

## From Plate To Body: How Students Consume Food And Physical Activity For Health

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### ABSTRACT

Universities are critical settings in which students develop everyday practices related to food consumption and physical activity that shape long-term health and well-being. This qualitative study examines how students in Philippine state colleges consume food and physical activity as interconnected practices through which health is constructed, experienced, and negotiated within public higher education. Guided by Consumer Culture Theory, embodiment theory, and a lifestyle consumption perspective, the study employed an interpretive qualitative design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 undergraduate students from selected state colleges. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach. Findings reveal that students experience food and physical activity not as separate health behaviors but as relational and mutually reinforcing practices embedded in daily routines. Food was interpreted as both fuel and reward for movement, while physical activity functioned as compensation and moral balance for food consumption. Students attached strong emotional and moral meanings to these practices, linking health to responsibility, discipline, emotional balance, and self-worth. Institutional contexts, including academic schedules, campus food environments, financial constraints, and curricular physical education requirements, significantly shaped how students ate and moved. Faced with these constraints, students actively negotiated health ideals by redefining healthy living as effort, balance, and sustainability rather than perfection. The study contributes to consumer and health research by conceptualizing student health as an embodied, culturally situated consumption process shaped by institutional structures, offering insights for health promotion and policy development within Philippine public higher education.

**Keywords:** food consumption; physical activity; student health; consumer culture; embodiment; state colleges

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Universities have increasingly been recognized as critical social environments in which young adults establish enduring health-related behaviors, particularly those involving food consumption and physical activity. The transition to higher education often coincides with increased autonomy, academic pressure, and changing social routines, all of which can disrupt previously established dietary and movement practices (Deforche et al., 2015). Globally, insufficient physical activity remains highly prevalent among young adults, with university-aged populations showing consistently low compliance with physical activity guidelines (Guthold et al., 2018). At the same time, dietary quality among college students frequently declines during this period, characterized by irregular meals, increased consumption of energy-dense foods, and reliance on convenience eating (Deliens et al., 2014).

Within higher education research, food intake and physical activity are often treated as separate health behaviors. However, emerging evidence suggests that

students experience these practices as interconnected lifestyle routines rather than isolated actions. Studies indicate that dietary behavior and physical activity cluster together as lifestyle patterns shaped by daily schedules, stress, and environmental constraints (Liang et al., 2018). Students frequently describe eating decisions in relation to movement, such as modifying food intake based on exercise participation or using physical activity to compensate for dietary choices, highlighting the relational nature of health practices in everyday life (Blue et al., 2014)

Despite growing attention to student health, state colleges and public universities remain underrepresented in the literature, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. State colleges typically serve students from more socioeconomically diverse backgrounds and operate under greater resource constraints than private institutions. These structural conditions shape how health is practiced and experienced. Research on higher education food insecurity shows that limited financial resources strongly influence students' food choices, often prioritizing affordability and satiety over nutritional value (Hicks, 2017). Philippine-based studies similarly indicate

that food insecurity is present among public university students, suggesting that healthy eating cannot be understood without considering institutional and economic contexts (Chen et al., 2022).

Campus food environments further mediate students' consumption practices. In state colleges, canteen pricing, food availability, and perceived value play a significant role in shaping daily eating routines (Larson et al., 2018). These environments function as localized marketplaces where students negotiate health ideals against financial and temporal constraints. As consumer research has emphasized, consumption decisions are rarely purely individual; they are embedded in institutional arrangements and cultural expectations that guide what is accessible, acceptable, and routine (Weder et al., 2025).

Similarly, opportunities for physical activity in state colleges are structured by institutional resources, curricular requirements, and campus infrastructure. While physical education courses and sports programs can promote active lifestyles, their impact is shaped by academic workload, facility access, and organizational support (Brown et al., 2024). Among Filipino college students, physical activity has been shown to remain a significant predictor of well-being and psychological health, particularly in the post-pandemic period (Baloran, 2020). However, participation in movement practices is uneven, reflecting differences in institutional provision and student capacity to engage consistently.

From a consumer-oriented perspective, health among college students can be understood as an embodied consumption process, where food and movement are consumed not only as functional inputs but as meaningful practices that signal discipline, balance, and self-care (Schut, 2021). Consumer culture research has highlighted that health-related behaviors often carry moral and emotional meanings, with eating and exercise framed in terms of responsibility, control, reward, and compensation (Gugglberger, 2018). Among students, "healthy eating" may represent discipline, while indulgence is justified through physical activity, revealing how health is negotiated through everyday trade-offs rather than strict adherence to guidelines.

In the Philippine state college context, these negotiations are intensified by institutional schedules, mandatory physical education programs, limited food options, and financial constraints. Yet, much of the existing research remains quantitative and behavior-focused, offering limited insight into how students make sense of food and movement in their daily lives. There remains a clear gap in qualitative, context-sensitive research that examines how students in state colleges integrate food consumption and physical activity as interconnected practices in constructing health and well-being.

To address this gap, the present study adopts an interpretive, qualitative approach to examine how students in a Philippine state college consume food and physical activity as part of their everyday health practices. By focusing on lived experiences and embodied meanings, this study seeks to contribute to consumer research and student health literature by conceptualizing health not merely as an outcome, but as a lived, negotiated

consumption experience shaped by institutional and cultural contexts.

### Research Questions

This study examines how students in selected Philippine state colleges construct and experience health through the interconnected consumption of food and physical activity within the context of public higher education. Guided by a consumer and embodiment perspective, the study is anchored on the following research questions:

How do students interpret food choices and physical activity as interconnected consumption practices in their everyday lives?

What meanings, emotions, and moral judgments do students attach to food consumption and movement in relation to health?

How do institutional contexts within state shape students' food and movement consumption practices?

How do students negotiate constraints while attempting to live out personal and institutional ideals of "healthy living"?

### Theoretical Lens

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical lens drawing from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), embodiment theory, and lifestyle consumption perspectives to examine how students in Philippine state colleges construct health through the interconnected consumption of food and physical activity. From a consumer culture perspective, health is understood not merely as a biomedical outcome but as a culturally mediated practice shaped by everyday consumption, social norms, and institutional contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Food choices and movement routines are conceptualized as consumption practices through which students produce meanings, express values, and negotiate expectations surrounding discipline, balance, and responsibility for health within public higher education settings (Schut, 2021).

Embodiment theory further informs this study by positioning the body as a central site of lived experience, meaning, and knowledge. Rather than treating the body as an object to be optimized, embodiment perspectives emphasize how health is experienced through sensations such as energy, fatigue, hunger, strength, and emotional regulation (Dadich & Khan, 2020). Through repeated engagement with food and movement practices, students internalize health as a felt and practical form of knowing that guides everyday decisions. This lens enables the study to capture how students "feel healthy" and how bodily feedback becomes central in negotiating eating and physical activity under constraints of time, finances, and academic demands.

Finally, the lifestyle consumption perspective situates food and physical activity within broader patterns of everyday life, emphasizing routine, continuity, and integration rather than isolated behaviors. From this view, health emerges as a lifestyle project maintained through the alignment of eating habits, physical activity, academic

responsibilities, and social life. In state college contexts, where institutional schedules, campus food environments, and physical education requirements structure daily routines, lifestyle consumption highlights how students actively negotiate structural constraints while striving for balance and sustainability in their health practices. Together, these theoretical perspectives allow the study to conceptualize student health as an embodied, culturally situated consumption process shaped by institutional structures and lived experience within Philippine public higher education.

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design to explore how students in Philippine state colleges construct meanings of health through the interconnected consumption of food and physical activity. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study seeks to understand lived experiences, subjective meanings, and everyday practices, rather than to measure variables or establish causal relationships. Consistent with Creswell’s framework, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to examine complex phenomena within their real-life contexts, particularly when meaning, culture, and experience are central to the research focus (Creswell, 2013).

Guided by an interpretivist orientation, the study draws on phenomenological principles, emphasizing how participants experience and make sense of food and movement as embodied aspects of daily life. An inductive approach was employed, enabling patterns and themes to emerge from participants’ narratives rather than being imposed a priori. This design aligns with the study’s theoretical lens by situating health as a culturally and institutionally shaped consumption process, allowing for an in-depth examination of how everyday eating and physical activity practices are negotiated within the context of Philippine public higher education.

### Research Setting

The study was conducted in selected Philippine state colleges operating within the public higher education system. State colleges serve a diverse student population, many of whom come from economically constrained backgrounds, and function within institutional environments shaped by limited resources, structured academic schedules, and standardized health and physical education requirements. These institutions provide a relevant setting for examining how students consume food and engage in physical activity as part of their everyday health practices, as access to food options, physical activity facilities, and health-related programs is largely mediated by institutional provision.

The campus environment in state colleges plays a central role in shaping students’ daily routines related to eating and movement. Food consumption is influenced by campus canteens, nearby food vendors, and students’ financial allowances, while physical activity is shaped by physical education courses, sports programs, and available open spaces for movement. Situating the study

within this context allows for an in-depth exploration of how institutional structures, resource constraints, and everyday campus life intersect to shape students’ embodied experiences and meanings of health within Philippine public higher education.

### Participants and Sampling

Participants in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in selected Philippine state colleges within the public higher education system. Consistent with qualitative research principles, participants were selected based on their capacity to provide information-rich accounts of everyday food consumption and physical activity practices as part of their health and well-being (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age, currently enrolled during the data collection period, and to have completed at least one academic semester in the institution to ensure sufficient exposure to campus food environments, physical education programs, and movement spaces. Participants were also required to engage in routine food-related decision-making, such as choosing meals, budgeting for food, or selecting food sources on or near campus, and to participate in some form of physical activity, whether structured or unstructured. Both student-athletes and non-athletes were included to capture variation in health consumption experiences across different forms of engagement with movement and institutional expectations.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants who could meaningfully reflect on the interconnected consumption of food and physical activity within the state college context. Students below 18 years of age, those not currently enrolled as undergraduates, and individuals with minimal exposure to on-campus life were excluded from the study. Graduate students, exchange students, and non-degree enrollees were also excluded due to differences in institutional routines and responsibilities. To maintain analytic focus on everyday health consumption practices, students with medical conditions requiring highly specialized dietary management or severe restrictions on physical activity were excluded unless such conditions were central to the research focus. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new substantive insights emerged from successive interviews, in line with Creswell’s recommendations for sample adequacy in qualitative inquiry.

**Table 1**  
Profile of Study Participants (N = 15)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency
Sex	Male	7
	Female	8
Age (years)	18–19	4

Characteristic	Category	Frequency
	20–21	6
	22–23	3
	24 and above	2
<b>Year Level</b>	First Year	4
	Second Year	5
	Third Year	4
	Fourth Year	2
<b>Student Category</b>	Student-athlete	6
	Non-athlete	9
<b>Primary Physical Activity Engagement</b>	Organized sport / varsity	6
	Physical education classes	4
	Recreational or lifestyle activity	5
<b>Primary Food Source on Campus</b>	Campus canteen / food stalls	10
	Near-campus food vendors	5
<b>Length of Enrollment in Institution</b>	1–2 semesters	6
	3–4 semesters	5
	More than 4 semesters	4

### Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit in-depth accounts of students' experiences with food consumption and physical activity as part of their everyday health practices. The use of a semi-structured interview is consistent with qualitative research approaches that seek to explore participants' lived experiences, meanings, and interpretations while allowing flexibility to probe emerging insights during data collection. This format enabled the researcher to maintain alignment with the study's research questions while remaining responsive to participants' narratives.

The interview guide was informed by the study's theoretical lens, Consumer Culture Theory, embodiment theory, and lifestyle consumption perspectives, and was organized around key domains including everyday food

practices, physical activity routines, meanings of health and well-being, and institutional influences within the state college context. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on how food and movement are experienced as interconnected practices, while follow-up probes explored emotions, values, and constraints shaping these practices. The instrument was reviewed for clarity and cultural appropriateness prior to data collection, and interviews were conducted in English or Filipino based on participant preference. In line with Creswell's recommendations, the instrument was used flexibly to allow the interview process to evolve while ensuring consistency and rigor across participants.

### Data Gathering Procedures

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with undergraduate students from selected Philippine state colleges. After securing the necessary institutional permissions, participants were recruited using purposive sampling based on the established inclusion criteria. Eligible students were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and ethical considerations, including confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for the participants and were conducted either face-to-face in a private setting on campus or through an online platform, depending on participant availability and preference. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accurate documentation of responses, consistent with qualitative data collection practices.

The interview process followed the semi-structured interview guide, allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions as participants shared their experiences with food consumption, physical activity, and health. Data collection and preliminary analysis occurred concurrently, enabling the researcher to refine questions and explore emerging insights in subsequent interviews. Recruitment and interviewing continued until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new substantive information emerged from additional interviews. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis. To protect participant confidentiality, identifying information was removed from transcripts, and all data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes to achieve familiarization with the data, with particular attention to participants' narratives concerning everyday food consumption, physical activity, and perceptions of health. Initial codes were then generated inductively to capture meaningful features of students' experiences, including routines,

constraints, emotions, and decision-making processes related to eating and movement within the state college context. Coding was conducted across the entire dataset to ensure consistency while remaining open to unexpected insights emerging from participants' accounts.

Subsequently, codes were organized and examined to identify broader patterns of meaning, leading to the development, review, and refinement of themes that captured how food and physical activity were consumed as interconnected health practices. Interpretation throughout the analytic process was guided by the study's integrated theoretical lens. Consumer Culture Theory sensitized the analysis to how food and movement function as consumption practices embedded in institutional norms and everyday student life (Arnould & Thompson, 2018), while embodiment theory foregrounded lived bodily experiences such as energy, fatigue, hunger, and physical competence in shaping understandings of health (Lyons & Chamberlain, 2016; Ryba et al., 2017). In addition, a lifestyle consumption perspective informed interpretations of how students integrate eating and movement into routine patterns that reflect balance, discipline, and sustainability under structural constraints (Warde, 2016). This iterative and theoretically informed process resulted in a coherent set of themes that reflect health as an embodied, culturally situated consumption experience shaped by institutional conditions within Philippine public higher education.

## Results

### The Interconnected Consumption of Food and Physical Activity in Everyday Student Life

This section examined how students interpret food choices and physical activity as interconnected consumption practices in their everyday lives within the state college context. Findings indicate that students do not experience eating and movement as separate health behaviors, but as mutually reinforcing practices that together shape their sense of health, balance, and bodily management. Food and physical activity were consistently described as relational—food providing energy or reward for movement, and movement serving as justification or compensation for eating. These practices were further embedded in daily routines shaped by academic schedules, campus environments, and financial constraints. Three major themes emerged: (1) Food as Fuel and Reward for Movement, (2) Movement as Compensation and Moral Balance, and (3) Routine-Based Integration of Eating and Movement.

**Table 2.** Emerging Themes on Students' Interconnected Food and Physical Activity Practices

Major Theme	Description
Food as Fuel and Reward	Food is consumed to support physical activity and as a reward after bodily effort

Major Theme	Description
Movement as Compensation and Moral Balance	Physical activity is used to justify or offset food choices, especially indulgent eating
Routine-Based Integration	Eating and movement are integrated into daily routines shaped by campus life

### Food as Fuel and Reward for Movement

Students commonly interpreted food as closely linked to their engagement in physical activity, describing meals as fuel that enables them to participate in sports, physical education classes, or daily movement across campus. Participants reported being mindful of what and how much they eat depending on anticipated physical activity, particularly on days with PE classes or training sessions. At the same time, food was also framed as a reward following physical exertion, especially after physically or mentally demanding days.

“Kung naa koy PE or daghan kog lakaw sa school, mokaon gyud ko ug tarong kay kinahanglan ug kusog ang lawas.”

(If I have PE or a lot of walking in school, I really eat properly because the body needs energy.) (P4)

“Human ug exercise, murag deserve na nimo mokaon bisan unsa kay kapoy man pud.”

(After exercising, it feels like you deserve to eat anything because you're tired.) (P8)

These accounts suggest that students experience food consumption not only in terms of nutrition, but as part of an embodied logic of effort, energy, and recovery that supports everyday movement.

### Movement as Compensation and Moral Balance

Participants also described physical activity as a way of compensating for food intake, particularly when consuming foods perceived as unhealthy or excessive. Movement was often framed as a strategy to manage guilt and restore a sense of balance after eating fried food, sweets, or fast food commonly available near campus. In this sense, physical activity functioned as a moral counterbalance to eating practices.

“Kung mokaon ko ug daghan or junk food, murag kinahanglan gyud nako maglakaw-lakaw or mag-exercise sunod adlaw.”

(If I eat a lot or junk food, I feel like I really need to walk or exercise the next day.) (P6)

“Mura'g pangbayad ang exercise sa imong gikaon.”

(Exercise feels like payment for what you ate.) (P11)

These narratives indicate that students interpret movement as a means of justifying food choices and maintaining a personal sense of being healthy, even in the absence of strict dietary control.

### Routine-Based Integration of Eating and Movement

Students’ interpretations of food and physical activity were deeply embedded in daily routines structured by state college life. Academic schedules, class locations, campus food options, and financial allowances influenced when and how students ate and moved. Many participants described movement, such as walking between buildings or attending PE classes—as naturally integrated into their daily routines, with food consumption adjusted accordingly.

“Dili na gyud siya plan nga exercise. Apil na siya sa adlaw-adlaw—lakaw sa klase, kaon in between, PE kung naa.”

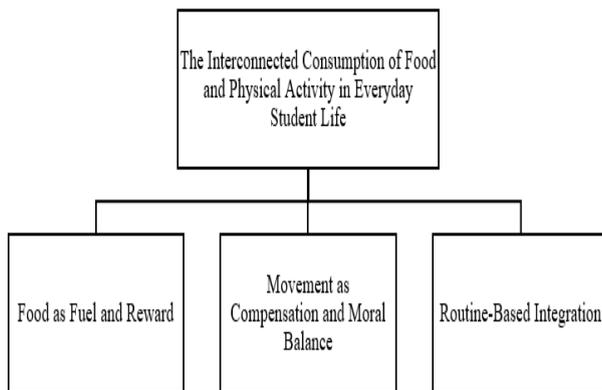
(It’s not really planned exercise. It’s already part of daily life—walking to class, eating in between, PE if there is.) (P2)

“Kung unsay oras sa klase, mao pud oras sa kaon ug lihok.”

(Whatever the class schedule is, that’s also when eating and movement happen.) (P9)

These experiences show that students do not separate health into deliberate planning of diet and exercise, but instead live it through habitual, routine-based practices shaped by institutional and environmental conditions.

**Figure 1.** Students’ Interpretation of Food and Physical Activity as Interconnected Consumption Practices



**Meanings, Emotions, and Moral Judgments Attached to Food and Physical Activity**

This section examined the meanings, emotions, and moral judgments that students attach to food consumption and physical activity in relation to health. Findings indicate that students experience eating and movement not only as practical behaviors but as emotionally and morally charged practices through which they evaluate themselves as disciplined, responsible, or failing to meet health ideals. Food and physical activity were imbued with feelings of guilt, pride, control, and self-worth, and were frequently used by students to judge their own healthiness and personal discipline. Five major themes emerged: (1) Healthy Eating as Moral Responsibility, (2) Food-Induced Guilt and Justification, (3) Movement as Proof of Discipline, (4) Health as Emotional Balance, and (5) Self-Worth Tied to Bodily Management.

**Table 3.** Emerging Themes on Meanings, Emotions, and Moral Judgments Related to Food and Movement

Major Theme	Description
Healthy Eating as Moral Responsibility	Eating “right” is viewed as a personal obligation tied to being healthy
Food-Induced Guilt and Justification	Certain foods evoke guilt that requires explanation or compensation
Movement as Proof of Discipline	Physical activity serves as evidence of self-control and responsibility
Health as Emotional Balance	Feeling healthy is linked to emotional calm and reduced stress
Self-Worth and Bodily Management	Health practices influence self-evaluation and confidence

**Healthy Eating as Moral Responsibility**

Students commonly framed healthy eating as a moral obligation, emphasizing that food choices reflected personal responsibility and discipline. Eating nutritious food was associated with being a “good” and “responsible” student, while unhealthy eating was viewed as a personal shortcoming rather than a result of external constraints.

“Kung di ka mokaon ug tarong, murag sala na nimo kay kabalo naman ka unsay sakto.” (If you don’t eat properly, it feels like it’s your fault because you already know what’s right.) (P1)

“Mura’g responsibility gyud nimo sa imong kaugalingon ang kaon.” (Eating feels like a responsibility to yourself.) (P7)

These narratives suggest that food consumption is moralized, with health framed as a matter of personal choice and accountability.

**Food-Induced Guilt and Justification**

Participants frequently expressed feelings of guilt after consuming foods perceived as unhealthy, such as fried food, sweets, or fast food. These emotions prompted students to justify their choices by referencing stress, lack of time, or financial limitations, or by planning compensatory behaviors.

“Kung mokaon kog junk food, naa gyud gamayng guilt, pero muingon ko nga kapoy man gud ang adlaw.” (When I eat junk food, there’s always some guilt, but I tell myself the day was tiring.) (P4)

“Makaingon ka nga okay ra kay mubawi ra man ka sunod.” (You tell yourself it’s okay because you’ll make up for it later.) (P10)

These accounts show that food consumption is emotionally charged and often requires moral explanation or future-oriented justification.

### Movement as Proof of Discipline

Physical activity was consistently framed as evidence of self-discipline and control, particularly when students felt their eating habits were imperfect. Exercising allowed students to reaffirm their identity as health-conscious individuals, even when their diets did not fully align with health ideals.

“Bisan dili kaayo healthy akong kaon, basta ga-exercise ko, murag okay ra gihapon.” (Even if my food isn’t very healthy, as long as I exercise, it still feels okay.) (P3)

“Ang exercise mura’g proof nga ga-atiman gihapon ka sa imong lawas.” (Exercise feels like proof that you’re still taking care of your body.) (P6)

These narratives indicate that movement carries moral weight, functioning as a visible marker of responsibility and effort.

### Health as Emotional Balance

Beyond physical outcomes, students described health as a state of emotional balance, closely tied to how food and movement made them feel. Eating well and engaging in physical activity were associated with reduced stress, improved mood, and a sense of calm amid academic pressure.

“Kung maka-exercise ko, mas hayahay akong pamati bisan stress sa klase.” (When I exercise, I feel lighter even with class stress.) (P9)

“Kung tarong akong kaon, murag mas okay pud akong mood.” (When I eat properly, my mood also feels better.) (P12)

These experiences suggest that students evaluate health emotionally, prioritizing how practices affect mental and emotional well-being.

### Self-Worth and Bodily Management

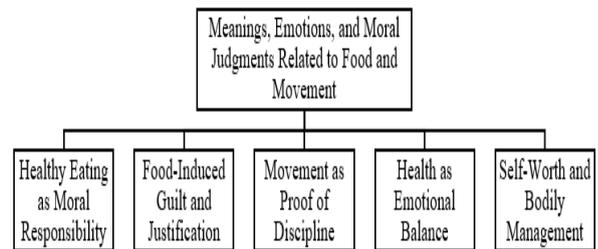
Finally, students linked food and movement practices to self-worth and confidence, using bodily management as a basis for self-evaluation. Maintaining routines around eating and physical activity contributed to feelings of control and competence, while lapses were associated with disappointment and self-criticism.

“Kung consistent ko sa kaon ug lihok, murag mas nindot akong tan-aw sa akong kaugalingon.” (When I’m consistent with eating and movement, I feel better about myself.) (P5)

“Kung makalapas ko sa akong routine, murag madisappoint ko sa akong kaugalingon.” (When I break my routine, I feel disappointed in myself.) (P14)

These accounts indicate that health practices extend beyond physical outcomes, shaping students’ emotional self-assessment and sense of personal worth.

**Figure 2.** Emotional and Moral Dimensions of Food and Physical Activity Consumption



### Institutional Contexts Shaping Food and Movement Consumption Practices

This section examined how institutional contexts within Philippine state colleges shape students’ food and physical activity consumption practices. Findings indicate that students’ eating and movement behaviors are deeply structured by institutional schedules, campus food environments, and formal physical activity requirements. Rather than being purely individual choices, food and movement practices were experienced as responses to academic timetables, availability of campus resources, and institutional expectations embedded in public higher education. Three major themes emerged: (1) Academic Schedules Structuring Eating and Movement, (2) Campus Food Environments and Financial Constraints, and (3) Institutionalized Physical Activity Through Curricular Requirements.

**Table 4.** Emerging Themes on Institutional Influences on Food and Movement Practices

Major Theme	Description
Academic Schedules Structuring Eating and Movement	Class timetables organize when and how students eat and move
Campus Food Environments and Financial Constraints	Food choices are shaped by availability, price, and proximity on campus
Institutionalized Physical Activity	Physical activity is normalized through PE and program requirements

### Academic Schedules Structuring Eating and Movement

Students consistently described academic schedules as a primary institutional factor shaping their food and movement practices. Class timetables influenced meal

timing, frequency, and food choices, often leading students to eat quickly between classes or skip meals when schedules were tight. Similarly, movement was largely determined by the need to walk between distant buildings or attend scheduled physical education classes, rather than by deliberate exercise planning.

“Usahay dili na kaayo ka makakaon ug tarong kay sunod-sunod ang klase.” (Sometimes you can’t really eat properly because classes are back-to-back.) (P3)

“Ang lakaw-lakaw sa campus kay tungod ra gyud sa oras sa klase, dili kay plano nga exercise.” (Walking around campus is really because of class schedules, not planned exercise.) (P8)

These accounts indicate that students’ food and movement practices are closely synchronized with academic rhythms imposed by institutional schedules.

### Campus Food Environments and Financial Constraints

Participants highlighted the role of campus food environments in shaping daily eating practices. Limited food options in campus canteens, combined with affordability concerns, constrained students’ food choices and often led them to prioritize cost and convenience over perceived healthiness. Students described choosing foods that were filling, inexpensive, and quickly accessible, especially during busy academic days.

“Kung unsay barato ug duol, mao na akong paliton bisan dili kaayo healthy.” (Whatever is cheap and nearby is what I buy, even if it’s not very healthy.) (P6)

“Sa canteen, limitado ra gyud ang choices ug kasagaran prito.” (In the canteen, choices are really limited and mostly fried.) (P12)

These narratives demonstrate that food consumption is shaped not only by preference but by institutional food provisioning and students’ financial realities within state colleges.

### Institutionalized Physical Activity Through Curricular Requirements

Physical activity was commonly experienced as an institutionalized practice, particularly through required physical education (PE) courses and program-related activity expectations. For many students, participation in physical activity occurred primarily through these formal structures, which normalized movement as part of academic life rather than as a voluntary lifestyle choice.

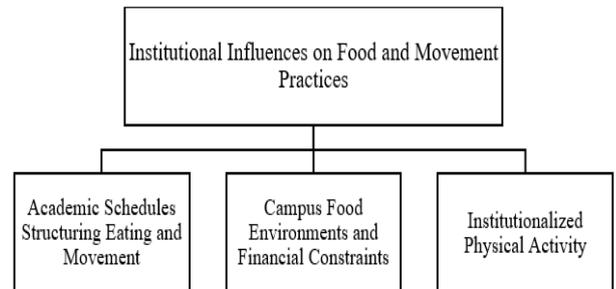
“Kung wala siguro ang PE, dili ko sure kung maka-exercise pa ba ko.” (If it weren’t for PE, I’m not sure I would still exercise.) (P1)

“Ang lihok nako kay kasagaran tungod ra sa PE requirement.”

(My movement is mostly because of PE requirements.) (P9)

These accounts suggest that institutional requirements play a crucial role in sustaining students’ engagement in physical activity, particularly in contexts where access to recreational facilities or free time is limited.

**Figure 3.** Institutional Influences on Students’ Food and Movement Consumption Practices



### Negotiating Constraints in Living Out Ideals of Healthy Living

This section examined how students negotiate everyday constraints while attempting to live out both personal and institutional ideals of “healthy living.” Findings reveal that students are not passive recipients of health guidelines but active negotiators, constantly balancing ideals of healthy eating and regular physical activity against constraints such as limited finances, academic workload, time pressure, and institutional structures. Rather than abandoning health ideals, students adapted them into practical, situational strategies that made healthy living feel achievable within their circumstances. Four major themes emerged: (1) Pragmatic Compromises in Food Choices, (2) Time-Based Negotiation of Movement, (3) Selective Compliance with Institutional Health Ideals, and (4) Redefining Healthy Living as “Doing What Is Possible.”

**Table 5.** Emerging Themes on Students’ Negotiation of Constraints and Healthy Living

Major Theme	Description
Pragmatic Food Compromises	Students adjust food choices to fit budget, availability, and time
Time-Based Movement Negotiation	Physical activity is fitted into available time rather than planned
Selective Institutional Compliance	Students adopt some health expectations while disregarding others
Redefinition of Healthy Living	Health is reframed as effort and consistency rather than perfection

### Pragmatic Compromises in Food Choices

Students described negotiating healthy eating by making practical compromises rather than strictly following nutritional ideals. While participants were aware of what constitutes “healthy food,” limited allowances, food availability, and academic schedules required them to adjust expectations. Many students prioritized foods that were filling, affordable, and accessible, even if these did not fully align with health ideals.

“Kabalo ko unsay healthy, pero usahay dili gyud kaya sa budget, mao na mag-adjust nalang.” (I know what’s healthy, but sometimes the budget can’t handle it, so I just adjust.) (P5)

“Mas pili-on nako ang busog kaysa healthy usahay kay lisod kung gutom ka sa klase.” (I sometimes choose being full over being healthy because it’s hard to be hungry in class.) (P11)

These narratives show that students negotiate constraints by recalibrating health ideals to match economic and situational realities.

### Time-Based Negotiation of Movement

Physical activity was negotiated primarily through time availability, with students fitting movement into existing schedules rather than creating separate exercise routines. Walking between classes, participating in required PE courses, or engaging in brief home-based workouts were common strategies for maintaining activity amid academic demands.

“Dili na gyud siya planned nga exercise, kung naa koy time, didto ra ko mulihok.” (It’s not really planned exercise—if I have time, that’s when I move.) (P3)

“Ang lakaw sa campus mao na akong exercise kung busy kaayo ang adlaw.” (Walking around campus becomes my exercise when the day is too busy.) (P9)

These accounts indicate that students adapt physical activity to temporal constraints rather than abandoning movement altogether.

### Selective Compliance with Institutional Health Ideals

Participants described selectively complying with institutional health expectations, such as physical education requirements or health promotion messages. While students acknowledged the importance of these initiatives, they did not always fully internalize or consistently follow them. Instead, students chose which aspects were realistic to maintain given their personal circumstances.

“Masunod ra nako ang PE kay required, pero dili gyud tanan giingon sa health programs.” (I follow PE because it’s required, but not everything promoted by health programs.) (P6)

“Paminawon nimo ang advice, pero pili ra kung unsay kaya nimo buhaton.” (You listen to the advice, but you choose only what you can actually do.) (P14)

These narratives suggest that institutional health ideals are filtered through personal capacity and practicality.

### Redefining Healthy Living as “Doing What Is Possible”

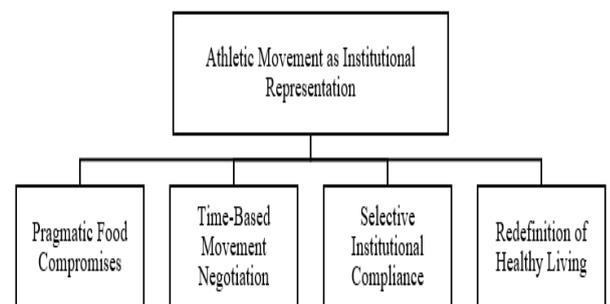
Ultimately, students negotiated constraints by redefining healthy living in more flexible and attainable terms. Rather than striving for idealized standards, participants emphasized consistency, effort, and self-awareness as markers of health. Being healthy was framed as “trying,” “balancing,” and “not giving up,” even when circumstances prevented ideal behavior.

“Para nako, healthy na kung nagpaningkamot ka bisag dili peppekto.” (For me, being healthy means trying, even if it’s not perfect.) (P2)

“Basta naa kay lihok ug dili ka pirmi pabaya sa kaon, okay na na para nako.” (As long as you move and don’t always neglect your food, that’s already healthy for me.) (P10)

These accounts illustrate how students reconcile ideals and constraints by constructing a practical and compassionate understanding of healthy living.

**Figure 4.** Students’ Negotiation of Constraints and Healthy Living Ideals



## 2. DISCUSSION

This study examined how students in Philippine state colleges consume food and physical activity as interconnected practices through which health is constructed, evaluated, and negotiated in everyday life. Across findings, health emerged not as a fixed outcome or biomedical target, but as a lived, embodied, and moralized consumption process, shaped by emotions, institutional contexts, and structural constraints. By integrating food, movement, and health within a consumer-oriented framework, the study extends existing literature that often treats diet and physical activity as separate health behaviors.

The finding that students interpret food and physical activity as mutually reinforcing practices aligns with research showing that health behaviors tend to cluster as lifestyle patterns rather than operate independently

(Spring et al., 2012). Students' framing of food as "fuel" and "reward" reflects an embodied understanding of consumption, where eating is valued for its capacity to support bodily effort and recovery rather than solely for nutritional content. This resonates with embodiment-based health research emphasizing that bodily sensations, such as energy, fatigue, and strength, play a central role in how individuals evaluate health practices (Schut, 2021).

At the same time, the interpretation of movement as compensation for eating reflects what Palermo and Rancourt (2019) describes as compensatory health logics, where physical activity is used to morally offset food consumption perceived as indulgent. Such logics indicate that health is experienced relationally, with eating and movement constantly evaluated against one another. Rather than following formal dietary or exercise guidelines, students rely on everyday moral calculations that allow them to maintain a sense of balance and control, an approach consistent with consumer culture perspectives on health as negotiated and situational (Moon & VanEpps, 2023).

The strong moral language attached to food and movement, particularly the framing of healthy eating as responsibility and movement as proof of discipline, supports existing evidence that contemporary health cultures increasingly moralize lifestyle practices (Gugglberger, 2018). In this study, students evaluated themselves as "good" or "failing" based on their ability to regulate food intake and sustain physical activity, suggesting that health functions as a moral identity project rather than a neutral health objective.

Feelings of guilt, justification, pride, and self-worth reported by participants echo findings in health psychology and consumer research showing that food consumption often carries emotional and ethical weight (Palermo & Rancourt, 2019). Movement, in particular, emerged as a visible marker of responsibility that could symbolically redeem dietary lapses, reinforcing its moral authority within student health narratives. These findings extend Consumer Culture Theory by illustrating how health-related consumption practices serve as tools for self-evaluation and identity maintenance, especially in environments where institutional health messaging emphasizes personal responsibility (Hochstein et al., 2024).

Consistent with socio-institutional perspectives on consumption, the study demonstrates that students' food and movement practices are deeply structured by state college environments, including academic schedules, campus food provisioning, and curricular requirements (Blue et al., 2014). Students' reliance on walking between classes and participation in required physical education courses highlights how movement is normalized through institutional design rather than individual motivation alone.

Similarly, constrained campus food environments and limited financial resources shaped food choices toward affordability and convenience, echoing research on food insecurity and constrained consumption in public higher education settings (Hicks, 2017). These findings challenge health narratives that frame unhealthy eating as

a failure of knowledge or motivation, emphasizing instead the role of institutional provisioning and structural limitation in shaping everyday consumption.

Perhaps most significantly, students did not abandon health ideals in the face of constraints; instead, they actively redefined healthy living as effort, balance, and consistency rather than perfection. This pragmatic orientation reflects what Warde (2016) describes as practice-based consumption, where individuals adapt ideals to fit everyday realities. Students' selective compliance with institutional health expectations further illustrates that health guidelines are interpreted, filtered, and reshaped according to personal capacity and context rather than passively adopted.

By framing health as "doing what is possible," students demonstrated agency within constraint, aligning with literature that critiques idealized health standards as unrealistic for populations facing structural limitations (Gugglberger, 2018). This finding is particularly important for state college contexts, where financial constraints, time pressure, and limited infrastructure are persistent features of student life.

This study contributes to consumer and health research in three key ways. First, it conceptualizes health as an embodied consumption process where food and movement are lived relationally rather than practiced independently. Second, it highlights the moral and emotional dimensions of student health practices, extending Consumer Culture Theory into public higher education contexts. Third, it foregrounds state colleges as critical but underexamined sites where institutional structures shape health consumption under constraint.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that health among students in Philippine state colleges is constructed through the interconnected consumption of food and physical activity, rather than through isolated dietary or exercise behaviors. Students experienced eating and movement as mutually reinforcing practices that function together to manage energy, balance, and bodily well-being. Food was understood as both fuel and reward for movement, while physical activity served as a means of compensation and justification for food choices. These interconnected practices reveal that students live health relationally and pragmatically, relying on embodied logics of effort, recovery, and balance rather than formal health prescriptions.

The findings further demonstrate that food and physical activity are embedded in strong moral and emotional meanings, shaping how students evaluate themselves as healthy, disciplined, or failing to meet health ideals. Healthy eating was framed as a personal responsibility, while physical activity functioned as visible proof of self-control and care for the body. Emotions such as guilt, pride, calm, and self-worth were closely tied to everyday food and movement practices, indicating that health operates as a moralized and emotionally charged aspect of student life. These moral judgments suggest that health consumption extends beyond physical outcomes to

influence students' self-perception and emotional well-being.

The study also concludes that students' food and movement practices are significantly shaped by institutional contexts within state colleges. Academic schedules, campus food environments, and curricular physical education requirements structured when, how, and why students ate and moved. Rather than being purely individual choices, health practices emerged as responses to institutional rhythms, resource availability, and structural limitations inherent in public higher education. This highlights the central role of institutions in shaping everyday health consumption, particularly in contexts where students face financial and infrastructural constraints.

Finally, the findings show that students actively negotiate constraints by redefining healthy living in attainable and compassionate ways. Instead of abandoning health ideals, students adapted them to fit their circumstances, emphasizing effort, consistency, and balance over perfection. Through pragmatic food choices, time-based movement strategies, selective compliance with institutional health expectations, and flexible self-definitions of health, students demonstrated agency within constraint. This redefinition of healthy living underscores that student health in state colleges is not a failure of knowledge or motivation, but a continuous process of negotiation shaped by lived realities.

## Implications of the Study

The findings imply that student health in Philippine state colleges should be understood as an interconnected, embodied consumption process, where food and physical activity are lived relationally and evaluated through moral and emotional meanings. The tendency of students to frame eating and movement in terms of balance, responsibility, guilt, and self-worth suggests that health education and promotion efforts must move beyond behavior-specific guidelines. Programs that acknowledge students' lived experiences, emotional realities, and everyday routines may be more effective than approaches that emphasize idealized standards of diet and exercise. Recognizing health as a negotiated practice rather than a fixed outcome also contributes to theoretical discussions in consumer culture and lifestyle research by highlighting how health is constructed under conditions of constraint.

At the institutional level, the results highlight the responsibility of state colleges to create environments that enable, rather than constrain, healthy living. Academic schedules, campus food environments, and physical education requirements significantly shape how students eat and move, indicating that health cannot be reduced to individual choice alone. Institutions may support student well-being by improving access to affordable and nutritious food, providing inclusive and flexible opportunities for physical activity, and framing health initiatives around sustainability and practicality. By aligning institutional health ideals with students' lived capacities, state colleges can foster more equitable and attainable forms of healthy living within public higher education.

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