

The Influence of Cultural Values on the Eating Habits and Dietary Patterns of IPB University Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the influence of cultural values on the eating habits of Program Pendidikan Kompetensi Umum IPB University students, representing the younger generation in a multicultural and globalized context. Employing a nutritional anthropology approach and qualitative methods through observation and in-depth interviews with students from diverse cultural backgrounds the research finds that food functions not only as a biological need but also as a marker of identity and cultural heritage. Family upbringing and pride in traditional cuisine are key factors influencing students' food preferences. Despite living in a dynamic and modern academic environment, many students continue to maintain their regional dietary practices as a form of emotional connection and cultural preservation. The findings suggest that student eating patterns result from a complex interaction between culture, self-identity, and social surroundings. Therefore, nutrition intervention programs in university settings should be designed with cultural sensitivity. Providing healthy food options inspired by regional flavors and involving families in nutrition education can promote more sustainable and culturally rooted eating habits.

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1. Introduction

Food practices are not merely biological responses to hunger but are socially and culturally constructed behaviors shaped by values, norms, and collective meanings. Within nutritional and health anthropology, eating is understood as a daily practice through which individuals express identity, negotiate social relationships, and reproduce cultural traditions. Consequently, the analysis of eating patterns requires attention not only to nutritional intake but also to the cultural values that inform food choice, eating routines, and perceptions of health.

In the context of globalization and modernization, university students represent a social group experiencing rapid lifestyle transformation. Exposure to urban living, mass media, digital food platforms, and cross-cultural interaction has altered how young people access and consume food. Recent studies show that student eating behavior is increasingly characterized by irregular meal timing, reliance on convenience foods, and changing dietary preferences. Nevertheless, research in nutritional anthropology consistently demonstrates

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that local cultural values, family upbringing, and regional food identities continue to influence how individuals define appropriate foods and eating practices, even within modern institutional settings.

PPKU IPB University students occupy a transitional position between values internalized within the family and those encountered in a multicultural academic environment. This condition creates what this study conceptualizes as complex eating patterns, defined as the interaction of multiple cultural references in everyday food practices. In this research, complexity is operationalized through three analytical dimensions. First, food choice, including preferences for traditional versus modern or practical foods. Second, eating practices, such as meal frequency, timing, and food preparation habits under campus constraints. Third, symbolic meaning, referring to how students interpret food as part of identity, cultural pride, health beliefs, and emotional attachment to place and family. Through these dimensions, the study examines how local, national, and global cultural values coexist, compete, and are selectively negotiated in students' daily lives.

Existing studies on student dietary behavior largely emphasize nutritional adequacy, economic access, or health outcomes, while giving limited attention to the cultural logic underlying food choices. Even when cultural factors are mentioned, they are often treated as background variables rather than as central analytical categories. As a result, nutrition interventions in higher education settings frequently overlook cultural meanings, reducing their effectiveness and sustainability. There remains a lack of qualitative, culture-centered studies that explicitly examine how cultural values shape eating patterns among Indonesian university students within a multicultural campus context.

To address this gap, this study aims to explore how cultural values influence the eating patterns of PPKU IPB University students using a nutritional anthropology approach. Specifically, the research seeks to analyze how family socialization, regional culinary identity, and campus life dynamics interact in shaping students' food choices, eating practices, and the meanings they attach to food. By situating eating behavior within its cultural context, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of student nutrition and provides insights for the development of culturally sensitive nutrition and health promotion programs in university settings.

Literature Review

2.1 Nutritional Anthropology and Health

Nutritional anthropology examines food not simply as a source of nutrients but as a cultural system that evolves alongside social, economic, and political change. Maigoda et al. (2020) describe this field as an interdisciplinary approach that integrates biological outcomes with cultural interpretation, emphasizing that dietary practices must be understood within their broader ecological and social contexts. Classical frameworks in nutritional anthropology identify key analytical domains such as ecology, social organization, food technology, and symbolic meaning, all of which interact to shape health outcomes.

More recent developments have expanded this framework. Jusriani (2023) highlights the growing importance of food politics, access, and ethical considerations, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the right to adequate and healthy food has become a central concern. These developments suggest that nutritional anthropology now extends beyond descriptive cultural analysis to include questions of justice and policy relevance. Supporting this shift, Trisutaguna et al. (2025) demonstrate through cross-cultural analysis that while globalization reshapes culinary techniques, ingredients, and consumption patterns, food continues to function as a key marker of identity. This positions nutritional anthropology at the intersection of biological health, cultural continuity, and global structural forces.

2.2 Cultural Values and Eating Behavior

Food consumption plays a central role in expressing social belonging and cultural affiliation. In many societies, eating practices are embedded in ritual and collective memory. For example, Roza et al. (2023) show that during Ramadan, Indonesian Muslims intentionally consume traditional regional dishes as a way to strengthen religious solidarity and reaffirm cultural identity. Similarly, the concept of "taste of place" emphasizes how local flavors operate as social capital, reinforcing kinship ties and shaping norms of appropriate eating behavior (Jusriani, 2023).

At the same time, contemporary food practices are increasingly influenced by global forces such as digital food delivery services, culinary tourism, and urban mobility. These factors contribute to more flexible and diversified eating habits, particularly among younger generations. However, communities are not passive recipients of these changes. Trisutaguna et al. (2025) found that many cultural groups actively maintain symbolic food boundaries, such as ceremonial food arrangements or halal cooking practices, as adaptive responses to

modernity. This evidence suggests that cultural change in food practices often involves negotiation rather than replacement, where tradition and modern influences coexist and are selectively integrated.

2.3 Eating Patterns of PPKU IPB University Students

Dietary patterns refer to the ways individuals or groups select, consume, and utilize food in relation to their social and cultural environment (Almatsier, 2009). Among university students, dietary patterns are shaped by a combination of institutional settings, lifestyle demands, and personal background. During the COVID-19 pandemic, IPB University students experienced notable shifts in eating behavior. Ningrum et al. (2022) reported that many students increased home cooking and fruit and vegetable intake. Nevertheless, reduced physical activity and irregular routines led to nutritional imbalances, with nearly half of respondents categorized as having non-normal nutritional status.

Within the PPKU dormitory context, structural constraints such as limited cafeteria hours and curfew policies further influenced eating behavior. Students often relied on instant foods and sugary snacks due to their affordability and convenience, particularly at night. Despite these constraints, some students continued to prepare simple traditional meals, such as *tempe orek* or *sayur bening*, especially when communal kitchen access allowed. This indicates that traditional food preferences persisted even under restrictive conditions.

Following the pandemic, the determinants of student eating behavior shifted toward lifestyle-related factors. Research conducted in the PPKU Female Dormitory showed that most female students had dietary quality that required improvement, characterized by frequent consumption of high-sugar snacks and insufficient water intake (Nabilah & Ekayanti, 2024). Although emotional eating was not prevalent, low levels of physical activity remained a concern.

In response, IPB University has implemented several initiatives aimed at improving student nutrition, including the Free Nutritious Meal program and the establishment of a Kitchen Laboratory for nutrition education and research. Complementary efforts such as the “D’Nutri – Dapur Nutrisi Inovasi” program have introduced affordable, healthier menu options with reduced reliance on ultra-processed foods (Shafinas et al., 2024). Despite these efforts, challenges persist. Szali et al. (2025) report that ultra-processed foods still contribute a substantial proportion of students’ daily energy intake and are associated with increased mental health risks. These findings suggest that the eating patterns of PPKU students are shaped by an ongoing tension between accessibility, personal preference, cultural habit, and health considerations.

2. Method

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in nutritional anthropology to examine how cultural values influence eating patterns among PPKU IPB University students. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, interpretations, and lived experiences related to food practices within specific social and cultural contexts. Such an approach is widely used in anthropological and public health nutrition studies to capture the complexity of dietary behavior beyond measurable intake alone (Maigoda et al., 2020; Jusriani, 2023).

The research was conducted at IPB University, Bogor, Indonesia, focusing on students enrolled in the PPKU program who reside in or actively use campus facilities such as dormitories, cafeterias, and communal kitchens. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in regional origin, gender, and everyday eating practices, which is essential in qualitative inquiry to capture variation in cultural experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A total of six key informants participated in the study. The informants consisted of three male and three female students, aged 18 to 20 years, originating from different regions in Indonesia, including Banten and Central Java. All informants reported consuming two to three main meals per day, with varying frequencies of snacking depending on academic schedules and dormitory conditions. This profile reflects the typical demographic and eating routines of first-year university students in a residential campus environment.

Data were collected through non-participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Observations were carried out over a four-week period to document students’ daily eating practices, including meal timing, food choices, eating locations, and social contexts of consumption within the campus environment. Field notes were recorded systematically to capture recurring patterns and situational variations.

In-depth interviews were conducted individually with each informant and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across participants while allowing flexibility for

probing emerging themes. Interview topics included family food upbringing, regional food preferences, perceptions of healthy eating, adaptation to campus food environments, and the symbolic meaning of traditional foods. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure commonly used in qualitative social and health research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, interview transcripts and observation notes were read repeatedly to achieve familiarization with the data. Second, initial codes were generated to identify meaningful units related to cultural values, eating practices, and identity. Third, related codes were grouped into broader themes, such as family influence, regional food identity, health-related values, and adaptation to campus life.

To enhance analytical rigor, themes were continuously compared across informants to identify similarities and differences in eating patterns. The final themes were interpreted using concepts from nutritional anthropology, particularly the role of food as a cultural symbol and identity marker. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation between interview and observation findings, while reflexive notes were used to minimize researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Anonymity was ensured by using initials rather than real names, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

3. Result and Discussion

Based on the research, it reveals the dynamics of PPKU IPB University students in maintaining, adapting, and interpreting their food choices amid modernization and globalization.

The Influence of Cultural Values on the Eating Habits of PPKU IPB University Students

Cultural values play a significant role in shaping the eating habits of PPKU IPB University students, as reflected in consumption practices carried over from their family environments and regions of origin. Many students continue to maintain traditional eating patterns, such as the consumption of vegetables, rice, or regional specialties like *megono* and *sate bandeng*, which not only reflect personal tastes but also carry symbolic value and cultural identity. The family serves as the primary institution instilling these eating habits from an early age, and this influence persists even when students enter a new, more heterogeneous campus environment.

However, campus life dynamics also encourage adaptation, for example, irregular eating patterns or changes due to time constraints and social influences. Despite this, many students still view traditional food as part of their identity and a cultural heritage that must be preserved. This aligns with findings by Intan (2018) which shows that eating habits in Indonesian society are influenced not only by biological needs but also by systems of values, social norms, and cultural taboos passed down through generations. In many cases, food functions as a social symbol representing status, power relations, and broader value systems within society.

Therefore, although globalization and social mobility have altered some aspects of food consumption, cultural values remain a foundational element in shaping students' food preferences and the meanings behind their choices. In this context, an anthropological understanding of eating patterns becomes essential in explaining how food consumption reflects social structure, identity, and cultural resistance.

The most influential cultural values shaping the food consumption patterns of IPB University students lie in the role of family, particularly mothers and students' attachment to their regional culinary identities. Experiences shared by two informants, MK from Banten and K from Pekalongan, show that their current eating habits did not emerge spontaneously in the campus environment but are the result of a long process beginning in childhood. MK grew up eating staples like rice and tofu and began limiting sugar intake after experiencing obesity. He noted that his food choices are still guided by his mother's habits, even though his academic schedule forces him to eat irregularly. On the other hand, K carries over a healthy and consistent eating pattern from home, such as consuming boiled sweet potatoes, *jamu temulawak*, and *beras kencur*. She identifies as a "picky eater," indicating high selectiveness in food consumption, which makes her less susceptible to food choices available in campus canteens. These stories affirm the views of Maigoda et al. (2020) and Jusriani (2023), who found that food values passed down through families play a fundamental and enduring role, even when individuals enter socially and culturally different environments.

Another equally dominant factor is the attachment to regional food identity. For MK, dishes like *sate bandeng* and *nasi gonjleng* are not merely culinary choices but symbols of cultural pride. Meanwhile, K demonstrates her loyalty to *megono*, a traditional jackfruit-based dish typical of her hometown in Pekalongan.

This illustrates that food choices are not only about nutrition or personal taste but are also closely tied to efforts to preserve self-identity within a multicultural campus environment. These findings are consistent with research by Roza et al. (2023), which states that traditional foods often serve to maintain collective cultural memory, and with Trisutaguna et al. (2025), who describe local cuisine as a “symbolic boundary” in facing modernization and globalization. Thus, in the student context, traditional food serves as an important tool for affirming identity amid rapid social change.

In addition to these two primary factors, there are other elements that shape students’ eating practices, albeit more situational in nature. Health norms, often shaped by personal experiences such as MK’s avoidance of sugar or K’s habit of consuming herbal drinks show that health awareness is frequently formed through family experience rather than external pressure. In K’s case, her “picky eater” character reflects a personal habit formed since childhood, which plays a role in filtering environmental influences. Meanwhile, campus life conditions, such as tight class schedules and limited time, lead both informants to adopt flexible eating patterns, such as eating only when hungry. These findings are in line with the report by Ningrum et al. (2022), which observed changes in students’ eating patterns post-pandemic, where time and energy constraints often hinder consistent healthy eating. Nevertheless, as shown in the studies of Nabilah and Ekayanti (2024) and the institutional “Free Nutritious Meal” program at IPB University, the campus environment tends to have a more visible impact on snacking habits or consumption of convenience foods, rather than determining main food preferences.

Considering all these findings, it can be concluded that cultural values rooted in family and regional culinary identity are the two dominant forces shaping students’ eating patterns. Other factors, such as health values, selective eating habits, and campus life structure serve more as adaptive elements that adjust eating practices without displacing the deeply embedded core values. This implies that nutrition education policies or programs implemented in higher education settings should take into account the cultural dimensions inherent in students. Offering healthy menus based on regional dishes and involving families as partners in the educational process would be more effective in promoting healthy eating patterns that are also strongly grounded in students’ identities and values.

Dominant Cultural Factors in Shaping the Food Consumption Patterns of Students

The cultural values that most significantly shape food consumption patterns among IPB University students lie in the role of family, particularly the mother figure, and students’ attachment to the culinary identity of their regions of origin. The experiences shared by two informants, MK from Banten and K from Pekalongan, demonstrate that their current eating habits did not emerge suddenly in the campus environment, but rather resulted from a long process that began during childhood. MK grew up with staple foods like rice and tofu, and began limiting sugar intake after experiencing obesity. She mentions that food decisions still refer to her mother’s habits, even when the rhythm of university life forces her to eat irregularly. On the other hand, K brought healthy and consistent eating patterns from home, such as consuming boiled sweet potato, turmeric herbal drink, and galangal rice drink. She refers to herself as a “picky eater,” a term indicating high selectivity toward consumed foods, and this makes her tend not to be easily influenced by food choices available in campus cafeterias. Both stories affirm the views of Maigoda et al. (2020) and Jusriani (2023), that eating values inherited through generations within families play a fundamental role and remain strong, even when someone is in an environment that is very different socially and culturally.

Another equally dominant important factor is attachment to regional food identity. For MK, foods like *sate bandeng* and *nasi gonjlang* are not merely culinary choices, but cultural symbols she takes pride in. Meanwhile, K shows loyalty to *megono*, a traditional dish made from jackfruit that is characteristic of her region of origin, Pekalongan. This attitude shows that food choices are not only related to nutritional fulfillment or personal taste, but are also closely related to efforts to maintain identity in a multicultural environment like campus. This finding aligns with studies by Roza et al. (2023) stating that regional specialties are often used to nurture collective cultural memory, as well as research by Trisutaguna et al. (2025) that views local cuisine as “symbolic boundaries” in facing the currents of modernization and globalization. Thus, in the context of students, traditional food functions as an important identity affirmation tool amid rapid social change.

Besides these two main factors, there are also other elements that contribute to shaping students’ eating practices, although their influence is more situational. Health norms associated with personal experiences, such as sugar restrictions for MK or herbal consumption habits for K, show that health awareness is often shaped by family experiences and not solely due to external pressure. In K’s case, the “picky eater” character becomes a reflection of personal habitus formed since childhood and plays a role in filtering

environmental influences. Meanwhile, campus life conditions such as busy class schedules and time constraints make both informants choose flexible eating patterns, namely eating only when hungry. This finding aligns with reports by Ningrum et al. (2022) observing changes in student eating patterns post-pandemic, where time and energy factors often become barriers to consistent healthy eating. Nevertheless, as shown in studies by Nabilah and Ekayanti (2024) and the institutional program "Free Nutritious Meals" at IPB University, campus environment influence tends to be more apparent in snacking habits or practical food consumption, compared to determining main food preferences.

Considering the findings of this study, cultural values rooted in family upbringing and regional culinary identity emerged as dominant influences on the eating patterns of PPKU IPB University students. This conclusion is supported by interview data showing that informants consistently referred to family food practices, particularly those learned at home, as primary references in determining daily food choices. Preferences for traditional dishes such as regional staples and herbal drinks were repeatedly expressed and maintained even under campus constraints, indicating that these practices function as enduring cultural anchors rather than incidental habits.

The results also indicate that other factors, including health-related considerations, selective eating behavior, and the structure of campus life, influence how eating practices are adjusted in everyday situations. Informants described modifying meal timing, portion size, or food availability in response to academic schedules and facility limitations, yet these adjustments did not replace their core preferences for culturally familiar foods. Instead, such factors operated as adaptive mechanisms that allowed students to negotiate between cultural values and situational demands.

These empirical patterns suggest that student eating behavior is shaped by an interaction between deeply internalized cultural values and contextual conditions within the university environment. Therefore, the findings imply that nutrition education and food provision programs in higher education settings should align with students' cultural orientations. Interventions that incorporate familiar regional dishes and acknowledge the role of family-based food socialization are more likely to resonate with students' lived experiences and support sustainable dietary practices, as evidenced by the consistency between reported values and observed behaviors in this study.

The Meaning of the Relationship Between Culture, Identity, and Food Choices in the Daily Lives of Students

The food choices made by PPKU IPB University students on campus are not merely responses to nutritional needs but also represent a complex construction of cultural identity. In-depth interviews with student informants reveal that the traditional foods they consume are not only nutritious but also rich in symbolic meaning, serving as representations of identity and cultural heritage. Dishes such as *megono* serve as tangible expressions of their affection for their cultural origins, which they believe must not be forgotten. They feel that each serving of traditional food carries stories about their family and regional backgrounds, which in turn reinforces their pride in their own identity. Despite exposure to a multicultural campus lifestyle, many PPKU IPB students continue to maintain the habit of consuming regional specialty foods, such as *sate bandeng* and *nasi gongleng*, which have been integral parts of their lives since childhood.

Conceptually, the meaning embedded in traditional food as a marker of identity constitutes an institutionalization of cultural values. Food is not merely seen as a consumable product, but also as a symbolic medium that expresses values of togetherness, kinship, and cultural continuity. This is in line with research by Roza et al. (2023), which suggests that traditional regional foods play a strategic role in preserving social and cultural identity, where the symbolism attached to food can strengthen social cohesion and foster a sense of belonging to one's cultural heritage. The practice of consuming traditional foods thus becomes a means for PPKU IPB students to uphold their identity, even within a highly heterogeneous environment and in the midst of modernization.

Furthermore, the interview findings highlight the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity. Although IPB University students live in an era of globalization, where modern food choices are increasingly diverse, the tendency to return to or preserve traditional food consumption reflects deep-rooted cultural resistance. They perceive that changes in eating patterns due to adaptation to the campus environment do not necessarily erode the values instilled since childhood. Instead, these adaptations occur selectively, with core values inherited through the family still serving as primary references in choosing what to eat. This selective process creates a space for students to preserve cultural values in a continuum, while still adjusting to the social realities around them.

In a study by Trisutaguna et al. (2025), this phenomenon is interpreted as a “zone of identity negotiation” between local traditions and the dynamics of modernity. According to this research, traditional food functions as a symbolic marker that not only reinforces cultural aspects but also clarifies the boundaries of self-identity amidst various external influences. Moreover, PPKU IPB students who view food choices as an extension of their identity tend to demonstrate a high level of cultural awareness. This awareness then shapes food practices that are not purely pragmatic but instead reflect a conscious engagement with ancestral values and traditions.

From an anthropological perspective, food serves as a medium of communication among individuals, conveying cultural messages. In this context, every menu choice carries its own meaning for example, the reluctance to consume foods that do not align with the tastes or norms internalized since childhood. Many PPKU IPB students believe that traditional foods are not only about flavor but also a means of preserving identity, allowing them to feel “connected” to their origins and family cultural values. Thus, even in a new environment that offers numerous alternative lifestyles, students often choose to maintain eating habits rich in symbolic meaning.

This duality between adaptation and cultural preservation in food choices also indicates that the process of cultural socialization does not end in adolescence but continues and evolves with changing social environments. Food practices that are consciously performed as expressions of cultural identity contribute to character formation and group solidarity among students. This process illustrates how cultural values can transcend physical and spatial boundaries and persist in an increasingly complex globalized context.

Moreover, choosing traditional food as a form of identity expression can also be seen as a response to cultural homogenization, which increasingly erodes local diversity. In the campus setting, students often face pressure to conform to general habits, yet the decision to continue consuming foods that reflect their cultural origins illustrates the enduring power of cultural values. This not only provides symbolic strength to the individual but also holds the potential to inform culturally sensitive nutrition education and health promotion programs. By integrating cultural values into health interventions, efforts to improve nutritional quality can go beyond technical solutions to address aspects of identity and social sustainability.

Thus, the field findings demonstrate that the cultural meaning and identity embedded in food choices are inseparable from the social dynamics of PPKU IPB University students. The practice of maintaining traditional food consumption represents a form of resistance to changes that may erode cultural diversity. Although adapting to a new environment is a necessity, the values carried from home and one’s place of origin remain the core foundation in determining their food preferences.

4. Conclusion

This study shows that cultural values have a strong influence on the eating patterns of PPKU IPB University students. Eating habits formed from an early age, particularly through family traditions and regional cuisines, tend to persist even when students are in a multicultural and dynamic campus environment. Food is perceived not only as a nutritional necessity but also as a symbol of identity and cultural heritage.

The most dominant cultural factor shaping eating habits is the internalization of family values and a sense of pride in traditional foods. In practice, students display selective behavior and tend to prioritize foods that reflect their cultural background, even when adapting to campus life.

Therefore, students’ consumption patterns result from the interaction between culture, identity, and social realities. Hence, nutrition and health programs on campus should not only focus on technical aspects but also consider the cultural contexts surrounding students. Providing healthy food options based on regional flavors and involving families in nutrition education can be a more relevant and sustainable strategy to promote healthy eating patterns that are deeply rooted in cultural identity.

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