

# Investigating factors influencing UBC Vantage Students’ choices of meat-alternative food options in campus food services

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## INTRODUCTION

The concerns relating to environmental sustainability and food security have become increasingly aware by world governments, institutions and the General public and consumption behaviors, such as food consumption, have become the focus of studies that try to understand the environmental impact of our eating behaviors. While some have proposed to reduce meat consumption to tackle these issues, others have seen opportunities in meat-alternative foods.

As one of the elite institutions that share great social and environmental responsibility, the University of British Columbia has put a lot of effort into researching how to make a positive impact on the current environment and investigate how improving food services would benefit the environment and even student health. Although some studies have been conducted on the UBC food system and have focused on improving UBC food services to benefit environment sustainability, few have focused on investigating meat-alternative food consumption (Maddox, 2011; Maddox et al.; Buchheister et al., 2020; Woo, 2020; Fu et al., 2020; Heo et al., 2020).

Those that did focus on such aspects either did not focused on specifically Vantage College population, which is a unique community, was not based on recent data or did investigate the issues related to meat-alternative food but did not address the issue from the consumers’-- in this case its students’-- perspective (Farshad et al., 2010; Black et al., 2010; Gao et al., 2014).

Our study aims to investigates the factors influencing students’ behaviors of choosing meat-alternative food options while eating from UBC Vantage food services. We hope with the results of this investigation, we would be able to understand more about students’ food consumption behaviors when they are facing meat-alternative food options and gain more understanding of how to make a positive impact on environmental sustainability and our already over-pressured food production system as education institution and individuals.

## DISCUSSION

In short, our study has uncovered three themes that are majorly responsible for influencing students’ eating behaviors towards meat-alternative food in UBC. These themes include dozens of factors that would influence students’ thought and decision process towards food consumption. Previous researches have similar findings compare to the results we have concluded. For example, Driskell et al. (2005) stated in their research that change of household personals affect eating habits, which is also proven by our study. Our research has also shown that weight concern is a factor to female diet, which is also proven by Mooney et al. (2001). Stress eating, health - seeking behaviors, influences by individuals and perceived limits of (healthy) eating behaviors and other personal background factors, according to Von et al. (2004) and Sapp (1998), were also among the factors influencing one’s eating behavior. With our study resonating with previous studies, even studies that have been done on the UBC food system, it would be possible to gain a new understanding of the UBC food system through the lens of Vantage--this unique population. With our results, we would be able to explore how university itself influences students’ food consumption, and how the university shall react to such influence and make a positive impact based on our findings. Although our research only studies a tiny portion of the Vantage population, with our findings, the university can act towards a more meat-alternative-food-driven dietary system that would possibly increase general health, promote food security, and benefit environmental sustainability.

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## METHODS & PROCEDURE

This study uses the method of Qualitative interviews to collect primary data. Participants would be recruited to the study if they fulfill the following requirement: Must be more than 18 years old, studying in UBC as a UBC Vantage Student, and have experienced eating meat-alternative food in any UBC food places. After they decided to join the study, make official contact with the interviewers and have reviewed and signed the information and consent forms, the participants would be asked to attend an online interview session estimated between thirty to forty-five minutes long. A secure electronic device with internet and information, consent and debrief forms are required for this interview. The interview would be conducted through online video or audio chat software such as Zoom, or WeChat depends on the participants’ preference. During the interview, questions would be asked about the participants’ eating behaviors, experiences. They would also ask to reflect on themselves and share their most inner thoughts on their eating behaviors and meat-alternative foods. After the study, they would be debriefed and given resources that would help them gain an understanding of the study or acquire support from wither the interviewer, school authority such as ethnic community or counselling support.

## RESULTS

Among the results of the six participants we have interviewed, three common themes have emerged. The first theme is that the event of becoming a UBC Vantage student and the aftermath of this event caused a change in eating habits and meat-alternative food consumption. The student would have to adapt to both the living style and the environment of the Vantage environment, and new daily routines, new campus, and new courses that are a lot more stressful contributed to more meat and less meat-alternative food consumption or unbalanced diet. This theme consists of two major factors: Adapting to Vantage and University life and change in the surrounding environment.

In the first factor, participants have expressed the need or urge of stress eating due to increased stress in university life or just pursue of sensation. In the second factor, the mandatory meal plan ("The reason I will get food from cafeteria is my money in my student account. You have to use it, or you will waste the money."--Participant 266817F; "...because I have meal plan in my UBC card (and if I don’t use it, the money would be wasted)..."--Participant SSF (unique code lost: TMJISPIG)), the distance to travel for food on campus, lack of food options or customizations, and change in activity patterns that allows no time to plan or prepare a balanced diet also adds to the factors influencing the students’ eating habits.

Another great theme we have discovered is the personal background of the Participant. We have found that personal background factors, especially the culture of the region where the students came from or the people related to the student because one of my friends she’s a vegetarian. So every time when I’m with her, I would try some vegetarian food"--Participant SSF (unique code lost: TMJISPIG) contribute to the factors that influence one’s eating habits.

The final theme is personal beliefs. Factors including but are not limited to already being a vegetarian, personal feelings toward or against meat-alternative food, or personal understanding of health, meat-alternative food or balanced eating.

These themes emerged contributes to the further understanding of what are the major factors that would influence the students’ eating behaviors towards meat-alternative food options.



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