
Work Culture and Ultra-Processed Food Consumption Patterns Among Office Workers: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The purpose of this study was to explore how workplace culture influences the consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) among office workers in Indonesia, considering the rising prevalence of UPF intake and its association with metabolic risks. Our goal was to fill a gap in the literature by examining contextual, cultural, and behavioral factors through a phenomenological lens. **Methods:** This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted over one month (September 2025) in an urban corporate office setting. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving a total of 18 participants. Participants provided written informed consent. **Results:** The study's main findings revealed three primary themes: (1) structural time pressure reinforcing reliance on UPFs, (2) workplace social norms that normalize processed food consumption, and (3) internal negotiation between practicality and health concerns. Additional findings included emotional comfort-seeking through UPF snacks during stressful workloads. **Conclusion:** By highlighting sociocultural and organizational determinants of UPF consumption, this work advances understanding of occupational health behavior. This study sheds light on the broader implications for workplace nutrition interventions. Future studies should examine longitudinal changes and test multilevel intervention models.

Keywords: Ultra Processed Foods; Work culture; Office workers; Qualitative study; Phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

The consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) has become an increasingly alarming global public health issue. UPFs are defined as industrially formulated products made primarily or entirely from substances extracted from foods, derived from food constituents, or synthesized in laboratories (1). These products typically contain additives such as preservatives, colorings, flavor enhancers, artificial sweeteners, and stabilizers ingredients not commonly used in home cooking. Examples include instant noodles, sausages, fast food, packaged snacks, sweetened beverages, and various other ready-to-eat products (2). UPFs are generally high in calories, saturated fats, sugars, and sodium, but low in dietary fiber, vitamins, and essential minerals (3).

The growing consumption of UPFs has been linked to numerous adverse health outcomes, including obesity, hypertension, type 2 diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic syndrome (4). Longitudinal studies in several countries have shown that every 10% increase in the proportion of UPFs in daily energy intake is associated with a significant rise in the risk of mortality from non-communicable diseases (5). Moreover, diets high in UPFs have

been associated with lower overall diet quality, emotional or stress-related eating behaviors, and reduced psychological well-being (6).

The phenomenon of UPF consumption has become particularly prominent in modern workplace environments, especially within office-based sectors. Workplaces that demand high productivity often impose time pressure, stress, and limited opportunities for employees to prepare or access nutritious meals. Office workers typically lead sedentary lifestyles and rely heavily on fast food or food delivery services that offer convenience and speed. Meanwhile, workplace facilities supporting healthy eating such as balanced canteens, structured meal breaks, or nutrition-friendly policies are often underdeveloped or deprioritized in many organizations.

Several studies have indicated that organizational factors such as heavy workloads, packed meeting schedules, and work cultures emphasizing time efficiency play a major role in shaping employees' eating behaviors (7). Within this context, ultra-processed foods serve as an instant solution to fulfill both energy demands and emotional comfort amid workplace demands (8). Beyond structural determinants, social dynamics

also exert strong influence: traditions of bringing packaged snacks to meetings, sharing fast food with colleagues, and subtle peer pressure to conform to group eating habits all reinforce the normalization of UPF consumption (9).

Living under time pressure, collective norms, and stress at work often leads to rushed decisions, particularly regarding food. Workers are caught up in tight schedules, where deadlines and workloads leave little time for preparing healthy meals. As a result, eating becomes an instant solution to hunger, with quick and easily accessible options chosen instead of healthier alternatives.

In collectivist cultures like Indonesia, food choices at work are influenced not only by individual preferences but also by social harmony and group cohesion. Sharing fast food or snacks with colleagues strengthens social bonds, and rejecting these offers may be seen as breaking group norms. This dynamic reinforces the consumption of ultra-processed foods in the workplace.

While the relationship between work stress, time scarcity, and reliance on convenience foods has been well-documented in high-income countries, there remains a paucity of research exploring how workplace culture and organizational social factors shape UPF consumption in developing nations, including Indonesia (10). In collectivist cultural contexts such as Indonesia, eating behavior at work is not merely an individual choice but is also guided by social harmony, group cohesion, and adherence to shared norms. These cultural dynamics add layers

of complexity to understanding how dietary decisions are made and sustained in daily work life (11).

Therefore, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how work culture through mechanisms of time pressure, social norms, and organizational dynamics affects the consumption of ultra-processed foods among Indonesian office workers. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study aims to uncover the subjective meanings and lived experiences of workers within their workplace context (12).

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Explore employees’ perceptions of ultra-processed foods (UPFs).
2. Identify workplace factors influencing food choices.
3. Describe the lived experiences of office workers in navigating UPF consumption within a demanding work culture.

METHOD

Research Type

The population consisted of office workers aged 20–45 employed in an urban corporate office building. Eighteen (18) informants were recruited using purposive sampling to capture variation in job roles, workload levels, and eating patterns.

Population and Sample/Informants

The population consisted of office workers aged 20–45 employed in an urban corporate office building. Eighteen (18) informants were recruited using purposive sampling to capture variation in job roles, workload levels, and eating patterns.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics and Roles

Informant	Age	Gender	Job Title	Department	Work Hours	Description of Role
I1	24	F	Administrative Staff	HR	8–9 hrs/day	Handles filing, scheduling, internal communications
I2	29	M	Finance Officer	Finance	9 hrs/day	Manages budget transactions and daily reporting
I3	32	F	Customer Relations	Marketing	8 hrs/day	Manages client communication and support
I4	27	F	Graphic Designer	Creative	8–10 hrs/day	Designs promotional materials under tight deadlines
I5	41	M	Senior Manager	Operations	10 hrs/day	Oversees daily operations and meetings

I16	22	F	Intern	HR	8 hrs/day	Supports admin tasks and event coordination
I17	36	F	Data Analyst	IT	9 hrs/day	Processes large datasets and prepares analytical reports
I18	28	M	Logistics Coordinator	Operations	9–10 hrs/day	Coordinates vendor relations and supply flows
I19	30	F	Copywriter	Creative	8 hrs/day	Produces written content on short deadlines
I110	26	M	Helpdesk Support	IT	8 hrs/day	Handles troubleshooting and rotating shifts
I111	35	F	Project Coordinator	Marketing	9 hrs/day	Manages timelines, deliverables, and team tasks
I112	31	M	Sales Executive	Sales	8 hrs/day	Manages client meetings and sales engagements
I113	33	F	Accountant	Finance	8–9 hrs/day	Executes audits, reconciliation, and monthly closing
I114	25	F	Admin Support	General	8 hrs/day	Performs routine clerical and office tasks
I115	38	M	Supervisor	Operations	9–10 hrs/day	Supervises field staff and workflow processes
I116	40	M	HR Manager	HR	10 hrs/day	Leads HR planning, staffing, and evaluations
I117	29	F	Business Analyst	Strategy	9 hrs/day	Prepares strategic analyses and executive reports
I118	23	F	Receptionist	Front Office	8 hrs/day	Greets visitors, manages front-desk communications

Research Location

The study took place in a large corporate office complex in urban Indonesia.

Instrumentation or Tools

Tools included:

1. A semi-structured interview guide
2. FGD guide with probing questions
3. Digital audio recorder
4. Note-taking sheets for nonverbal observations

Data Collection Procedures

1. In-depth interviews (18 informants) lasting 45–60 minutes each
2. One FGD (6 randomly selected participants)
3. All interviews conducted privately
4. Data collected in September 2025

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Colaizzi’s phenomenological method:

1. Familiarization
2. Extraction of significant statements
3. Formulation of meanings
4. Clustering into themes
5. Exhaustive description
6. Validation with participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis generated three major themes with associated subthemes and illustrative quotations. Member-checking and investigator triangulation were used to enhance credibility

Table 2. Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotations

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Quotation
Time Pressure and Convenience	Skipped or rushed meals	“Sometimes lunch simply disappears because meetings are nonstop.” (I7, Data Analyst)
Time Pressure and Convenience	Reliance on ready-to-eat foods	“If I have five minutes, instant noodles or packaged snacks are the only options.” (I3, Customer Relations)

Workplace Social Norms	Meeting and event provisioning	“There is always packaged cake or sweet drinks at meetings.” (I11, Project Coordinator)
Workplace Social Norms	Peer influence and conformity	“If colleagues order fast food, I join in — it feels awkward not to.” (I12, Sales Executive)
Negotiating Practicality vs. Health	Health awareness but constrained action	“I know it’s unhealthy, but it’s the most practical option at work.” (I1, Administrative Staff)
Negotiating Practicality vs. Health	Emotional and stress-related eating	“When stressed, my hand reaches for a snack automatically.” (I4, Graphic Designer)

Theme 1 Time pressure and convenience

Subtheme 1.1: Skipped or rushed meals

Many participants reported frequently skipping or rushing main meals because of back-to-back meetings and tight deadlines.

“Sometimes lunch simply disappears because meetings are nonstop.” (I7, Data Analyst)

“When deadlines come, you eat whatever is fastest.” (I4, Graphic Designer)

Subtheme 1.2: Reliance on ready to eat foods

Participants described the pragmatic choice of instant noodles, packaged snacks, and delivery meals as the primary strategy to maintain energy and meet work demands.

“If I have five minutes, instant noodles or packaged snacks are the only options.” (I3, Customer Relations)

Interpretation within theme: Time scarcity produced a decision environment where speed and minimal preparation were prioritized over nutritional quality, causing routine substitution of minimally processed meals with UPFs.

Theme 2 Workplace social norms that normalize UPF consumption

Subtheme 2.1: Meeting and event provisioning

UPFs were commonly provided during meetings, events, or celebrations, making processed items the default shared food.

“There is always packaged cake or sweet drinks at meetings.” (I11, Project Coordinator)

Subtheme 2.2: Peer influence and social conformity

Some participants reported joining group orders or eating with colleagues to maintain social harmony, even when preferring healthier choices.

“If colleagues order fast food, I join in it feels awkward not to.” (I12, Sales Executive)

Interpretation within theme: Collective practices and expectations transformed UPF consumption from individual choice into social routine, reinforcing frequency and acceptability.

Theme 3 Negotiating practicality versus health concerns

Subtheme 3.1: Awareness of health risks but constrained action

Most participants acknowledged UPFs are unhealthy, yet reported difficulty changing habits due to environmental constraints.

“I know it’s unhealthy, but it’s the most practical option at work.” (I1, Administrative Staff)

Subtheme 3.2: Emotional and stress-related eating

Participants identified stress, fatigue, and boredom as triggers for UPF consumption, describing these foods as comfort or “energy” boosters.

“When stressed, my hand reaches for a snack automatically.” (I4, Graphic Designer)

Interpretation within theme: Cognitive awareness of long-term risk coexisted with short-term coping strategies; the latter often won because of immediacy (time, stress relief) and environment.

Cross-cutting observations

- **Environmental enablers:** vending machines, nearby minimarkets, and food delivery app promotions were repeatedly cited as increasing UPF uptake.
- **Variation by role:** staff with more meetings (project coordinators, managers) reported higher frequency of UPF reliance.
- **Normalization:** repeated exposure (daily meetings, snack routines) produced a

perception that UPF consumption is an ordinary, acceptable part of office life.

Table 3. Summary of Key Findings and Practical Implications

Key Finding	Interpretation	Practical Implication
Time constraints drive UPF reliance	Workers prioritize speed over nutrition due to workload and tight schedules.	Introduce structured meal breaks and healthy ready-to-eat options at offices.
Social norms reinforce UPF consumption	Group orders and meeting snacks normalize processed foods.	Encourage healthier group catering and peer-led wellness programs.
Stress increases emotional eating	UPFs serve as comfort foods during stress or fatigue.	Integrate stress management and mindfulness activities at work.
Awareness alone insufficient for change	Environmental factors override individual health knowledge.	Adopt multilevel interventions addressing environment, policy, and culture.

Interpretation of Key Findings

This phenomenological inquiry found workplace culture functions as an ecological driver of UPF consumption through three interlinked mechanisms: (1) *structural time scarcity* that privileges speed over nutrition; (2) *social practices* that make UPF the normative, shared option; and (3) *psychosocial coping strategies* that favor UPF for immediate comfort or perceived energy. These mechanisms interact: time pressure increases reliance on delivery and vending options, which are socially reinforced through meetings and peer ordering, while stress provides the emotional impetus to choose UPF.

Practically, the findings indicate that individual knowledge or intent (awareness that UPFs are unhealthy) is insufficient to alter behavior without changes to the workplace environment, schedule expectations, and group practices.

Comparison with Previous Studies

The results are consistent with international evidence linking work time pressure and availability of convenience foods to higher UPF intake among employed adults. Prior work has similarly identified time scarcity, vending machine access, and delivery services as predictors of processed food consumption in occupational settings (13). What this study adds particularly relevant to Indonesian workplace culture is the strength of collectivist social norms (e.g., peer conformity during shared orders and meeting snacks) as a reinforcing mechanism; this

cultural dimension amplifies the effect of environmental enablers and may make workplace interventions that ignore group norms less effective (14).

Limitations and Cautions

1. Single-site / limited generalizability: Data were collected in one urban corporate complex; findings may not extrapolate to rural settings, other industries, shift work, or informal workplaces.
2. Self-reporting and social desirability: Participants may under- or over-report behaviors; however, triangulation with FGDs and anonymized quotes mitigated this risk.
3. Cross-sectional qualitative design: The study captures lived experience at one time point; it cannot establish causal links or temporal trends.
4. Sample size and composition: Although sufficient for phenomenological saturation in the chosen context (n=18), broader samples are needed for quantification and subgroup analyses (e.g., by socioeconomic status or job grade).
5. Readers should interpret findings as contextualized, explanatory insights rather than population prevalence estimates.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Mixed-methods and longitudinal studies: combine quantitative dietary assessment (24-hour recalls, UPF classification) with

repeated qualitative interviews to track behavior change over time.

2. Intervention trials at workplace level: test multi-component interventions (healthy-food provisioning, protected meal breaks, limits on meeting snacks, behavioral nudges) and evaluate effects on UPF consumption and cardiometabolic markers.
3. Cross-cultural comparative studies: examine how collectivist versus individualist workplace cultures modulate UPF norms and intervention uptake.
4. Policy and economic analyses: assess the cost-effectiveness of employer-led healthy canteens, subsidies, or regulation of on-site vending content.
5. Digital environment research: study the role of delivery app promotions and targeted marketing in shaping workplace food choices and test digital nudges to promote healthier options.

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CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study demonstrates that UPF consumption among office workers is embedded in workplace culture: structural time pressures, accessible processed food environments, and social norms together create an ecosystem that favors UPF. Individual awareness of health risks is not enough to overcome these drivers. To reduce UPF reliance and improve dietary quality, workplace interventions must be multi-level addressing scheduling practices, food availability, and social norms rather than focusing solely on individual education. Future research should rigorously evaluate workplace interventions, incorporate longitudinal designs, and explore scalability across sectors to inform national occupational nutrition strategies.

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