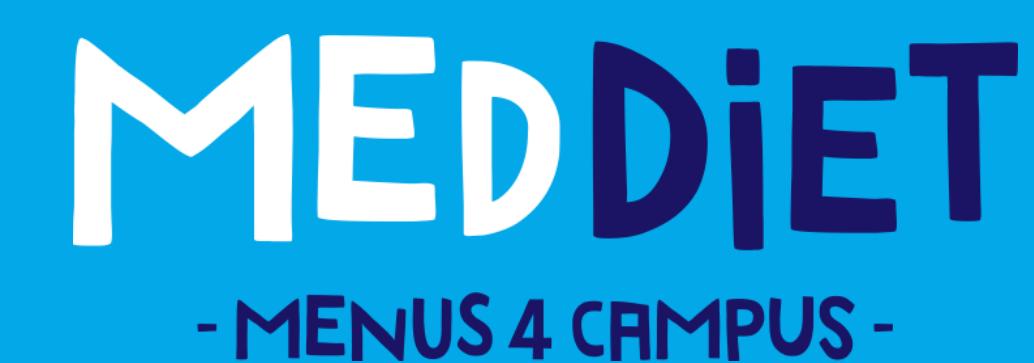


What's on the menu? Student's perspectives on barriers and opportunities for the Mediterranean Diet in university canteens

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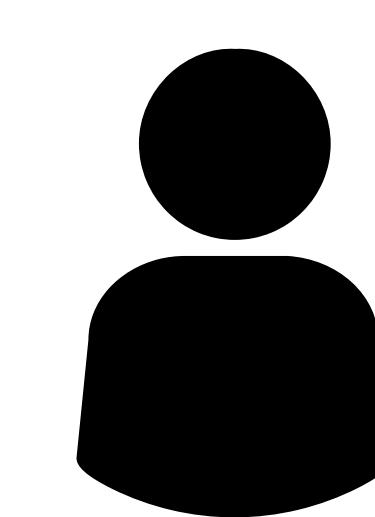
Introduction

The adoption of healthy eating habits, such as those promoted by the Mediterranean Diet, correlates with a better quality of life and academic performance among university students (Abuawad et al., 2023; Lanuza et al., 2022). Nevertheless, healthy food options within university settings are frequently limited, leading to a preference for ultra-processed and cost-effective choices (e.g., fast food) (Silva et al., 2025).

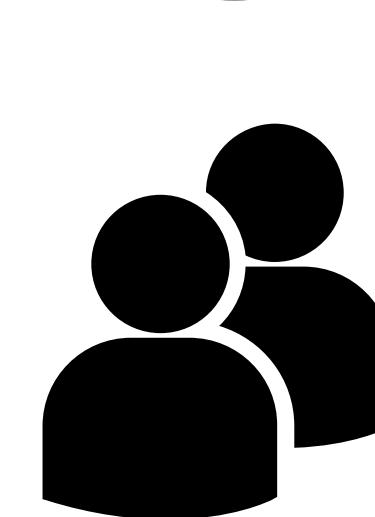
Aim

Our research aimed to examine Portuguese university **students' perceptions** of the main environmental **opportunities and barriers** to embracing healthier and more sustainable dietary practices, encompassed by the Mediterranean diet

Method



Qualitative methodology



66 participants

- 31 compensated with 15€ vouchers
- 35 compensated with course credit



Focus groups

- maximum of 8 participants per session
- 90 minutes
- moderated by the same researchers

Recruited through social media and word-of-mouth referrals
Inclusion criteria:

- full-time university students
- residence in Portugal for a minimum of two years
- fluency in Portuguese

Results

The analysis revealed two overarching themes regarding university students' perceptions of the Mediterranean diet: opportunities and perceived barriers to its adoption.

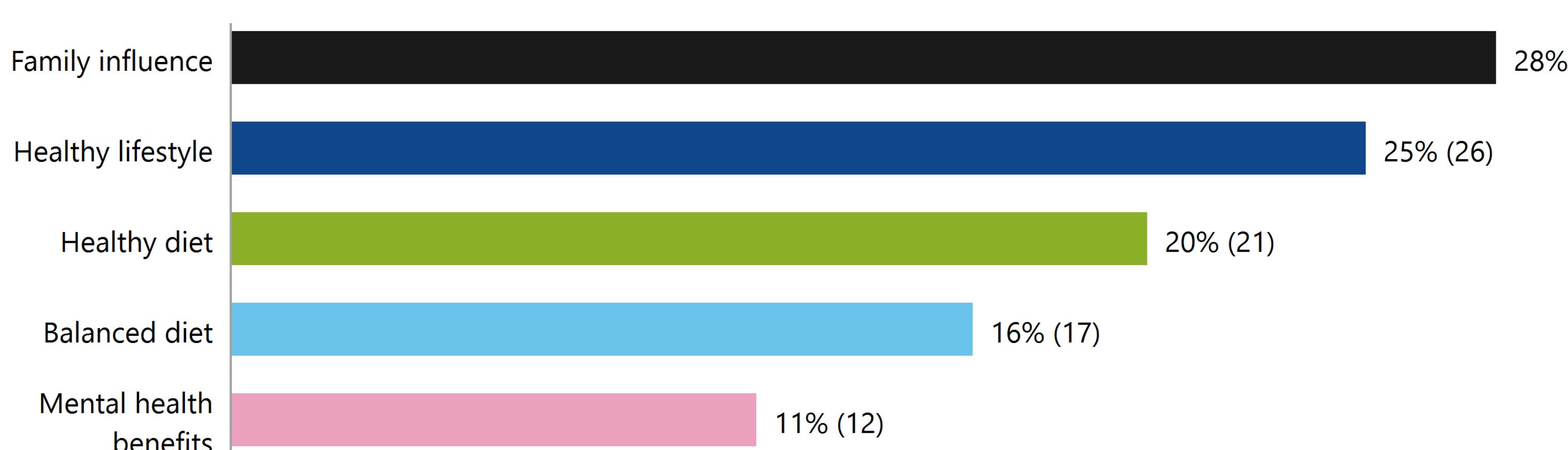


Figure 1 - Student's perceptions of **opportunities** to adherence to the Mediterranean diet

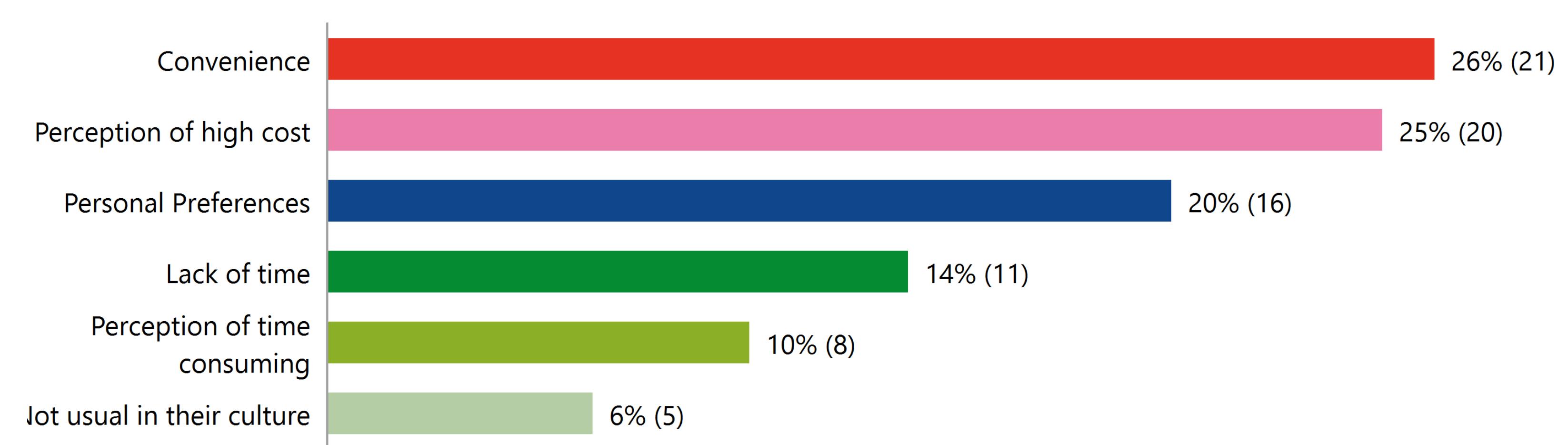


Figure 2 - Student's perceptions of **barriers** to adherence to the Mediterranean diet

Discussion

University students identified family influence as the main opportunity to adopt a Mediterranean diet, especially when the choices regarding meals are made by other family member. They also recognized the numerous health benefits of adopting the mediterranean diet.

Overall, the findings suggest that while university students recognize the health-related value of the Mediterranean diet, practical concern such as convenience and perceived cost hinder widespread adoption. This gap between knowledge and practice reflects patterns identified in previous research (Silva et al., 2025) and underscores the need for targeted strategies to improve accessibility and affordability of healthy food choices in student populations (Lima et al., 2021).

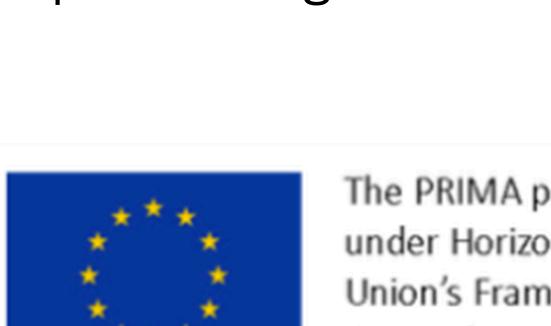
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