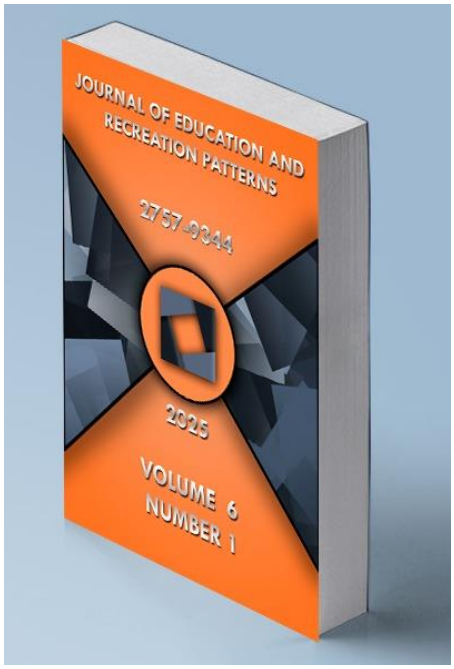

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Investigation of Nutrition and Exercise Behaviors in Fırat University Sports Sciences Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study is to examine the nutrition and exercise behaviors of students at Fırat University's Faculty of Sport Sciences. This research aims to evaluate the level of students' dietary and physical activity habits.

Methods: A relational survey model, one of the quantitative research methods, was used in the study. The study population consisted of students from Fırat University, and the sample included a total of 120 students (62 male, 58 female) studying at the Faculty of Sport Sciences during the 2024–2025 academic year. Data were collected using a "Demographic Information Form" and the "Nutrition and Exercise Behavior Scale." Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS 22 software program, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. Percentages, frequencies, Independent Samples T-Test, and ANOVA tests were applied.

Results: The results showed that male students scored higher than female students, with the highest scores observed in the unhealthy eating sub-dimension ($p>0.05$). Additionally, students who were taller scored higher than other groups, and height was found to have a significant effect only on the meal regularity sub-dimension ($p=0.027$). It was observed that taller individuals had more regular meal habits. it was determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the Nutrition and Exercise Behaviors sub-dimensions based on the weight variable ($p>0.05$).

Conclusion: It was determined that the nutritional habits of sport sciences students were at a moderate level and male students had better nutritional habits than female students. It is recommended that education programs related to nutrition should be increased for the students of the Faculty of Sports Sciences.

Keywords: Exercise Behaviors, Nutrition, Exercise, Student.

INTRODUCTION

Nutrition plays a critical role in improving individuals' health and well-being, as well as in maintaining their physical activities in a healthy manner (Nazni & Vimala, 2010). Every individual aims for a healthy lifestyle and a high quality of life. However, in today's world, a sedentary lifestyle, lack of adequate nutritional knowledge, the convenience brought by technology, and time management challenges due to a busy work schedule have led to an increase in many health issues such as obesity and diabetes (Bayrakdar & Zorba, 2020).

Students who start university in a different city suddenly find themselves in a new academic and social environment. This new life experience is significantly different from their previous life in terms of education, human relationships, and social life. In this unfamiliar setting, where the support of their families and close friends is suddenly cut off, students must quickly adapt and sustain this process by making the most of their potential (Karahan et al., 2005).

Exercise is a habit that offers countless benefits for both physical and mental health. Physically, regular exercise protects heart health, improves blood circulation, and strengthens muscles and bones. Additionally, it boosts metabolism, supports weight management, and strengthens the immune system (Erkan, 2011). Its contributions to mental health are also significant; endorphins released during exercise reduce stress, improve mood, and help alleviate mental health issues such as depression. Furthermore, it enhances sleep quality, regulates energy levels, and supports brain function. In short, regular exercise is an indispensable healthy lifestyle habit that strengthens both the body and mind while improving overall quality of life (Powell et al., 2018).

Exercise behavior refers to the process of developing a regular physical activity habit. This behavior can turn into a habit that positively affects an individual's physical health, mood, social relationships, and overall quality of life (Sezer & Üçgül, 2022). However, for many people, initiating or maintaining regular exercise habits can be challenging. A healthy lifestyle is fundamentally based on a balanced diet and regular physical activity. Proper nutrition helps strengthen the immune system, balance energy levels, protect skin health, and improve mood (Best et al., 2017).

Nutrition plays a crucial role in exercise performance and the body's response to exercise. Proper intake of the necessary energy and nutrients helps improve performance during workouts and accelerates recovery afterward (Dietz, 2001). Nutrition is one of the key factors that directly influence exercise performance. While the body uses carbohydrates as an energy source, it requires protein for muscle repair and growth, and healthy fats for endurance and hormone balance (Eker et al., 2017). Consuming an adequate amount of carbohydrates before exercise helps maintain energy levels, enhances performance, and delays muscle fatigue (Bayrakdar & Zorba, 2020). After exercise, protein intake aids in rapid muscle recovery and strengthening. Additionally, hydration is extremely important; adequate water consumption ensures more efficient muscle function and prevents cramps. Moreover, vitamins and minerals support muscle and nervous system function, increasing endurance. A proper and balanced diet not only helps individuals become physically stronger and more resilient but also enhances mental focus, making exercise more efficient (Dietz, 2001).

METHOD

Research Design

In this study, the quantitative research method was preferred. Quantitative research, which is a reflection of positive science, considers reality as an objective phenomenon independent of the individual. The researcher adopts an objective approach by observing events and phenomena from an external perspective. Quantitative research requires precisely determining and measuring the effects of variables on each other; otherwise, it would not be possible to test the hypotheses established in the study (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021).

H1: The mean scores of male students in terms of nutrition and exercise behaviors differ significantly from those of female students.

H2: The mean scores of male students in terms of nutrition and exercise behaviors differ significantly from those of female students.

This research is based on a descriptive and correlational design, which is one of the quantitative methods. The aim of the study is to examine the nutrition and exercise behaviors of students in the Faculty of Sports Sciences.

Universe and Sample

The universe of this study consists of students studying at the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Firat University. The sample consists of students who are actively studying in the year 2024-2025.

Research process

This study, conducted on students of Elazığ Fırat University Faculty of Sports Sciences, was carried out in December 2024. Convenience sampling was used as the research sample. Convenience sampling is a non-random sampling method in which the sample to be selected from the main mass is determined by the judgment of the researcher. Permission was obtained from the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Fırat University for the implementation of the scale. The scale was administered face-to-face to voluntarily selected students, and information about the Nutrition and Exercise Behavior Scale was provided to them.

Data Collection Tools

The "Nutrition and Exercise Behavior Scale" (NEBS), developed by Yurt (2008), is a 45-item, 5-point Likert-type scale with four sub-dimensions. The sub-dimensions of the scale include psychological eating behavior (11 items, minimum 11, maximum 55), healthy nutrition-exercise behavior (14 items, minimum 14, maximum 70), unhealthy nutrition-exercise behavior (14 items, minimum 11, maximum 55), and meal regularity (6 items, minimum 6, maximum 30) (Yurt, 2008)

The validity of the scale, developed by Yurt in 2008, was assessed through language and content validity (Kendall's W test concordance coefficient = .19, $p < 0.001$). Item correlation analysis was conducted, and the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was found to be .85. The scale is evaluated based on sub-dimension scores. In this study, the alpha reliability of the scale, when applied to high school students, was found to be 0.76 (Yurt et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

The statistical analysis of the data was conducted using the SPSS 22 software package. Frequency and percentage distribution measures were used to examine the demographic characteristics of the students. The normality of the distribution of the data was evaluated with skewness and kurtosis (-1.5, +1.5) tests and the results showed that the data had a normal

distribution.

In the study, the "Independent Samples t-Test" was used for comparisons between two groups, while "ANOVA" tests were applied for comparisons involving more than two groups. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. When ANOVA results were significant, Tukey's test was used as a post hoc analysis to determine specific group differences.

Research Ethics

The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Social and Human Sciences Research at Fırat University with Decision No. 22, dated 07.11.2024.

FINDINGS

This section presents the descriptive and inferential statistical findings obtained from the analysis of data collected from 120 participants. The first table provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants, including variables such as gender, height, weight, exercise participation status, nutrition education, and weekly exercise frequency.

Table 1

Demographic İnformation of students Participating in the NEBS

Variables		**f**	**%**
Gender	Male	62	51,7
	Female	58	48,3
Height	150-160 cm	13	10,8
	161-170 cm	51	42,5
	171-180 cm	39	32,5
	181cm and over	17	14,2
Weight	50-60 kg	21	17,5
	61-70 kg	55	45,8
	71-80 kg	32	26,7
	81-90 kg	5	4,2
	91 kg and over	7	5,8
Exercise Status	Yes	36	30,0
	No	63	52,5
	Partially	21	17,5
Have You Received Nutrition Education?	Yes	65	54,2
	No	55	45,8
Weekly Exercise Frequency	One Day	13	10,8
	Two Day	36	30,0
	Three Day	49	40,8
	Four Day	22	18,3

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 120). Among the students, 51.7% (n = 62) were male, and 48.3% (n = 58) were female. In terms of height, 10.8% (n = 13) of participants were between 150-160 cm, 42.5% (n = 51) between 161-170 cm, 32.5% (n = 39) between 171-180 cm, and 14.2% (n = 17) were 181 cm or taller. Regarding weight, 17.5% (n = 21) of the participants weighed between 50-60 kg, 45.8% (n = 55) weighed 61-70 kg, 26.7% (n = 32) weighed 71-80 kg, 4.2% (n = 5) weighed 81-90 kg, and 5.8% (n = 7) weighed over 91 kg. When asked about their exercise participation status, 30.0% (n = 36) reported exercising regularly, 52.5% (n = 63) reported not exercising, and 17.5% (n = 21) indicated partial participation. Additionally, 54.2% (n = 65) of participants reported having

received nutrition education, while 45.8% (n = 55) had not. Concerning weekly exercise frequency, 10.8% (n = 13) exercised once a week, 30.0% (n = 36) exercised twice, 40.8% (n = 49) exercised three times, and 18.3% (n = 22) exercised four or more times per week.

Table 2

Examining Sports Sciences Students According to NEBS Gender Variable

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	sd	t	p
Psychological/Addicted Eating Behavior	Male	62	44,40	4,81	1,119	0,265
	Female	58	43,41	4,85		
Healthy Nutrition Exercise Behavior	Male	62	56,45	6,30	0,153	0,879
	Female	58	56,27	6,28		
Unhealthy Diet-Exercise Behavior	Male	62	57,24	7,15	0,898	0,371
	Female	58	56,05	7,37		
Meal Plan	Male	62	23,90	3,45	1,436	0,151
	Female	58	22,89	4,16		

Note. *p<0,05

Upon examining Table 2, it was determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the students' NEBS sub-dimensions based on the gender variable. It was found that the total scores of male students were higher than those of female students.

Table 3

Examination of Sports Sciences Students' NEBS According to Height Variable

Variables	*Height*	N	Mean	sd	f	p	Difference	n^2
Psychological /Addicted Eating Behavior	150-160 cm[a]	13	42,46	4,78	0,610	0,610		0,016
	161-170 cm[b]	51	43,96	5,62				
	171-180 cm[c]	39	44,51	4,06				
	181cm and over[d]	17	43,58	4,03				
Healthy Nutrition Exercise Behavior	150-160 cm[a]	13	55,53	4,66	1,140	0,336		0,029
	161-170 cm[b]	51	55,96	5,95				
	171-180 cm[c]	39	56,05	6,81				
	181cm and over[d]	17	58,94	6,82				
Unhealthy Diet-Exercise Behavior	150-160 cm[a]	13	55,76	6,22	0,600	0,616		0.015
	161-170 cm[b]	51	56,21	7,91				
	171-180 cm[c]	39	56,64	7,36				
	181cm and over[d]	17	58,76	5,60				
Meal Plan	150-160 cm[a]	13	22,69	5,20	3,179	**0,027** *	b,d	0.076
	161-170 cm[b]	51	22,64	3,18				
	171-180 cm[c]	39	23,64	3,95				
	181cm and over[d]	17	25,76	3,45				

Note. *p<0,05 a = 150–160 cm; b = 161–170 cm; c = 171–180 cm; d = 181 cm and over.

Upon examining Table 3, it was found that there was a statistically significant difference in the NEBS Meal plan sub-dimension based on the height variable ($p < 0.05$). No statistically significant differences were found in the NEBS sub-dimensions of Psychological/Compulsive Eating Behavior, Healthy Nutrition-Exercise Behavior, and Unhealthy Nutrition-Exercise Behavior.

Table 4
Examination of Sports Sciences Students' NEBS According to Weight Variable

Variables	Weight	N	Mean	sd	f	p	Difference
Psychological/ Addicted Eating Behavior	50-60 kg	21	45,09	5,41	0,901	0,466	
	61-70 kg	55	44,00	4,96			
	71-80 kg	32	43,78	4,30			
	81-90 kg	5	42,80	5,44			
	91 kg and over	7	41,28	4,02			
Healthy Nutrition Exercise Behavior	50-60 kg	21	57,04	5,55	0,112	0,978	
	61-70 kg	55	56,16	5,93			
	71-80 kg	32	56,25	6,58			
	81-90 kg	5	55,60	7,34			
	91 kg and over	7	57,00	8,60			
Unhealthy Diet-Exercise Behavior	50-60 kg	21	58,00	9,74	0,291	0,883	
	61-70 kg	55	56,56	6,95			
	71-80 kg	32	56,12	6,11			
	81-90 kg	5	55,00	8,51			
	91 kg and over	7	57,14	6,25			
Meal Plan	50-60 kg	21	23,23	4,24	1,597	0,180	
	61-70 kg	55	23,90	3,45			
	71-80 kg	32	22,53	3,84			
	81-90 kg	5	21,40	4,87			
	91 kg and over	7	25,57	4,03			

Note. *p<0,05

Upon examining Table 4, it was determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the NEBS sub-dimensions based on the weight variable.

Table 5
Examination of Sports Sciences Students' NEBS According to Exercise Participation Status Variable

Variables	Exercise Status	N	Mean	Sd	F	P	Difference
Psychological/Addicted Eating Behavior	Yes	36	43,66	5,47	0,116	0,890	
	No	63	44,12	4,51			
	Partially	21	43,76	4,85			
Healthy Nutrition Exercise Behavior	Yes	36	56,52	6,46	0,202	0,817	
	No	63	56,53	5,68			
	Partially	21	55,57	7,72			
	Yes	36	57,30	7,30	0,266	0,767	

Unhealthy Diet-Exercise Behavior	No	63	56,22	6,56		
	Partially	21	56,90	9,19		
Meal Plan	Yes	36	23,33	3,97		
	No	63	23,36	3,96	0,076	0,927
	Partially	21	23,71	3,28		

Note. *p<0,05

Upon examining Table 5, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference in the NEBS sub-dimensions based on the exercise participation status variable.

Table 6

Examination of Sports Sciences Students' NEBS According to Nutrition Education Variable

Variables	Did you receive Nutrition Education?	N	Mean	Ss	t	p
Psychological/Addicted Eating Behavior	Yes	65	43,81	5,01	-0,270	0,788
	No	55	44,05	4,67		
Healthy Nutrition Exercise Behavior	Yes	65	56,73	6,34	0,706	0,482
	No	55	55,92	6,20		
Unhealthy Diet-Exercise Behavior	Yes	65	57,41	6,99	1,225	0,223
	No	55	55,78	7,51		
Meal Plan	Yes	65	23,13	3,84	-0,864	0,389
	No	55	23,74	3,82		

Note. *p<0,05

When Table 6 is examined, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference in the subdimensions of NEBS in the nutrition education variable of the research group.

Table 7

Examination of Sports Sciences Students' NEBS According to Weekly Exercise Participation Variable

Variables	Weekly Exercise Frequency	N	Mean	sd	f	p
Psychological/Addicted Eating Behavior	One Day	13	43,53	3,04	1,942	0,127
	Two Day	36	45,38	4,91		
	Three Day	49	42,87	4,82		
	Four Day	22	44,09	5,28		
Healthy Nutrition Exercise Behavior	One Day	13	55,38	4,85	0,527	0,664
	Two Day	36	57,02	6,63		
	Three Day	49	55,75	5,87		
	Four Day	22	57,22	7,34		
Unhealthy Diet-Exercise Behavior	One Day	13	55,15	7,43	1,031	0,382
	Two Day	36	58,38	7,58		
	Three Day	49	56,00	6,44		
	Four Day	22	56,22	8,23		

Meal Plan	One Day	13	22,53	3,45	1,271	0,288
	Two Day	36	23,47	4,03		
	Three Day	49	23,02	3,84		
	Four Day	22	24,72	3,58		

Note. *p<0,05

Upon examining Table 7, it was determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the NEBS sub-dimensions based on the weekly exercise participation variable.

DISCUSSION

Recent advancements in technology have led to noticeable changes in exercise and nutrition habits. While there is no definitive information regarding university students' nutrition and exercise habits, their impact on daily life remains unclear. The aim of this study was to examine the NEBS behaviors of students in the Faculty of Sports Sciences. A total of 120 students participated in the study, with 62 (51%) male and 58 (48.3%) female students. Analyzing the gender variable of the research group, it was determined that there was no statistically significant difference in the sub-dimensions of the nutrition and exercise behavior scale. It was found that male students had higher total scores than female students. This suggests that gender does not have a significant effect on psychological dependent eating behaviors, healthy and unhealthy eating-exercise behaviors, and meal regularity. Erdoğan (2023) studied university students' nutrition and exercise behaviors and found no significant differences between male and female students. The literature suggests that male children tend to have unhealthier eating habits compared to female children, and male children are more likely to be obese (Tümer et al., 2014; Taşdemir et al., 2014). In a study by Park et al. (2013), it was observed that the school's nutritional environment did not significantly impact students' healthy eating habits or weight status. However, it was noted that students from high-income families, who spent less time in front of screens and whose parents were housewives, had higher healthy eating scores. Some studies have found that male adolescent students had higher scores compared to female adolescents (Kalay & Türkmen, 2015). According to the research by Yurt and Özdemir (2020), no statistically significant differences were found between males and females in terms of nutrition and exercise scale scores. This study also found that students' overall health status was not at the expected level. It was determined that there was no significant relationship between participants' height and psychological dependent eating behaviors, healthy eating-exercise behaviors, and unhealthy eating-exercise behaviors. However, height had a significant effect on meal regularity, with taller individuals observed to have more regular meal patterns (Hasanpouri et al., 2023). In Aykut et al.'s (2021) study on high school students' nutrition and exercise habits, no significant difference was found between height and NEBS. Adolescent eating, exercise, and psychological eating behaviors were examined, and a low correlation between body mass index and unhealthy eating behaviors was found. This study concluded that height, as a physiological development factor, is related to eating behaviors (Tayhan et al., 2019). In this study, no significant difference was found in the NEBS sub-dimensions based on different weight groups. The results of the study suggest that the psychological/dependent eating behavior, healthy or unhealthy eating-exercise habits, and meal regularity variables are similar across different weight groups. Based on these findings, it was concluded that weight groups have no significant impact on the NEBS sub-dimensions. Sarı and Ceylan (2022) conducted a study examining the relationship between adolescents' weight status and their nutrition and exercise habits, and found a weak negative relationship between NEBS and body mass index. They observed that individuals at risk of obesity had unhealthy eating habits and performed low levels of exercise, which made it difficult for them to manage weight control. Hendekçi and Avcı (2020) examined the relationship between

adolescents' weight status and their meal regularity and exercise habits, finding that overweight and obese adolescents had more irregular meal patterns and exercised less. In a study by Kostak et al. (2014), healthy lifestyle behaviors of nursing and classroom teaching students were examined, and it was observed that most of them did not exercise or did not have exercise habits when given the opportunity. The study also found that students' health status, gender, academic performance, and their department of study influenced healthy lifestyle behaviors. In our study, no statistically significant difference was found in the NEBS sub-dimensions based on exercise participation status. Many studies have shown that individuals who engage in regular exercise tend to have healthier eating habits (Yasul et. al. 2024). It has been emphasized that exercise can positively affect individuals' eating behaviors, and athletes generally prefer more balanced, nutritious, and performance-enhancing diets (Yilmaz et al., 2021). In our study, no statistically significant difference was found in the NEBS sub-dimensions based on nutrition education. In studies conducted with adolescents and young adults, it has been observed that athletes, in particular, face challenges in their exercise and eating behaviors due to their developmental stage. Intense training and poor eating behaviors may negatively affect growth and development. In this context, it has been observed that individuals who exercise regularly tend to have healthier eating habits (Yurt & Ozdemir, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, when examining the nutrition and exercise behaviors of students in the Faculty of Sports Sciences, it was determined that their eating habits were at a moderate level. It was found that male students had better eating habits compared to female students, and taller individuals were more likely to pay attention to their eating and exercise habits. It is recommended that nutrition education for students in the Faculty of Sports Sciences be increased.

Limitations

Although this study presents some important findings, it also has several limitations. First of all, the study was limited to students of Fırat University Faculty of Sports Sciences. This makes it difficult to generalize the results to students from different universities or departments. Secondly, the data were collected using the self-report method; in other words, the participants' own statements were taken as basis. This may be limiting in terms of data accuracy, which may be affected by factors such as social desirability bias or recall error. In addition, since the study has a cross-sectional design, the results obtained only reflect the situation at the time the data were collected; it does not allow for the establishment of cause-effect relationships. In addition, variables such as socioeconomic level, psychological status, environmental factors or academic stress level that may affect the students' nutrition and exercise behaviors were not included in the study. Finally, the research sample was selected using the convenience sampling method. Since this may create a potential bias in representing the universe, it is thought that studies conducted with larger and random sample groups will produce more reliable and generalizable results.

Recommendations

As a result of this study, it is recommended that informative training programs on nutrition and exercise be increased for students of the Faculty of Sports Sciences. In the future, similar studies can be conducted with larger samples from different universities. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to monitor the behavioral changes of students over time. In addition, influential variables such as psychological and socioeconomic factors should be evaluated in future studies.

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