). Similarly, fast food consumption and nutritional neglect are common among university populations, leading to gastrointestinal issues, fatigue, and increased risk for obesity and non-communicable diseases (Francis & Stevenson, 2013).

Recent studies underscore the importance of adopting a holistic approach to student wellbeing that considers interrelated lifestyle factors rather than isolating individual behaviors (Moore et al., 2020). This study aims to explore how the combined effects of lifestyle routines, sleep patterns, and dietary habits influence the overall wellbeing of university students through qualitative inquiry.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Student wellbeing is a multidimensional construct influenced by physical, emotional, social, and academic factors (Dodge et al., 2012). Among university populations, lifestyle behaviors such as sleep, diet, and physical activity have shown strong associations with overall health and academic success.

1. Sleep Patterns and Student Wellbeing

Sleep is a foundational element of wellbeing, yet it is often disrupted among university students. Lund et al. (2010) reported that irregular sleep schedules are linked to lower academic performance, increased stress, and depressive symptoms. A study by Galambos et al. (2009) found that students with poor sleep quality exhibited higher levels of psychological distress and diminished life satisfaction. Sleep disturbances have also been associated with internet overuse and late-night screen exposure, exacerbating mental fatigue (Hirshkowitz et al., 2015).

2. Dietary Habits and Mental Health

Dietary behaviors play a significant role in psychological and physical health. A high intake of fast food, sugary beverages, and processed

foods has been linked to anxiety, poor mood regulation, and obesity (Francis & Stevenson, 2013). In contrast, balanced diets rich in fruits, vegetables, and omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to improve emotional resilience and cognitive function (O'Neil et al., 2014). Mikolajczyk et al. (2009) also observed a correlation between frequent junk food consumption and elevated stress levels in European students.

3. Integrated Lifestyle Behaviors and Holistic Health

Emerging literature emphasizes that wellbeing should not be evaluated through isolated behaviors but rather through the interaction of sleep, diet, and lifestyle habits (Moore et al., 2020). Physical inactivity, excessive screen time, and poor time management have been identified as co-occurring patterns that impair mental health among youth (Keles et al., 2020). Integrative wellness models suggest that modifying one lifestyle component—like improving sleep—can positively influence other areas such as diet and mood regulation (Coulthard et al., 2017).

4. University Environment and Preventive Strategies

Environmental and institutional factors also shape student behaviors. Beiter et al. (2015) stressed the role of university policies in addressing stressors related to academic workload and social pressures. Wellness programs promoting sleep hygiene, nutrition education, and mental health services have shown promising outcomes in enhancing student engagement and wellbeing (Buboltz et al., 2001).

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the perceptions and experiences of university students regarding their lifestyle habits, sleep routines, dietary patterns, and overall wellbeing. Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary method of data interpretation to identify recurring themes and contextual insights.

Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted among students enrolled in various undergraduate and postgraduate programs at a multidisciplinary university in Maharashtra, India. A total of 35 participants aged between 18 and 45 years were recruited using purposive sampling. The sample included both male and female students from diverse educational backgrounds such as Engineering, Medicine, Nursing, Management, and Allied Health Sciences.

Inclusion Criteria

- Current university students (UG/PG)
- Aged between 18–45 years
- Willing to provide informed consent
- Able to communicate in English, Hindi, or Marathi

Data Collection Tool and Procedure

Data were collected using a semi-structured in-depth interview guide developed based on literature and expert input. The guide included open-ended questions focusing on digital habits, sleep quality, eating patterns, emotional well-being, and coping strategies. Interviews were conducted either in-person or via video call, and responses were audio-recorded with participant consent.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using participant codes in transcripts and avoiding the collection of personally identifiable information.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary. The data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006). Codes were generated manually, and themes were developed based on patterns and meaningful clusters. NVivo software (optional) was considered to organize and cross-reference coded data.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through peer debriefing and member checking. Transferability was addressed by providing rich descriptions of the setting and participant context. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through audit trails and researcher reflexivity.

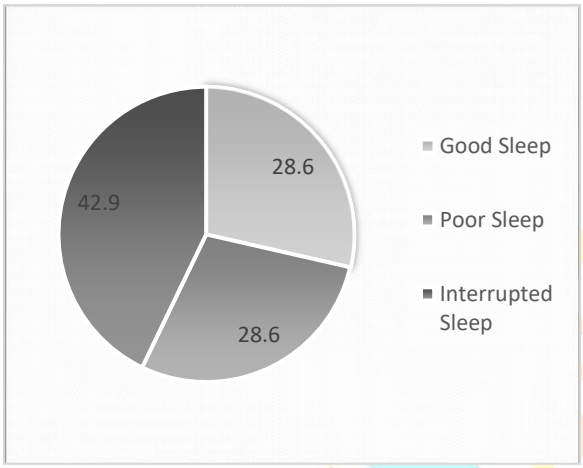
RESULTS

1. Lifestyle and Daily Routine Patterns

Participants reported varied lifestyle habits influenced by academic schedules, social media use, and personal motivation. Many described irregular routines, often staying up late due to academic pressure or entertainment. Students noted minimal physical activity during weekdays, contributing to fatigue and low energy. A few participants who practiced time management and mindfulness reported feeling more productive and emotionally balanced.

2. Sleep Quality and Its Psychological Impact

Figure 1: *Reported Sleep Quality*

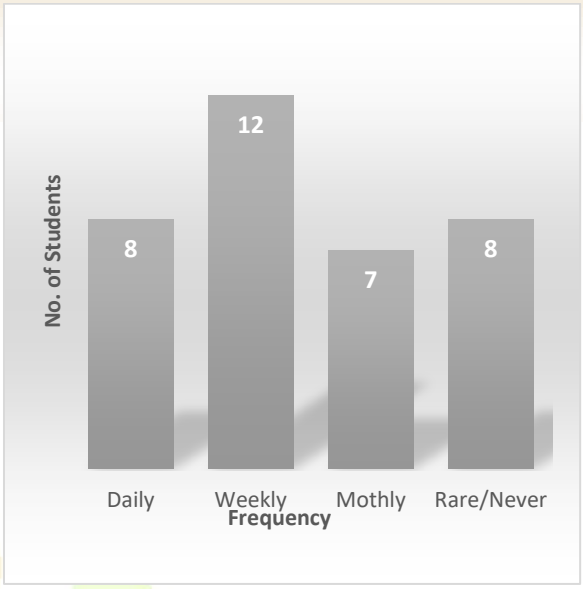


Irregular sleep patterns emerged as a common theme. Several students experienced delayed sleep onset, especially due to prolonged mobile phone use. Reports included waking up tired, experiencing daytime drowsiness, and difficulty focusing in classes. Participants who followed consistent sleep routines described better emotional control, reduced anxiety, and improved academic focus. Some students on night shifts (e.g., healthcare interns) expressed challenges in maintaining restful sleep, leading to irritability and cognitive fog.

3. Fast Food Consumption and Eating Habits

Most participants admitted frequent consumption of fast food, especially during study hours or social outings. Cravings, convenience, and peer influence were major drivers. Although some perceived no major health impact, others reported symptoms like acidity, sluggishness, and weight gain. A few participants who intentionally reduced fast food intake noticed positive changes, such as improved digestion and enhanced alertness.

Figure 2. *Fast Food Consumption Frequency Among Students*



4. Screen Time and Emotional Wellbeing

Heavy digital engagement—often exceeding 6 hours daily—was associated with eye strain, mood swings, and social withdrawal. Students noted that excessive screen time, especially before bed, interfered with sleep and made them feel mentally exhausted. Some participants adopted digital detox practices and shared that these efforts led to improved focus and mental calmness.

5. Perception of Overall Wellbeing

Students who maintained a balance between academic responsibilities, sleep, and diet reported feeling more in control of their mental and physical health. On the contrary, those with irregular sleep schedules, unhealthy food habits, and prolonged screen exposure often experienced emotional instability, lack of motivation, and health complaints. Peer support, structured routines, and personal discipline were seen as key contributors to maintaining wellbeing.

DISCUSSION

The present study explored the lifestyle behaviors, sleep patterns, and dietary habits of university students and their relationship with overall wellbeing. The findings revealed a strong connection between irregular routines and negative psychological and physical outcomes, supporting existing literature on student health.

Consistent with previous studies (Lund et al., 2010; Hirshkowitz et al., 2015), irregular and insufficient sleep among participants was linked to reduced concentration, daytime fatigue, and emotional disturbances. Students who followed stable sleep routines reported better focus and emotional regulation. This aligns with Galambos et al. (2009), who emphasized the cognitive and psychological advantages of adequate sleep among college students.

Dietary patterns also emerged as significant contributors to wellbeing. Most students reported regular consumption of fast food, citing convenience and peer influence. While some did not perceive immediate health effects, others experienced digestion issues, fatigue, and weight gain. These results support the findings of Francis and Stevenson (2013), who demonstrated the negative impact of poor nutrition on mood and cognitive performance.

Screen time was another notable factor. Excessive digital engagement—especially before bedtime—was commonly associated with sleep disturbances and mental exhaustion. Similar to the findings of Keles et al. (2020), this study observed that high screen exposure correlates with stress, anxiety, and withdrawal behaviors. Students who attempted digital detox practices noted improved mental clarity and sleep quality, reinforcing the benefits of mindful digital use.

Importantly, students who maintained a balance between academic work, sleep, and healthy eating habits showed better psychological resilience and perceived wellness. This supports the holistic view of wellbeing advocated by Moore et al. (2020), suggesting that interconnected lifestyle factors should be addressed together rather than in isolation.

The qualitative nature of this study enabled an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences, offering valuable insights into how modern academic life interacts with personal health choices. However, findings may not be generalizable due to the limited sample size and context-specific variables.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the dual role of technology in mental health care among underserved populations. While digital tools offer valuable opportunities for education, support, and access to care, excessive or unregulated use contributes to stress, poor sleep, and emotional fatigue. Limited awareness and usage of advanced tools like AI and VR suggest that significant barriers—such as digital literacy and cultural acceptability—still exist in rural and semi-urban areas. Participants expressed a desire for more balanced, human-centered approaches that integrate technology with physical activity, nutrition awareness, and emotional support. Bridging the mental health care gap in underserved regions will require not only improved digital infrastructure but also community engagement, health education, and ethical integration of emerging technologies. A hybrid model that values both innovation and local relevance can make mental health care more accessible, effective, and inclusive.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was limited by its small sample size and single-institution focus, which may affect the generalizability of findings. As responses were self-reported, there is a possibility of bias due to social desirability or recall errors. Additionally, the qualitative and cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for measurement of long-term behavioral changes or causality.

Future studies should consider larger, multi-center samples to enhance applicability across student populations. A mixed-methods approach combining interviews with quantitative data could offer more robust insights. Longitudinal research would help track lifestyle changes over time, while intervention-based studies could assess the impact of wellness programs on student health and wellbeing.

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