



FOOD HABITS TO HAVE A LONG LIFE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF DIETARY PRACTICES AMONG THE ELDERLY

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the dietary practices and lived experiences of elderly individuals in Dasmariñas, Cavite, regarding food habits they perceived as contributing to longevity. Specifically, the study examined participants' personal beliefs about healthy eating, socio-cultural influences on food choices, daily dietary routines, and health-promoting practices associated with long life. A qualitative descriptive phenomenological design was employed to capture the participants' experiences and perspectives regarding nutrition and healthy aging. Using convenience sampling, elderly individuals aged 72 years old and above who resided in Barangay Salawag, Dasmariñas, Cavite were selected as participants. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The findings revealed four major themes: (1) Personal Beliefs and Experiences as Foundations of Longevity, which highlighted discipline, moderation, and stress-free living; (2) Socio-Cultural Influences on Food Choices, emphasizing the impact of traditions, family practices, and social gatherings; (3) Daily Dietary Patterns and Meal Practices, describing structured meal routines and preference for simple home-cooked meals; and (4) Practical Recommendations and Health-Promoting Practices, which focused on portion control, natural ingredients, and traditional diets rich in vegetables and fish. Participants commonly associated longevity with moderate food intake, reduced consumption of processed and fatty foods, regular physical activity, and emotional well-being. The study concludes that healthy aging among elderly Filipinos is influenced by culturally grounded dietary practices and holistic lifestyle behaviors that promote balance, simplicity, and wellness.

Keywords: *longevity, dietary practices, elderly individuals, phenomenology, healthy aging, Filipino culture*

Introduction

Population aging has become a significant global demographic phenomenon, prompting increased scholarly attention toward factors that contribute to healthy aging and longevity. Among these factors, dietary behavior remains one of the most influential determinants of physical health, disease prevention, and quality of life among older adults. The concept of longevity extends beyond mere lifespan and encompasses the ability to maintain functional independence, physical vitality, and psychosocial well-being during old age. According to the Cleveland Clinic (2024), life expectancy and longevity are shaped by multiple interconnected factors, including access to healthcare, nutrition, sanitation, environmental conditions, family history, and lifestyle practices. Among these variables, food habits are considered highly modifiable determinants that substantially influence long-term health outcomes. Consequently, understanding the dietary practices of elderly individuals who have attained advanced age may provide valuable insights into sustainable and culturally relevant approaches to healthy aging.

Eating habits refer to the patterns, behaviors, and practices associated with food consumption, including the types of food consumed, meal timing, portion sizes, preparation methods, and the social contexts surrounding eating (Rodriguez, 2023). These habits are often shaped by learned behaviors, cultural traditions, environmental exposure, and personal experiences accumulated across the lifespan. Food choices are likewise influenced by social etiquette, cultural beliefs, and socioeconomic realities that determine what is considered acceptable or desirable within a community. Suhoza (2022) emphasized that despite widespread awareness regarding healthy eating, individuals continue to engage in unhealthy dietary behaviors due to deeply ingrained habits, environmental influences, and psychological factors. Similarly, Manaker (2024) argued that consistent and manageable dietary modifications, rather than extreme lifestyle overhauls, are more effective in producing long-term health benefits. These perspectives suggest that eating habits are not merely nutritional decisions but also reflections of cultural identity, discipline, and lived experience.

Existing literature consistently demonstrates the relationship between dietary practices and healthy aging among older populations. In the United Kingdom, Whitelock and Ensaff (2018) explored older adults' food choices and dietary habits through focus-group discussions and identified several factors affecting eating behaviors in later life, including declining physical function, food accessibility, social isolation, and changing relationships with food. Their findings highlighted that aging significantly alters food preferences and eating routines, while social and environmental conditions influence nutritional intake among the elderly. The study further emphasized the importance of maintaining food accessibility and social engagement to support healthy dietary behaviors among aging populations. Such findings underscore the multidimensional nature of food practices in later life, where physiological, emotional, and social factors collectively shape nutritional decisions.

In the Philippine context, dietary behaviors among adults and older populations are likewise influenced by socioeconomic status, cultural traditions, and lifestyle conditions. The study of de Juras et al. (2022) identified several dietary patterns among Filipino adults, including diets centered on rice, fish, vegetables, fruits, and meat consumption. Their findings revealed that these dietary patterns are strongly associated with demographic and lifestyle variables such as age, educational attainment, physical activity, and socioeconomic status. Moreover, traditional Filipino diets characterized by fish, vegetables, and minimally processed foods have been associated with lower risks of chronic diseases and improved health outcomes among older adults (University of New England Applied Nutrition Program, 2020). These studies indicate that culturally rooted dietary behaviors remain highly relevant in understanding health maintenance and longevity among Filipino elderly populations.

Despite the growing body of literature on nutrition and aging, limited qualitative studies have specifically examined the lived experiences and personal meanings attached to food habits among Filipino elderly individuals who associate their dietary practices with long life. Most existing studies rely heavily on quantitative dietary assessments and epidemiological analyses, leaving a gap in understanding how older adults themselves perceive the relationship between food, health, and longevity. Phenomenological inquiry offers a valuable methodological approach for addressing this gap because it allows researchers to explore deeply embedded beliefs, cultural traditions, and experiential knowledge surrounding food practices. Examining these lived experiences may generate culturally contextualized insights into healthy aging while preserving indigenous knowledge systems related to nutrition and well-being.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of elderly individuals regarding dietary practices that they perceive as contributing to longevity. Specifically, the research aims to examine their personal beliefs about healthy eating, identify common food habits and meal practices, and understand the socioeconomic and socio-cultural influences shaping their dietary behaviors. By foregrounding the voices and narratives of older adults in Dasmariñas, Cavite, this study contributes to the expanding discourse on healthy aging, nutrition, and culturally grounded health promotion. The findings may provide practical implications for nutrition education, public health initiatives, and intergenerational transmission of traditional dietary knowledge that supports long-term well-being among Filipino communities.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this phenomenological study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of elderly individuals regarding their dietary practices and their perceived impact on longevity. Specifically, the study aims:

1. To explore the lived experiences and personal beliefs of elderly individuals regarding dietary practices, lifestyle behaviors, and habits they perceive as contributing to longevity.
2. To examine the socio-cultural influences, traditional beliefs, and community practices that shape the food choices and eating behaviors of elderly individuals in Dasmariñas, Cavite.
3. To identify the daily dietary patterns, meal practices, and health-promoting strategies commonly practiced by elderly individuals to maintain health, wellness, and long life.

Literature Review

Dietary Practices and Nutritional Patterns Associated with Longevity

The literature consistently demonstrates that dietary practices significantly influence longevity, healthy aging, and the prevention of chronic illnesses among older adults. Studies indicate that elderly populations who consume diets rich in vegetables, fruits, fish, and minimally processed foods tend to exhibit better health outcomes and improved quality of life. de Juras et al. (2022) identified dietary patterns among Filipino adults characterized by fish, vegetables, and traditional food consumption, emphasizing the influence of sociodemographic and lifestyle factors on eating behaviors. Similarly, Whitelock and Ensaff (2018) found that older adults often modify their food intake by reducing unhealthy foods and preferring lighter, more nutritious meals due to age-related health concerns. Supporting these findings, Zaragoza-Martí et al. (2020) reported that adherence to balanced dietary intake and moderation in food consumption contributes to improved health outcomes among elderly individuals. These studies collectively suggest that longevity is strongly associated with disciplined eating habits, moderation, and consistent consumption of nutrient-dense foods.

Socio-Cultural Influences on Elderly Food Behaviors

Food habits among older adults are deeply embedded within cultural traditions, social relationships, and community practices. Existing literature highlights that dietary behaviors are not solely determined by nutritional knowledge but are also shaped by cultural norms, family

traditions, religious beliefs, and social interactions. According to Whitelock and Ensaff (2018), social isolation, living arrangements, and communal eating practices significantly influence food selection and eating behaviors among older adults. In the Filipino setting, Cruz and Estrella (2018) emphasized the importance of communal gatherings and the cultural value of “pakikisama” in shaping food consumption patterns among elderly Filipinos. Traditional dietary beliefs passed across generations likewise influence preferences for natural, locally sourced, and minimally processed foods. Dela Cruz and Periyakoil (2010) further explained that Filipino cultural perspectives on health emphasize balance, moderation, and holistic well-being, which are reflected in traditional food practices. These findings imply that food choices among older adults are strongly connected to cultural identity and social belonging, reinforcing the need to consider cultural context in nutrition and public health interventions.

Lifestyle Discipline, Moderation, and Healthy Aging

The literature also emphasizes that longevity is influenced not only by food intake but also by broader lifestyle behaviors involving discipline, physical activity, and stress management. Several studies associate healthy aging with moderation in eating, avoidance of harmful behaviors, and maintenance of active lifestyles. The Department of Health (2020) identified healthy lifestyle behaviors such as smoking cessation, reduced alcohol intake, balanced nutrition, and regular physical activity as essential contributors to increased life expectancy. Likewise, Gorospe and Bautista (2007) reported that older Filipinos who engage in simple physical activities and consume traditional diets rich in vegetables and fish demonstrate lower risks of chronic diseases. Research further indicates that portion control and caloric moderation are associated with improved metabolic health and reduced age-related illnesses (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015). Additionally, stress reduction and emotional well-being have been linked to healthier physiological functioning and better overall health outcomes among the elderly (Pietrangelo, 2025). Collectively, these studies highlight that longevity is achieved through an integrated lifestyle characterized by dietary discipline, moderation, physical activity, and emotional balance.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of elderly individuals regarding dietary practices that they associate with longevity. Phenomenology is an appropriate qualitative approach for investigating how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences within a particular social and cultural context. The study specifically utilized a descriptive phenomenological approach to obtain rich and detailed narratives concerning the participants’ food habits, meal routines, nutritional beliefs, and health-related practices. Through this design, the researchers sought to capture the essence of the participants’ experiences and understand how dietary behaviors contribute to their perceptions of long and healthy living.

Qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of meanings, perspectives, and subjective realities within natural settings. According to Jones (2018), qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding the “why” behind social phenomena by examining the experiences and interpretations of individuals as meaning-making agents in everyday life. In this study, the phenomenological design enabled the researchers to examine deeply rooted cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices associated with food consumption among elderly individuals in Dasmariñas, Cavite. The design also allowed for flexibility in exploring emerging insights and contextual factors influencing dietary practices and healthy aging.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of elderly individuals residing in Barangay Salawag, Dasmariñas, Cavite. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was utilized to recruit participants who met the inclusion criteria and were readily accessible to the researchers. Convenience sampling is appropriate in qualitative phenomenological studies because it allows researchers to identify participants who possess direct experience and relevant knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The study focused on elderly individuals aged 72 years and above, as this age group was considered capable of providing meaningful insights regarding dietary practices associated with longevity.

To ensure the relevance of the data gathered, participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) individuals aged 72 years old and above; (2) residents of Barangay Salawag, Dasmariñas, Cavite; and (3) willingness to voluntarily participate in the study. The researchers sought participants who could provide rich and comprehensive narratives regarding their dietary routines, eating behaviors, and personal beliefs about food and healthy aging. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw participation at any stage of the research process without penalty.

Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews are widely utilized in phenomenological studies because they allow participants to freely express their lived experiences while enabling researchers to explore relevant topics systematically. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses regarding the participants’ dietary habits, meal preparation practices, food preferences, cultural influences, lifestyle behaviors, and beliefs about longevity. Follow-up and probing questions were also employed to clarify responses and obtain deeper insights into the participants’ experiences.

Prior to the conduct of the interviews, the interview guide was reviewed to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the objectives of

the study. The semi-structured format provided flexibility for participants to narrate their experiences in their own words while allowing the researchers to maintain focus on the central phenomenon being explored. Interviews were conducted using a conversational approach to establish rapport and encourage honest and meaningful sharing of experiences. With the participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection and transcription.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researchers secured permission and coordinated with appropriate local authorities and community representatives in Barangay Salawag, Dasmariñas, Cavite. Eligible participants were identified through convenience sampling based on the established inclusion criteria. The researchers personally approached prospective participants, explained the purpose and significance of the study, and invited them to participate voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained before conducting the interviews, ensuring that participants fully understood the nature of the study, their role in the research process, and their rights as participants.

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted in a comfortable and familiar environment chosen by the participants. The interviews encouraged elderly individuals to share their experiences, perspectives, and reflections regarding their dietary practices and beliefs about healthy aging and longevity. Each interview was conducted using the participants' preferred language to facilitate clear communication and an authentic expression of experiences. Field notes were also taken during the interviews to document non-verbal cues, behaviors, and contextual observations relevant to the study. The interview recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to prepare the data for analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a rigorous and flexible qualitative analytic method used to identify, organize, and interpret meaningful patterns or themes within qualitative data. This approach was deemed appropriate for the study because it enabled the researchers to systematically examine the lived experiences and dietary practices of elderly individuals while preserving the richness and depth of participants' narratives.

The first phase involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and careful review of field notes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. In the second phase, initial codes were generated by identifying significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful patterns related to dietary practices and longevity. The third phase involved searching for potential themes by organizing related codes into broader conceptual categories relevant to the research objectives. In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, consistency, and distinctiveness across categories. The fifth phase focused on defining and naming themes to accurately capture the essence of the participants' experiences and perceptions. Finally, the sixth phase involved producing the report by integrating thematic findings with supporting participant narratives and relevant literature. Through this analytic process, the researchers generated rich and nuanced interpretations regarding the relationship between dietary habits, cultural practices, and healthy aging among elderly individuals.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical principles in qualitative research, including beneficence, autonomy, confidentiality, anonymity, and veracity, to ensure the protection, dignity, and welfare of all participants. Ethical considerations are essential in maintaining integrity, trustworthiness, and accountability throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, participants were thoroughly informed about the objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and nature of their involvement in the study. They were also informed that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

To uphold beneficence, the researchers ensured that the interview process did not cause harm, discomfort, or psychological distress to participants. The researchers remained sensitive to the participants' cultural beliefs, personal experiences, and emotional well-being throughout the conduct of the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by assigning pseudonyms or participant codes instead of using real names in transcripts and reports. All gathered information, interview recordings, and transcripts were handled securely and used solely for academic purposes in accordance with the principles of the Data Privacy Act. Furthermore, the principle of veracity was observed by ensuring the truthful and accurate presentation of participants' responses. Audio recordings, field notes, and verbatim transcriptions were carefully reviewed to preserve the authenticity and reliability of the collected data. Through these ethical safeguards, the researchers ensured a respectful, secure, and trustworthy research environment for all participants.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the qualitative findings derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted with elderly participants regarding their dietary practices and perceptions of longevity. Through thematic analysis, four major themes emerged from the participants' narratives: (1) Personal Beliefs and Experiences as Foundations of Longevity; (2) Socio-Cultural Influences on Food Choices; (3) Daily Dietary Patterns and Meal Practices; and (4) Practical Recommendations and Health-Promoting Practices. These themes reflect the participants' lived experiences, beliefs, and daily routines concerning food and healthy aging. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that longevity among elderly individuals is shaped not only by nutritional intake but also by discipline, cultural traditions, moderation, and lifestyle practices deeply embedded within their everyday lives.

Theme 1: *Personal Beliefs and Experiences as Foundations of Longevity*

The first theme highlights how personal beliefs, self-discipline, and life experiences shape the dietary behaviors of elderly individuals. Participants consistently associated longevity with moderation, avoidance of harmful habits, physical activity, and emotional well-being. Their narratives suggest that healthy aging is not solely dependent on food consumption but also on disciplined lifestyle choices developed through years of lived experience.

Subtheme 1: *Self-Discipline in Food Habits Learned Through Life Experiences*

Several participants emphasized that dietary discipline was acquired through aging, health experiences, and lifestyle adjustments. Many participants described consciously reducing the intake of unhealthy foods, meat, and harmful substances such as alcohol and cigarettes.

Participant 1 shared:

“Sa pagkain, bawas-bawas sa mga pagkaing bawal. Ganoon din sa bisyo—katulad ng pag-inom at paninigarilyo, iniawasan ko na ngayon. Dati-rati, ganoon ang bisyo ko.” (“When it comes to food, I try to cut down on unhealthy foods. The same goes for vices, like drinking and smoking. I now avoid them. Back then, those were my habits.”)

Similarly, Participants 3, 5, and 6 emphasized the importance of vegetables and limiting meat consumption:

“Sa pagkain mga kelangan gulay, wag karne pati kanin.” (“For food, I recommend vegetables and avoiding too much meat and rice.”)

“Kakain kami gulay.” (“We eat vegetables.”)

“Di kami kumakain baboy.” (“We don’t eat pork.”)

Participant 7 additionally connected healthy eating with physical activity:

“Sa mga pagkain ko, siguro ’yung mga gulay o di kaya mga isda. Tapos, sasabayan ko ng paglalakad sa umaga, namamalengke, yun.” (“As for my food, I usually eat vegetables or fish. Then I combine it with walking in the morning while going to the market.”)

The findings reveal that participants associate longevity with moderation, avoidance of unhealthy behaviors, and adherence to traditional plant- and fish-based diets. The participants’ conscious reduction of smoking, alcohol intake, and fatty foods reflects self-regulatory behaviors associated with preventive health practices. These findings support the Philippine Department of Health’s (2020) emphasis on reducing lifestyle-related risk factors to improve life expectancy and overall well-being. Moreover, the preference for vegetables, fish, and simple meals aligns with studies suggesting that traditional Filipino diets rich in locally sourced produce contribute to lower risks of chronic diseases and healthier aging (Gorospe & Bautista, 2007; DOST-FNRI, 2021).

The narratives further indicate that aging encourages individuals to become more mindful of their health behaviors. Rather than perceiving dietary restrictions as burdensome, participants viewed moderation as a practical and necessary adaptation to aging. Their food choices also reflect cultural values of simplicity, self-discipline, and self-sufficiency, particularly through the use of indigenous and locally available food resources.

Subtheme 2: *Self-Discipline in Fitness and Nutrition*

Participants also associated longevity with maintaining physical activity and balanced nutrition throughout life. Participant 4 described how active habits developed during youth continued into old age:

“Noong kabataan ko, sobrang active ko, mahilig akong sumali sa mga competition at laro. Ngayon naman, tamang simpleng galaw pa rin sa garden ko sa likod. Tapos minsan, ’yun na rin ang mga kinakain ko, nilagang talbos, okra, at talong, na ipinapares ko minsan sa sinigang o paksiw na isda.” (“When I was younger, I was very active. I loved joining competitions and games. Now, I still keep myself moving through simple activities in my backyard garden. Sometimes, I even eat what I grow, such as boiled sweet potato leaves, okra, and eggplant paired with fish dishes.”)

This narrative highlights the interconnectedness of physical activity and healthy eating in promoting longevity. Gardening served not only as a form of low-impact exercise but also as a sustainable source of nutritious food. The participant’s experiences demonstrate how lifelong habits of movement and balanced eating become integrated into daily routines during old age. Existing literature supports these findings, emphasizing that regular physical activity and nutrient-rich diets improve quality of life, support independence, and reduce risks of age-related diseases among older adults (Moberg & Carlson, 2025).

The findings further suggest that elderly individuals perceive healthy aging as a holistic process involving both nutrition and movement. Simple daily activities such as gardening, walking, and household chores were considered sufficient forms of exercise that contributed to physical wellness and longevity.

Subtheme 3: *Stress-Free Living as a Contributor to Longevity*

Another significant finding was the perceived relationship between emotional well-being and longevity. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of living without excessive stress:

“Ah walang stress, sa pagkain hilig ko ay talbos ng kamote tapos isda.” (“No stress. For food, I like fish and sweet potato leaves.”)

The participant associated a calm and stress-free lifestyle with healthy aging and simple dietary habits. This finding suggests that emotional balance is perceived as equally important as nutrition in achieving longevity. Previous research indicates that chronic stress negatively affects cardiovascular health, immune functioning, and psychological well-being, while stress management contributes to healthier aging outcomes (Pietrangelo, 2025).

The participants' emphasis on peace of mind, simplicity, and moderation reflects a broader understanding of health that extends beyond physical nourishment. Their perspectives indicate that healthy aging involves maintaining emotional stability alongside proper dietary habits and physical activity.

Theme 2: Socio-Cultural Influences on Food Choices

The second theme highlights the influence of cultural traditions, social interactions, and community practices on elderly individuals' dietary behaviors. Participants described how social gatherings, family traditions, and generational beliefs shaped their food preferences and eating practices.

Subtheme 1: Role of Community and Social Gatherings in Shaping Food Behavior

Participants explained that social occasions often present challenges in maintaining dietary discipline due to the abundance of unhealthy foods typically served during celebrations.

Participant 1 stated:

“Pag sa social gatherings kasi, andiyan ang mga pagkaing bawal, e. Pero pag nadadalo naman ako, pancit lang ang kinukuha ko kasi may gulay din 'yon.” (“During social gatherings, there are foods that are not good for me. But when I attend, I usually choose pancit because it has vegetables.”)

Participant 4 similarly shared:

“Minsan gugustuhin mo talaga tumikim ng mga bawal sayo pero tikim lang din talaga.” (“Sometimes you really want to taste the foods that are prohibited for you, but I only take small portions.”)

These narratives illustrate the tension between social participation and health-related dietary restrictions. Participants demonstrated moderation rather than complete avoidance, allowing them to maintain social inclusion while managing chronic health conditions. The Filipino cultural value of “pakikisama,” or maintaining harmonious social relationships, may explain why elderly individuals still participate in communal eating despite dietary limitations. These findings support the work of Cruz and Estrella (2018), who emphasized the continuing influence of communal gatherings on Filipino food behaviors.

Subtheme 2: Traditional Beliefs Passed Through Generations About Healthy Food

Participants also described how traditional dietary practices learned during childhood influenced their present food choices.

Participant 4 shared:

“Hindi uso samin ang karne sa probinsya. Kamote, gulay, isda lang kinakain namin noon.” (“Meat was uncommon in our province before. We mostly ate sweet potatoes, vegetables, and fish.”)

Similarly, Participant 7 explained:

“Hindi ako kinalakihan sa mga fast food. Nauna kong natutunan kumain ng healthy food.” (“I did not grow up eating fast food. I learned to eat healthy foods first.”)

These findings indicate that traditional Filipino diets centered on root crops, vegetables, and fish continue to shape elderly individuals' perceptions of healthy eating. Participants viewed minimally processed and locally sourced foods as healthier alternatives compared to modern processed foods and fast food consumption. Such practices align with studies linking traditional Filipino diets with lower risks of chronic diseases and improved health outcomes (University of New England Applied Nutrition Program, 2020).

The findings also suggest that economic conditions during earlier life stages indirectly promoted healthier eating behaviors. Limited access to processed foods in the past encouraged reliance on natural and locally available ingredients, which participants now perceive as beneficial to their longevity.

Subtheme 3: Cultural Norms Supporting Unconscious Eating

One participant demonstrated how food consumption may sometimes occur without conscious attention to dietary choices:

“Ay hindi ko alam kain lang kasi ako nang kain.” (“I don't really know. I just keep eating.”)

This finding suggests that cultural norms, food availability, and habitual eating behaviors may contribute to unconscious eating practices among some elderly individuals. According to Sieck (2021), cultural norms shape individuals' behaviors and expectations regarding food consumption. In environments where food is constantly available and eating is socially encouraged, individuals may become less attentive to hunger cues and portion awareness.

Although only minimally discussed by participants, unconscious eating highlights the importance of mindfulness in dietary behavior. This finding suggests that while many elderly individuals practice moderation, some eating behaviors remain deeply habitual and culturally conditioned.

Theme 3: Daily Dietary Patterns and Meal Practices

The third theme focuses on the participants' regular meal routines, food preferences, and daily eating practices. Participants generally followed structured meal schedules and preferred simple, home-cooked meals.

Subtheme 1: Typical Food Routines

Participants described consistent meal patterns characterized by light breakfasts, moderate lunch portions, and reduced food intake during the evening.

Participant 1 stated:

“Sa umaga, tinapay. Sa gabi, hindi na ako nagkakanin, tinapay at gatas na lang para iwas high blood at cholesterol.” (“In the morning, I eat bread. At night, I no longer eat rice, only bread and milk to avoid high blood pressure and cholesterol.”)

Participant 4 shared:

“Balanse na lang talaga. Kaunting kanin at ulam, tapos gatas bago matulog.” (“It’s really about balance now. Just small amounts of rice and dishes, then milk before sleeping.”)

Participant 7 similarly explained:

“Sa umaga, gatas at biskwit. Sa gabi, kaunti na lang na kanin.” (“In the morning, I have milk and biscuits. At night, I eat only a small amount of rice.”)

These findings indicate that elderly individuals intentionally adjust their food intake according to their age and health conditions. Participants preferred lighter evening meals and controlled rice consumption to prevent hypertension, cholesterol-related illnesses, and digestive discomfort. Such dietary adjustments align with studies suggesting that caloric moderation and simplified meal routines contribute to healthier aging outcomes (Drewnowski & Evans, 2001; Chumlea et al., 2004).

The findings further reveal that meal routines among elderly individuals are guided by practicality, familiarity, and accessibility. Bread, milk, biscuits, and home-cooked dishes were preferred because they were easy to prepare, affordable, and suitable for aging individuals with changing nutritional needs.

Theme 4: Practical Recommendations and Health-Promoting Practices

The final theme centers on participants' recommendations regarding healthy eating and longevity. Their advice primarily emphasized moderation, natural foods, portion control, and avoidance of processed ingredients.

Subtheme 1: Specific Food Items and Cooking Practices Recommended for Longevity

Participants consistently recommended vegetables, fish, and simple cooking methods as important contributors to long life.

Participant 1 shared:

“Yung mga gulay at isda talaga, tamang balanse sa pagkain. Kung kakain ng karne, tikim lang talaga.” (“Vegetables and fish are really the right balance in food. If I eat meat, it should only be in small amounts.”)

Participant 5 added:

“Nilagang isda o gulay lang. Hindi na ako mahilig sa Magic Sarap o betsin.” (“I prefer boiled fish or vegetables. I no longer like flavor enhancers or MSG.”)

Participant 8 similarly stated:

“Nag-iwas na talaga ako sa mga karne at matatabang pagkain. Isda at gulay na lang.” (“I already avoid meat and fatty foods. I mostly eat fish and vegetables.”)

The findings demonstrate participants' preference for natural, minimally processed, and traditionally prepared foods. Participants associated boiled dishes, natural seasonings, and reduced meat intake with better health outcomes and disease prevention. These findings are supported by literature emphasizing the benefits of plant-based diets, reduced red meat consumption, and minimally processed foods in promoting longevity and reducing chronic disease risks (Micha et al., 2017; WHO, 2021).

Subtheme 2: Portion Control and Moderation as Keys to Healthy Aging

Participants also emphasized moderation and portion control as essential components of healthy aging.

Participant 7 explained:

“Kalahating baso ng rice okay na ’yun.” (“Half a cup of rice is already enough.”)

Participant 6 stated:

“Konti lang kami kumain. Minsan may natitira pa.” (“We only eat small amounts. Sometimes there are still leftovers.”)

Participant 1 similarly described controlled food intake throughout the day:

“Saktong kanin lang, kalahating baso siguro.” (“Just enough rice, maybe half a cup.”)

These narratives indicate that elderly individuals consciously regulate food portions as part of maintaining their health. Portion control was perceived not as deprivation but as an adaptive lifestyle adjustment resulting from aging and increased health awareness. The cultural value of “sakto lang” or eating “just enough” emerged as a recurring principle underlying participants’ dietary practices.

The findings support existing literature associating caloric moderation and reduced portion sizes with improved metabolic health, weight management, and reduced risks of chronic diseases among older adults (WHO, 2015; FNRI, 2020). Overall, the participants’ narratives suggest that longevity is closely associated with disciplined eating behaviors, moderation, and culturally rooted practices emphasizing simplicity and balance.

Conclusion

The findings of this phenomenological study revealed that longevity among elderly individuals in Dasmariñas, Cavite is closely associated with disciplined dietary practices, balanced nutrition, and healthy lifestyle behaviors developed through lived experiences. Participants emphasized the importance of moderation in food consumption, avoidance of excessive intake of meat and processed foods, and preference for vegetables, fish, and locally available ingredients. Their narratives demonstrated that healthy aging is not merely the result of a single dietary pattern but rather a combination of conscious food choices, physical activity, emotional well-being, and self-discipline cultivated throughout life. These findings suggest that longevity is deeply rooted in sustainable and culturally grounded health practices.

The study further revealed that traditional Filipino dietary habits continue to influence the health behaviors of elderly individuals. Participants commonly consumed simple home-cooked meals prepared using natural ingredients and traditional cooking methods. Their preference for minimally processed foods and locally sourced vegetables and fish reflects long-standing cultural practices associated with practicality, moderation, and self-sufficiency. Such practices were perceived by participants as contributing significantly to disease prevention and overall well-being. The findings therefore support existing literature emphasizing the health benefits of traditional diets rich in vegetables, fish, and natural food sources.

Another significant finding of the study was the role of socio-cultural influences in shaping food behaviors. Community gatherings, cultural traditions, and generational beliefs affected participants’ dietary decisions and perceptions of healthy eating. Although social occasions exposed elderly individuals to unhealthy food choices, participants demonstrated restraint and portion control while still maintaining social participation. The Filipino value of “pakikisama” remained evident in communal eating practices, highlighting the importance of balancing social relationships and health-related dietary restrictions. This indicates that dietary behaviors among older adults are strongly intertwined with cultural identity and social belonging.

The study also concluded that healthy aging extends beyond food intake and includes emotional and physical wellness. Participants associated longevity with stress-free living, regular physical movement, and maintaining simple daily routines. Activities such as gardening, walking, and engaging in household tasks were viewed as essential contributors to maintaining physical health and independence during old age. Furthermore, emotional stability and avoidance of stress were perceived as equally important factors supporting long life. These findings underscore the holistic nature of healthy aging, where physical, emotional, and social dimensions collectively influence longevity.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that health promotion programs for older adults emphasize culturally relevant and sustainable dietary practices rather than restrictive or highly commercialized nutrition trends. Community-based nutrition education programs may encourage the consumption of traditional Filipino foods rich in vegetables, fish, and natural ingredients while promoting portion control and balanced eating habits. Local government units and health agencies may also develop wellness initiatives that integrate physical activity, stress management, and healthy aging education tailored specifically for elderly populations. Additionally, intergenerational programs may be established to preserve and transmit traditional dietary knowledge and healthy lifestyle practices to younger generations.

Future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar qualitative studies involving larger and more diverse populations of elderly individuals from different regions of the Philippines to further explore cultural variations in dietary practices associated with longevity. Comparative studies between urban and rural elderly populations may also provide broader insights into how environmental and socioeconomic factors influence healthy aging. Moreover, mixed-methods and longitudinal studies are recommended to further examine the long-term relationship between dietary habits, cultural practices, and life expectancy among Filipino older adults. Such investigations may contribute to the development of evidence-based and culturally responsive public health interventions that support healthy aging and improved quality of life.

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