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Thoughts, Behaviors, and Beliefs About Food and Body Image Among College Freshmen



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Abstract

Background: College-aged students are most susceptible to develop eating disorders as the transition from high school to college is a prevalent time for triggers and precursors to occur. By studying the behaviors and thoughts of college freshmen, awareness of the triggers the students may experience can be brought to them.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to assess and analyze the overall thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors about food and body image among college freshmen. The study aims to produce data that will allow more understanding of how the college freshmen at Ouachita Baptist University think and feel about their food intake and body image.

Methods: The survey, which consisted of a 20-question Google Form, was sent via Group Me to a convenience sample of various social clubs at Ouachita Baptist University. Data was analyzed using Google Sheets.

Results: Forty-eight freshmen college students participated in the study. Of the 48 participants, 85.4% (41) were female, and 14.6% (7) were male. Overall, the results of the study were consistent with the review of literature previously researched. The participants showed differences in thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of food and body image before and since coming to college.

Conclusion: The results prove for research to be continued in this subject, with the hope of awareness and education about eating disorder triggers for the college students.

Introduction

Eating disorders are serious, but treatable mental and physical illnesses that can affect people of all genders, ages, races, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, body shapes, and weights.

Approximately 30 million Americans will struggle with an eating disorder in their lifetime.¹ Because of the prevalence of eating disorders nationwide, and their statistical proven nature to come about in those ages 18-24, it is significant to study the effects that body image, food behaviors, and stress may have on triggering an eating disorder in a college student.

There are several types of eating disorders, which include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge-eating disorder, and other specified feeding or eating disorders (OSFED).² These are all equally life threatening and dangerous to the individual, as eating disorders have the second highest mortality rate of any mental illness.³ The study has significant value because many factors such as stress, body image, eating habits, and exercise behaviors contribute to eating disorders in college students. Thus, awareness and prevention of eating disorders on a college campus needs to be evaluated.

Methodology

After a review of literature, a survey was created to further understand first year college student's beliefs about food and their body image. The survey, which consists of 20 questions, was pilot tested before being submitted to Ouachita Baptist University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in February 2023. The survey included an informed consent form attached to the survey that must be completed before the questionnaire, in which the identity of participants is hidden from the creator of the survey. Once approved by the IRB, participants were recruited by a convenience sample. The participants involved in this study are first-year college students from the ages of 18 to 20 at Ouachita Baptist University.

For statistical analysis, the google form was uploaded into google sheets to graphically display data in charts and graphs.

Results

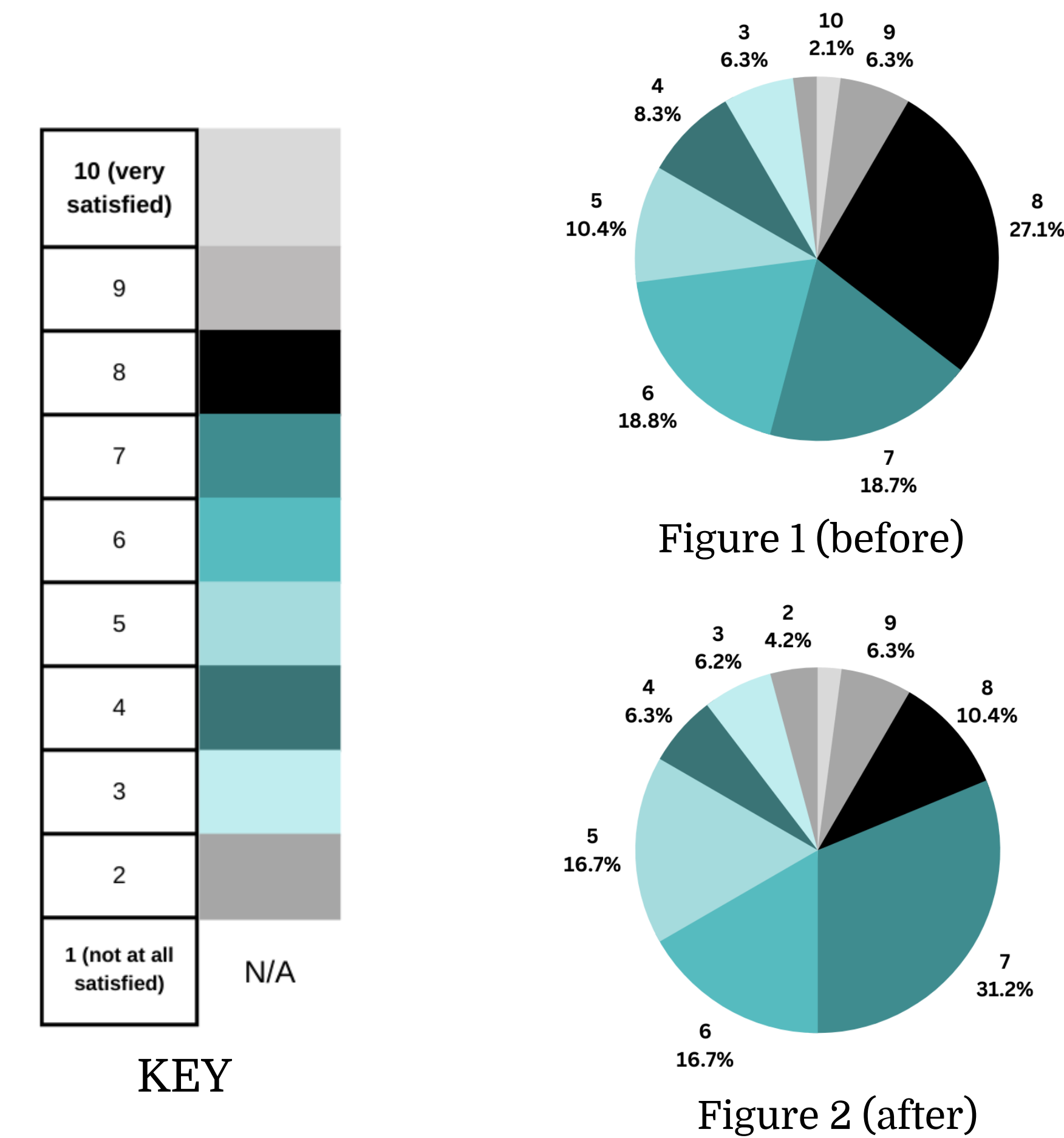
A total of 48 college freshmen, including 41 females (85.4%) and seven males (14.6%), participated in our research study. Eighty-nine and a half percent (43) of the participants admitted they do classify foods as good or bad, while the remaining 11.5% (5) participants said they do not classify foods at all. A large number of participants reported their average consumption of fruits and vegetables decreased when comparing before college and since coming to college. See Table 1 for details.

Table 1 Comparison of the average consumption of fruits and vegetables of participants before college and since coming to college.

Frequency of Consumption	Consumption of Fruits & Vegetables Before College	Consumption of Fruits & Vegetables Since College
Everyday	52.1% (25)	27.1% (13)
3 Times a Week	35.4% (17)	45.8% (22)
Rarely	8.3% (4)	22.9% (11)
Never	4.2% (2)	4.2% (2)

A large number of participants reported being less satisfied with their body since coming to college than they were before college. They ranked their feeling on a scale of 1-10, 10 being very satisfied and 1 being not at all satisfied with their body. See Figures 1 and 2.

Figures 1 and 2 Comparison of how satisfied participants feel about their bodies before and since coming to college.



Beyond their own personal feelings, most participants indicated their friends, family, and social media influenced their thoughts about their bodies. See Table 2 for more details.

Table 2 Comparison of influences on participants' thoughts about their bodies and body image.

Influences	Number of Participants
Personal Feelings	95.8% (46)
Friends	56.3% (27)
Family	45.8% (22)
Social Media	47.9% (23)
Other	16.6% (8)

When asked who influences your thoughts most about how you view nutrition, 81.3% (39) answered their personal feelings, 79.2% (38) answered their family, 50% (24) answered their friends, and 52.1% (25) answered social media. When asked about the reasons for which the participants choose to exercise, 79.2% (38) answered their mental health, and 79.2% (38) also said their physical health. 50% (24) answered to control their weight, 60.4% (29) answered to control how their body looks, 45.8% (22) answered "for fun", 58.3% (28) said to reduce stress, and only 20.8% (10) participants answered that they are a collegiate athlete. Thirty-seven (77.1%) participants said they do think about the way food and exercise affect the way their bodies look, and 22.9% (11) answered "sometimes". Zero of the participants answered "no" to this question.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to assess and analyze the overall thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors about food and body image among college freshmen. The goal of this study was to collect meaningful data that informs how college freshmen, specifically at Ouachita Baptist University, think about their food intake and body image. As seen in the results, many college freshmen that were surveyed do think about their bodies often, feel they are not consuming a well-balanced diet, classify foods, are influenced by friends and social media about food and body image, and have a feeling of guilt when they do not exercise. These results are important to the review of literature previously stated in this paper, as these are all factors that can eventually lead to eating disorders, and disordered eating. Eating disorders are most common among the ages of college students, and this research study also proves that college freshmen have the precursor symptoms that can trigger an eating disorder. Eating disorders are dangerous, and the results from this study need to produce awareness of these patterns and provide hope and help to those who need it most. This study indicates that college campuses need to support college students in establishing a positive relationship with food and their bodies as they enter college.

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