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Comparative Analysis of Food Literacy Levels Based on Gender Among Culinary Vocational High School Students

Saffana Erina Paramitha[1], Cica Yulia[2], Nia Lestari[2]

[1]Student Culinary Education Study Program, Faculty of Technical and Industrial Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
[2]Lecturer Culinary Education Study Program, Faculty of Technical and Industrial Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
Corresponding author: saffanamitha@upi.edu

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Abstract

Food literacy refers to the ability to understand, manage, and apply knowledge related to the selection, preparation, and consumption of healthy and sustainable food. One factor that may influence food literacy levels is gender. This study aims to examine differences in food literacy levels between male and female students enrolled in culinary programs at vocational high schools. A quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design was employed, involving 74 students selected based on data eligibility, using a questionnaire that had been tested for validity and reliability. Data were analyzed using the Chi-Square test to identify the relationship between gender and food literacy categories. The findings indicate that both male and female students demonstrate good levels of food literacy across all domains. These results suggest that food literacy is relatively balanced across genders and is more influenced by learning experiences, structured curricula, and hands-on practice. Therefore, culinary education plays a key role in developing students' competencies and highlights the importance of practice-based and inclusive learning.

Keywords: Chi-Square Test, Culinary Education, Food Literacy, Gender, Vocational High School Students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Food literacy refers to the ability to use knowledge and skills to plan, select, manage, prepare, and consume food according to nutritional needs. The concept of food literacy was first introduced in the United States in 1998 in response to the declining ability of modern consumers to make healthy dietary choices. Food literacy is closely linked to both health literacy and nutrition literacy and has largely been developed based on Nutbeam's three-level model of health literacy (Fisher & Potgieter, 2024). Food literacy is understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing four main domains: food planning and management, food selection, food preparation, and food consumption (Mashur et al., 2023; Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014). In this context, food literacy is defined as the integration of knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to plan, manage, select, prepare, and consume food in a healthy and sustainable manner.

The planning and management domain refers to the ability of individuals or households to design daily menus, manage time and budget, and balance nutritional needs, preferences, and available resources. Adolescents who are able to plan daily or weekly meals tend to better regulate eating schedules, portion sizes, and dietary variety, thereby reducing the risk of overeating or skipping meals (Nadila et al., 2024). In addition, budgeting skills enable adolescents to adjust economic constraints while still meeting nutritional needs by selecting affordable yet nutrient-dense foods (Astuti, 2023; Destryana et al., 2021). This aspect plays a key role in fostering discipline and economic awareness in food management, forming a basis for healthier decisions in food selection and preparation. Without adequate planning, adolescents are more likely to make impulsive

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consumption choices influenced by advertising and peer pressure, which may lead to unhealthy dietary patterns over time (Elvira et al., 2021).

The food selection domain emphasizes the ability to access and choose food appropriately, including reading labels, assessing quality and safety, understanding product origins, and managing storage efficiently. Higher levels of food literacy among adolescents are positively associated with healthier choices, such as increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, and home-cooked meals, along with reduced intake of high-calorie snacks and sugary drinks (Oktafiani et al., 2025). Dwijayanti et al. (2021) describe food selection as both a functional and critical competence, as adolescents are required to consider health, social, and environmental dimensions within complex food systems. A positive correlation exists between food selection literacy and increased micronutrient intake, as adolescents are better able to prioritize vitamin and mineral in foods within their daily budget constraints.

The food preparation aspect includes cooking skills, the use of kitchen equipment, recipe adaptation, and the application of food hygiene and safety practices. These competencies enable individuals to utilize available ingredients efficiently to create healthy and appealing meals while reducing food waste. Adolescents with strong food preparation skills are also able to modify traditional recipes into healthier versions, for example by replacing frying with baking or steaming to preserve the nutritional value of foods (Fisher & Potgieter, 2024). Proper food preparation practices help reduce food waste by utilizing leftover ingredients. Therefore, mastery of these skills fosters more independent and innovative food behaviors among adolescents and positions the kitchen as a space for everyday health learning (Park et al., 2022).

The food consumption aspect emphasizes awareness of the impact of food on health, regulation of portion sizes and meal frequency, as well as social eating behaviors (McManus et al., 2025). During adolescence, awareness of body image increases and is often influenced by social perceptions. Dissatisfaction with body shape can lead adolescents to restrict their diet, affecting their food choices, eating patterns, and nutrient intake (Yulia et al., 2024). Research by Park et al. (2022) indicates that food literacy in food consumption domain is associated with improved diet quality, better dietary regulation, and the development of healthy eating habits. In addition, food literacy includes an understanding of the social context of eating, where cultural norms and peer influence can either support or hinder healthy food choices (Fermeza & Isaura, 2022).

Gender roles and social norms also shape food consumption behavior. Women are often positioned as food managers in the household, while family food preferences are still frequently influenced by male dominance (Astuti, 2023). Family, media, and social influencers further strengthen gender-based eating patterns, causing adolescents to be more influenced by social trends and body image than by nutritional needs (Linggarsih et al., 2022). However, inclusive nutrition education in vocational schools can reduce these differences by encouraging both male and female students to share equal responsibility for healthy food choices without traditional gender stereotypes (Destryana et al., 2021).

Several studies have identified differences between males and females in terms of food literacy. Females tend to demonstrate higher levels of food literacy and relatively healthier eating patterns compared to males (Dwijayanti et al., 2021). However, the influence of gender on food consumption behavior does not operate independently, but is also affected by other factors such as nutritional knowledge, external eating styles, and socio-cultural contexts (Azka & Undarwati, 2025). Females with higher nutritional knowledge and stronger external eating styles are more likely to choose healthier foods than males, indicating a complex interaction between gender and other supporting factors in shaping food-related attitudes and consumption behavior (Fermeza & Isaura, 2022).

Vocational High Schools (*Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan/SMK*) with culinary specialization represent a form of vocational education designed to prepare students as skilled workers in the field of food preparation and food service. Therefore, the learning activities of culinary vocational students

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are closely related to the processes of food selection, preparation, and presentation (Elvira et al., 2021). Research has shown that structured cooking practice, food management, and food safety education can improve adolescents' nutritional knowledge, cooking skills, and healthy eating habits, thereby contributing to the strengthening of food literacy (Sullivan et al., 2026). In addition to technical competencies, culinary students are also required to possess adequate food and nutrition literacy, including the ability to understand nutritional values of ingredients, develop balanced menus, and consider sustainability aspects in food management (Sinaga et al., 2024).

Culinary education has been proven not only to provide technical skills but also to encourage healthier dietary patterns, such as increased fruit and vegetable consumption and reduced intake of fast food and sugar-sweetened beverages (Sinaga et al., 2024). Therefore, strengthening food literacy among vocational high school students, particularly in understanding food ingredients, food preparation techniques, and consumption behavior, is essential both for supporting sustainable healthy lifestyles and for preparing students professionally for the workforce (Azka & Undarwati, 2025). In this context, students of the Culinary Program at SMK Handayani Banjaran are considered a relevant and strategic group for the development of school-based food literacy initiatives. Thus, this study is directed to analyze the differences in food literacy levels between male and female students at Culinary Vocational Schools as an effort to enrich gender-based food literacy studies.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional design to examine the relationship and differences between variables at a single point in time. The quantitative method enabled the systematic analysis of numerical data using statistical techniques, particularly to assess differences in food literacy based on gender. The dataset utilized in this study was obtained from a prior study conducted by Yulia et al. (2025). The use of this dataset allowed for efficient analysis while maintaining data quality that had been previously verified.

2.2 Study Participants

The participants consisted of active students enrolled in the Culinary Program at SMK Handayani Banjaran. They were categorized into two groups, male and female, to facilitate comparative analysis of food literacy levels. The broader population encompassed culinary vocational students from 36 vocational high schools in West Java, representing both public and private institutions. However, the sample for this study was limited to 74 students from SMK Handayani Banjaran who had completed the questionnaire and met the predetermined data eligibility criteria. Among the 74 students included in this study, the majority of participants were female students, totaling 55 individuals, while male students accounted for 19 individuals. This sampling approach ensured that the data analyzed were complete, relevant, and suitable for statistical testing aligned with the objectives of the study.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments and Techniques

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire developed and validated in a prior previous study. It was designed to measure students' food literacy, covering four main aspects: planning and management, food selection, food processing, and food consumption. Each item was rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This study utilized secondary data obtained from students which had been previously coded and validated. Each aspect of food literacy was represented by specific indicators reflecting students' abilities and behaviors in managing food, including planning meals and budgeting, selecting nutritious and safe foods, applying proper food preparation and hygiene practices, and maintaining healthy consumption patterns.

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The research instrument was tested for validity and reliability prior to data analysis. Validity refers to the accuracy of the instrument in measuring the intended construct, while reliability indicates the consistency of the measurement results. Validity testing was conducted using Pearson Product Moment correlation on 74 respondents with 33 items, with an r-table value of 0.229 at a 5% significance level. Items with r-count values exceeding the r-table were considered valid, and most items met this criterion. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.786, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.6, indicating that the instrument was reliable and consistent.

2.4 Data Processing and Analysis Procedures

Data processing in this study employed a five-point Likert scale to assess students' food literacy attitudes. Each response was assigned a weighted score, which was then calculated into an index to identify overall response tendencies. To ensure accuracy and reduce potential manual errors, the results were further verified using mean calculations in SPSS version 27. The obtained scores were subsequently converted into percentages to facilitate clearer interpretation and comparison across indicators. Furthermore, the percentage scores were categorized into five levels of interpretation to describe students' food literacy. Scores of 80–100% were classified as very good, 60–79.99% as good, 40–59.99% as fair, 20–39.99% as poor, and 0–19.99% as very poor. This categorization framework was applied to simplify the interpretation of the questionnaire results and to determine the overall level of students' food literacy in a more systematic manner (Sugiyono, 2019).

2.5 Determination of Criteria for Level of Understanding & Interpretation of Result

Food literacy data were analyzed based on scores obtained from the Likert-scale questionnaire and subsequently categorized to facilitate interpretation and presentation. Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize the distribution of students' food literacy levels in the form of tables and percentages, providing an overview of response patterns across all indicators. In addition, inferential analysis using the Chi-Square test was conducted to examine potential differences in food literacy levels between male and female students. To support clearer analysis, food literacy scores were further classified into two categories, namely low and high, using the median score as the cut-off point. This approach follows previous studies by Aprianti et al. (2023) and Fermeza and Isaura (2022), which employed similar categorization to simplify interpretation in Chi-Square analysis. Based on data from 74 respondents, the median score was 108; therefore, scores less than or equal to 108 were categorized as low, while scores above 108 were categorized as high. This classification enabled a more structured comparison of food literacy levels across gender groups.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Respondent Overview

The respondent characteristics indicate that the majority of participants were female students, totaling 55 individuals (74%), while male students accounted for 19 individuals (26%). This distribution reflects the general trend that culinary programs tend to attract more female students. In terms of age, most respondents were between 17 and 18 years old (73%), while 27% were aged 15–16 years, indicating that the sample was largely composed of students in the later stage of adolescence. Based on grade level, the highest proportion of respondents came from grade XII (47%), followed by grade XI (35%) and grade X (18%). This pattern suggests that most participants were in their final year of study, meaning they had received more extensive exposure to both theoretical instruction and practical culinary training.

3.2 Analysis of Food Literacy Level

The analysis of food literacy levels was conducted based on gender to examine the potential differences between male and female students. This analysis covered all four domains of food literacy

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that were the focus of the study, namely planning and management, food selection, food preparation, and food consumption. The results presented in **Table 1.**

Table 1. Food Literacy Level of Students Based on Gender

Indicator	Average Score (%)		Category
	Male	Female	
Food Management Planning	61 %	62 %	Good
Food Selection and Storage	73 %	75 %	Good
Food Preparation and Processing	69 %	71 %	Good
Food Consumption	67 %	66 %	Good
Total	**67.5 %**	**68.5 %**	**Good**

Table 1. shows that both male and female students demonstrated good levels of food literacy across all four domains, namely food planning, food selection, food preparation, and food consumption. Female students tended to obtain slightly higher scores in the domains of food planning, food selection, and food preparation, indicating a marginal advantage in these aspects. In contrast, male students showed slightly higher scores in the food consumption domain, although the difference remained minimal.

In the food planning and management domain, the findings are consistent with Araque-Padilla and Montero-Simo (2025), who reported that adolescents generally possess adequate basic meal planning skills but remain limited in more structured and strategic food management. Similarly, Indrawati et al. (2024) found that although females tend to report higher involvement in household meal planning, such differences are not always statistically significant when education and practical experience are controlled, suggesting that knowledge and experience play a more decisive role than gender.

In the food selection domain, the results align with Nadila et al. (2024), who showed that many adolescents already demonstrate relatively good habits in reading nutrition labels, indicating potential for improving food literacy through strengthening label-reading skills. However, Hanun (2022) reported that nutrition label use among Indonesian adolescents remains limited, partly due to the influence of fast-food advertising. This is supported by Oktafiani et al. (2025), who found a relationship between frequent exposure to junk food advertisements and increased fast-food consumption as well as higher nutritional risk among adolescents.

In the food preparation domain, the findings are in line with Sullivan et al. (2026), who observed that while basic cooking skills are generally adequate, creativity in food preparation still needs improvement through more practice-based learning. This highlights the importance of contextual and experiential learning approaches that encourage experimentation and innovation in food processing. Furthermore, Park et al. (2022) reported similar results, with scores around 70% influenced by home cooking experience, indicating that regular cooking activities within the family environment contribute significantly to the development of food literacy and healthier eating behaviors among adolescents.

In the food consumption domain, the findings support Fisher and Potgieter (2024), who found that adolescents generally have good awareness of personal eating habits but limited understanding of broader food system roles at the community level. Differences in ultra-processed food consumption are more pronounced among adults but tend to diminish among adolescents exposed to uniform culinary education. In addition, Deslippe et al. (2025) emphasized that variations in dietary patterns are more strongly influenced by nutritional adequacy and social factors rather than gender. Diet is

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often linked to achieving an ideal body shape. In Indonesia, adolescents' body image is shaped by cultural values and social norms, which influence how they perceive themselves (Yulia et al., 2024).

3.2.1 Food Management Planning

To provide a clearer understanding of the distribution of food literacy levels in the planning and management domain, the data are presented through a visual representation on **Figure 1.** based on gender categories. This visualization illustrates the proportion of male and female students within the low and high literacy categories, allowing for a more straightforward comparison between groups.

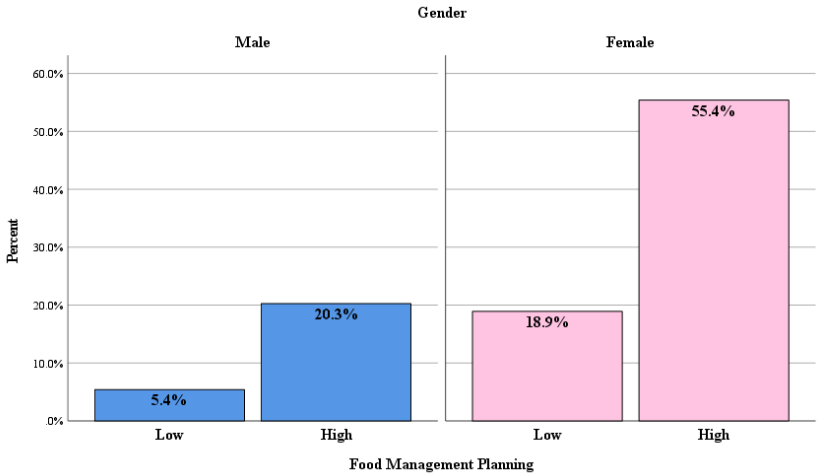


Figure 1. Distribution of Low and High Food Literacy in Food Management Planning

Figure 1. indicates that the proportion of female respondents in the high category of food planning and management literacy is more dominant than that of males, while the low category represents only a small proportion in both groups. Specifically, 55.4% of females fall into the high literacy category and 18.9% into the low category, whereas among males, 20.3% are categorized as high and 5.3% as low. Female students show a slightly higher proportion in the high category for menu planning, ingredient management, and budgeting, while male students are more evenly distributed across moderate and high levels. This indicates only minor gender differences in food planning and management. However, the Chi-square test yielded a value of 0.149, which exceeds the significance threshold, indicating that the observed differences are not statistically significant.

These differences suggest slight variations in tendencies related to food planning and management across genders, although the gap is not substantial. This finding is consistent with (Araque-Padilla & Montero-Simo, 2025) demonstrate that well-structured educational and training programs are effective in strengthening these competencies, which in turn contribute to improved dietary habits and enhanced household food security. This consistency in findings highlights that the implementation of a standardized curriculum and comparable learning experiences in culinary vocational schools, such as menu planning and budgeting practices, plays a crucial role in equalizing students' food literacy skills (Koerich et al., 2024). Consequently, the differences observed are only apparent at the descriptive level and are not statistically significant.

3.2.2 Food Selection and Storage

A clearer overview of food literacy distribution in the food selection domain is presented in **Figure 2.** based on gender groups. This figure displays the proportion of male and female students within the low and high literacy categories, allowing for a direct comparison of their ability to choose safe and nutritionally appropriate foods.

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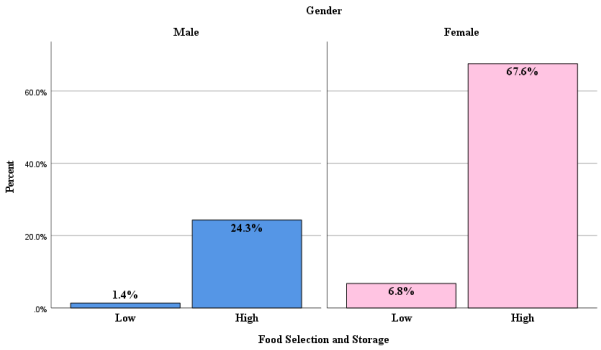


Figure 2. Distribution of Low and High Food Literacy in Food Selection and Storage

In the food selection domain on **Figure 2.**, the distribution indicates that the majority of respondents fall within the high literacy category, with a higher proportion of female students compared to males. Specifically, 67.6% of female students are categorized as high and 6.8% as low, while among male students, 24.3% are in the high category and 1.4% in the low category. The relatively larger proportion of females reflects the overall sample composition, which is dominated by female respondents. This advantage is particularly evident in food safety indicators, such as checking expiration dates and interpreting nutrition labels. While male students also perform well, their scores are more concentrated at moderate levels, suggesting that female students tend to be slightly more attentive in food selection, although the difference remains minimal. The Chi-square value of 0.278 suggests that the variation between the two groups is not statistically significant, indicating that gender is not associated with differences in food selection literacy levels.

Research by Nadila et al. (2024) indicates that many adolescents already demonstrate relatively good habits in reading nutrition labels, providing a promising basis for enhancing food literacy through the development of label-reading skills, which may positively influence healthy food choices. In line with this, higher levels of food literacy among adolescents are associated with healthier eating behaviors (Hanun, 2022). Gender-based differences in food literacy tend to diminish when students are exposed to uniform curricula and learning experiences. In this context, instruction that emphasizes the selection of raw ingredients prior to practical activities contributes to more comparable food selection literacy across genders (Azka & Undarwati, 2025). This finding is consistent showing that gender differences in food selection tend to decrease when students receive similar curriculum exposure and learning experiences.

3.2.3 Food Preparation and Processing

The distribution of food literacy levels in the food processing domain is illustrated in **Figure 3.** using gender-based grouping. This visualization outlines the proportion of students in each literacy category, making it easier to compare cooking skills and food safety practices between male and female students.

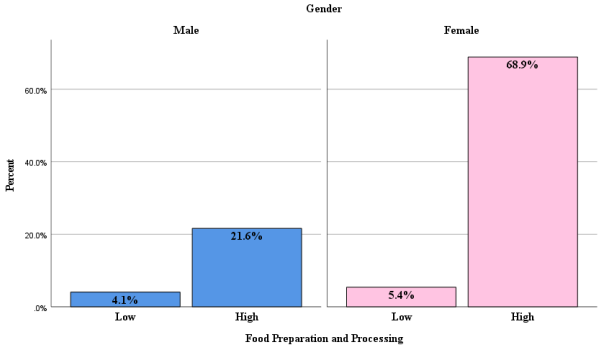


Figure 3. Distribution of Low and High Food Literacy in Food Preparation and Processing

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The visual results in **Figure 3.** for the food processing domain indicate a consistent pattern, with the majority of respondents categorized as having high literacy, particularly among female students. Specifically, 68.9% of females fall into the high category and 5.4% into the low category, while among males, 21.6% are categorized as high and 4.1% as low. Although female percentages appear higher, this is largely influenced by the greater number of female respondents in the sample. There are slight differences between male and female students in several food preparation indicators, such as hygienic practices, temperature control, and proper use of cooking tools and methods. Female students show a slightly higher proportion in the high category, while male students demonstrate relatively comparable performance. The Chi-square test yielded a value of 1.196, which exceeds the significance threshold, indicating that there is no statistically significant association between gender and food processing literacy.

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating a diminishing gender gap in cooking skills within formal education contexts. Although female students may show higher learning interest descriptively, differences in practical culinary skills become less pronounced due to structured curricula (Sinaga et al., 2024). Vocational training and culinary education play a significant role in reducing gender disparities in cooking skills, as practice-based culinary programs have been shown to improve cooking competencies, food knowledge, and healthy eating habits, including increased fruit and vegetable consumption through the application of healthy cooking techniques and hygiene practices (Koerich et al., 2024). School-based food literacy programs integrate nutrition education with hands-on cooking practice, enabling students to apply balanced nutrition principles in daily life (Sullivan et al., 2026).

3.2.4 Food Consumption

Figure 4. presents the distribution of food literacy levels in the food consumption domain by gender categories. This visual display shows the proportion of students in the low and high groups, providing a clearer comparison of eating behaviors and awareness of healthy consumption patterns between male and female students.

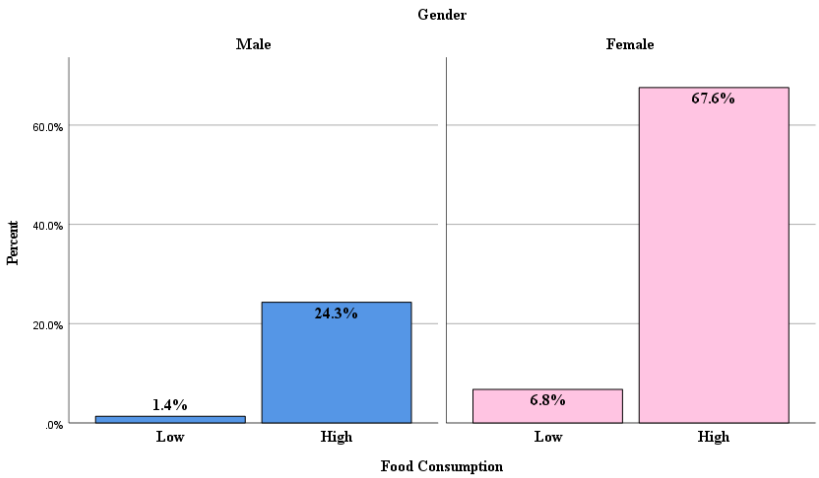


Figure 4. Distribution of Low and High Food Literacy in Food Consumption

In the food consumption domain, the distribution from **Figure 4.** indicates that most female students and a large proportion of male students fall within the high literacy category, while the low category represents only a small share in both groups. Specifically, 67.6% of females are classified

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as high and 6.8% as low, whereas among males, 24.3% are in the high category and 1.4% in the low category. The higher percentage among females reflects their larger representation in the overall sample. Female students tend to show a slightly higher proportion in balanced consumption indicators, such as attention to food variety and nutritional content. Male students, on the other hand, display a tendency toward larger portions or higher consumption frequency in some indicators. However, the differences are small, and the overall distribution of literacy levels remains similar between groups. The Chi-square test yielded a value of 0.278, indicating no statistically significant association between gender and food consumption literacy. Therefore, differences in consumption patterns cannot be attributed solely to gender within the context of this study.

These findings are supported by Deslippe et al. (2025), who showed that food literacy can standardize dietary patterns across genders in youth populations. Higher food literacy in the consumption domain is associated with a 15–25% increase in fiber and micronutrient intake, along with reduced consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and ultra-processed snacks commonly found among urban adolescents (Athennia & Nurdini, 2024; Oktafiani et al., 2025). This aspect also involves understanding the social context of eating, where cultural norms and peer influence in culinary school can shape healthy food choices (Fermeza & Isaura, 2022). Food consumption reflects the application of a healthy lifestyle. It represents how individuals translate nutritional knowledge into daily eating habits, which may influence others in adopting healthier dietary behaviors.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in food literacy between male and female students across all domains, including food planning and management, food selection, food processing, and food consumption. Both groups demonstrated relatively comparable abilities in managing, selecting, preparing, and consuming food. Female students showed slightly higher scores in planning and management, food selection, and food processing, while male students performed slightly better in food consumption. However, these differences were minimal and not statistically significant. Overall, the results suggest that food literacy is more strongly influenced by shared learning experiences, structured curricula, and practical-based vocational education than by gender differences.

The research focused primarily on gender differences in food literacy and did not examine other potential factors, such as socioeconomic background, family eating habits, parental influence, or industrial practice experience. In addition, the findings were limited to a specific vocational school context. Future research is recommended to include broader variables and comparative analyses based on school accreditation, learning environments, and teaching factory facilities. Further development of more contextual food literacy instruments incorporating sustainability, waste management, and industrial-scale food production is also encouraged.

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