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# Consumption of Somay as a Ready-to-Eat Snack in the Campus Environment: A Qualitative Study of Consumption Behavior and Health Risks among Students of Tadulako University

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## ABSTRACT

*Ready-to-eat snacks constitute part of students' consumption patterns, particularly within campus environments characterized by intensive academic activities. Students tend to choose food that is practical, easily accessible, and affordable. One of the snacks commonly found around Tadulako University is somay. Although popular, the consumption of ready-to-eat foods may pose health risks when food safety principles are not adequately met. This study aimed to analyze somay consumption behavior, students' perceptions of food safety, and the potential health risks associated with consuming somay in the campus environment. This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive exploratory design. The informants consisted of four students from Tadulako University representing different faculties, namely the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), Faculty of Law, Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences (FMIPA), and Faculty of Public Health. Informants were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicated that somay consumption was influenced by practicality, affordability, strategic location, and students' limited time. All informants demonstrated basic awareness regarding food hygiene and potential health risks; however, their understanding of food safety varied. Students from science and health-related backgrounds showed better understanding compared with those from non-science backgrounds. Although aware of the risks, students continued to consume somay because the perceived practical benefits were greater. It can be concluded that somay is a practical food choice for students in the campus environment; however, consumption behavior has not fully considered food safety aspects. Health education and the strengthening of a healthy campus environment are needed to improve safe food consumption behavior*

**Keyword : *Ready-to-eat snacks, somay, consumption behavior, food safety, students***

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## INTRODUCTION

University students represent a productive age group characterized by high mobility, intensive academic activities, and dynamic lifestyles. These conditions often result in limited time to meet daily dietary needs, leading students to prefer food that is practical, quickly obtainable, and affordable. Such consumption patterns are commonly observed in higher education settings, where ready-to-eat snacks function as part of the support system for student activities. Recent studies indicate that university students are among the groups with a high tendency to consume convenience foods due to comfort, affordability, and time efficiency (Almeida et al., 2024). Tadulako University, as one of the largest public universities in Central Sulawesi, has approximately 43,000 students distributed across 11 faculties and more than 50 study programs. The large student population and the high intensity of academic activities have transformed the campus environment into a center of informal economic activity, including the food sector. Around faculty areas, main campus routes, and cafeterias, numerous ready-to-eat food vendors can be found serving students' daily needs.

One of the most popular snacks in the campus environment is somay. This food is widely favored because of its relatively low price, familiar taste, easy accessibility, and quick serving process. Based on the researcher's preliminary observations, somay vendors are located at several strategic points across the campus and have regular student customers. This indicates that somay is not merely

a snack, but has become part of the routine consumption pattern of some students. Nevertheless, the high consumption of ready-to-eat snacks requires attention from a public health perspective. The World Health Organization states that unsafe food remains a major cause of foodborne diseases globally, with millions of cases occurring each year (WHO, 2024). This risk increases for ready-to-eat foods sold in open spaces, as they may be exposed to dust, flies, vehicle emissions, hand contamination, and inadequate sanitation of utensils.

In addition to biological hazards, ready-to-eat foods may also present chemical risks. The repeated use of cooking oil, inappropriate food additives, and poorly controlled processing practices may reduce food quality and increase health risks when consumed continuously. Recent studies have shown that small-scale ready-to-eat food businesses often face limitations in implementing hygiene standards and quality control compared with formal food systems (Ebrahim et al., 2025).

However, student consumption behavior is not always based on health considerations. Among young adults, food choices are more frequently influenced by taste, price, convenience, and food availability within their activity environment. Therefore, knowledge of health risks does not necessarily align with daily consumption practices. Research on food safety among university students has also demonstrated that adequate knowledge does not always translate into healthy eating behavior (Hassan et al., 2024).

In the context of Tadulako University, the phenomenon of somay consumption is an interesting subject of study because it reflects the relationship between students' practical needs, the campus food environment, and health awareness. Previous studies have mainly focused on quantitative aspects such as consumption frequency or nutritional status, while research exploring the reasons students choose certain snacks, their perceptions of food safety, and the gap between knowledge and behavior remains limited.

Therefore, this study is important to analyze the consumption of somay as a ready-to-eat snack in the campus environment using a qualitative approach. This research is expected to provide an overview of student consumption behavior, perceptions of food safety, and potential health risks, thereby serving as a basis for the development of health promotion programs and healthy campus policies.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive exploratory design. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' consumption behavior, perceptions of food safety, and views regarding the health risks associated with consuming somay as a ready-to-eat snack in the campus environment. The descriptive exploratory design was used to systematically describe the phenomenon based on the experiences and perspectives of the informants within their natural context.

The study was conducted at Tadulako University, located in Palu. The research site was selected based on the high level of student activity and the large number of somay vendors operating across the campus area, which enabled the researcher to obtain a realistic overview of ready-to-eat snack consumption within a higher education setting.

The research informants consisted of four active students of Tadulako University from different faculties: the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), Faculty of Law (FH), Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences (FMIPA), and Faculty of Public Health (FKM). Informants were selected using purposive sampling, in which participants were intentionally chosen based on criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. The inclusion criteria were: (1) active students of Tadulako University, (2) individuals who had consumed or regularly consumed somay on campus, and (3) willingness to participate in the study.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. This technique was employed to obtain rich and detailed information while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. The interviews focused on several aspects, including frequency of somay consumption, reasons for choosing somay, food hygiene considerations, understanding of health risks, and informants' views regarding the impact of somay consumption on health.

In addition to interviews, the researcher conducted direct field observations of somay selling environments within the campus area. Observations included vending locations, cleanliness of the place and utensils, food serving conditions, and interactions between vendors and consumers. These observations were carried out to strengthen the interview findings and provide real-life context to the phenomenon under study.

The collected data were analyzed thematically through several stages: data reduction, data presentation, theme categorization, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting essential information from the interview results. Subsequently, the data were presented in narrative form and thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation. Major themes were then identified based on recurring response patterns, such as factors driving consumption, perceptions of cleanliness, understanding of health risks, and the relationship between knowledge and consumption behavior.

Data validity was maintained through methodological triangulation by comparing interview findings with field observation results. In addition, the researcher conducted member checking to ensure that the interpretation of responses accurately reflected the intended meaning of the informants' statements. This study was conducted in accordance with research ethics principles. All informants were provided with explanations regarding the purpose of the study, confidentiality of identity was ensured, and participation was voluntary based on informed consent

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

This study involved four student informants from Tadulako University representing different faculties: the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), Faculty of Law (FH), Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences (FMIPA), and Faculty of Public Health (FKM). The differences in the informants' academic backgrounds provided diverse perspectives regarding somay consumption behavior, perceptions of food safety, and views on health risks. Based on the results of in-depth interviews, several major themes were identified, namely consumption patterns of somay, driving factors of consumption, perceptions of food hygiene, understanding of health risks, and the relationship between knowledge and consumption behavior.

**Table 1. Characteristics of the Research Informants**

| Informant Code | Faculty | Study Program | Semester | Consumption Characteristics |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I1 | Faculty of Teacher and Education | Chemistry Education | 2 | Fairly regular consumption |
| I2 | Faculty of Low | Law | 4 | Situational consumption |
| I3 | Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences | Biology | 4 | Very regular consumption |
| I4 | Faculty of Public Health | Public Health | 4 | Infrequent consumption |

**Table 2. Summary of Informant Interviews**

| Informant | Consumption Frequency | Reasons for Choosing Somay | Perceptions of Cleanliness | Understanding of Health Risks |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I1 (FKIP) | $\pm 5$ times/week | An alternative when the cafeteria is crowded | Observes the cleanliness of plates | Aware of the presence of bacteria, but the effects are considered indirect |
| I2 (FH) | Situational | Affordable and easily accessible | Environment considered fairly clean | Concerned about the use of borax and air contamination |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I3 (FMIPA) | Almost every day | Nearby and practical | Highly attentive to cleanliness | Aware of the risks of bacteria, diarrhea, and repeatedly used cooking oil. |
| I4 (FKM) | Approximately once every two weeks | When no other options are available | Considers the selling area fairly clean | Aware of the risks of bacteria, viruses, and repeatedly used cooking oil. |

Based on Table 2, the highest consumption frequency was observed among the informant from FMIPA, while the lowest frequency was found among the informant from the Faculty of Public Health. These findings indicate that academic background may be associated with students' consumption patterns. Informants with health-related backgrounds tended to be more selective, whereas other informants more frequently considered practicality and convenience.

1. Somay Consumption Patterns among Students

   The findings showed that somay is a fairly popular snack in the environment of Tadulako University. Students consumed somay with varying frequencies, ranging from almost every day to only occasionally. The informant from FMIPA stated that somay was consumed almost daily because its location was nearby and easily accessible. This indicates that somay has become part of the routine consumption pattern of certain students. In contrast, the student from the Faculty of Public Health consumed somay only about once every two weeks and considered it an alternative option when no other food was available. This suggests that students with better health-related knowledge tend to be more cautious in selecting ready-to-eat foods. Meanwhile, the informants from FKIP and the Faculty of Law were categorized as moderate consumers, consuming somay during lecture days, when craving snacks, or when the cafeteria was crowded. In general, somay was not positioned merely as a snack, but also as a quick solution to fulfill food needs amid academic activities.
2. Factors Driving Somay Consumption

   Several major factors encouraged students to choose somay, namely affordability, ease of access, practicality, and time limitations. Economic factors appeared dominant among the Faculty of Law informant, who considered somay an inexpensive food suitable for students' budgets. Location was also highly influential. The informant from FMIPA stated that the proximity of the vendor to the academic area was the main reason for purchase. The easier the food location was to access, the greater the likelihood of repeated purchases. In addition, practicality emerged among the FKIP informant, who chose somay when the cafeteria was crowded because it could be obtained more quickly. These findings indicate that students tend to choose food based on time efficiency rather than nutritional value or food safety considerations.
3. Perceptions of Cleanliness and Food Safety

   All informants stated that cleanliness was an important consideration before purchasing somay. However, the indicators of cleanliness used were still simple and based mainly on visual assessment. The FKIP informant evaluated cleanliness based on the condition of the plates, while other informants considered the cleanliness of the selling area and the appearance of the vendor. The Faculty of Public Health informant perceived the vendor as maintaining cleanliness adequately because trash bins were provided and the selling area was kept tidy. Meanwhile, the Faculty of Law informant emphasized that environmental cleanliness depends not only on the vendor, but also on consumers' behavior in disposing of waste properly. These findings indicate that students' perceptions of food safety remain limited to visible external cleanliness. Understanding of processing sanitation, food storage practices, and the potential for cross-contamination had not yet become major considerations
4. Understanding of Health Risks

The level of understanding regarding health risks differed according to academic background. Informants from FMIPA and the Faculty of Public Health demonstrated better understanding of microbiological hazards, such as the presence of bacteria and viruses in foods sold in open areas. They also recognized that unhygienic food could cause digestive disorders such as diarrhea. In addition, these two informants understood the hazards of repeatedly used cooking oil, which may reduce food quality and negatively affect health. In contrast, informants from non-science faculties tended to have more general understanding, for example associating risks only with hazardous substances such as borax or food that appeared dirty. These findings suggest that formal education in science and health contributes to students' food literacy levels.

5. The Gap between Knowledge and Consumption Behavior

One of the important findings of this study was the existence of a gap between knowledge of health risks and actual consumption behavior. Although most informants were aware that continuous consumption of somay could potentially cause health impacts, they continued to consume it. This was due to the immediate benefits perceived by students, such as satiety, low cost, easy access, and time efficiency. Health risks were considered less tangible because their effects were not directly experienced. Therefore, knowledge alone is insufficient to encourage changes in consumption behavior when environmental factors and habits continue to support ready-to-eat snack consumption. Overall, the findings indicate that somay is a popular snack in the environment of Tadulako University because it is inexpensive, practical, and easily accessible. Students possess basic awareness regarding cleanliness and health risks; however, their consumption behavior does not yet fully consider food safety principles. Academic background influences students' level of understanding, but it does not always correspond to healthier consumption behavior. These findings demonstrate that ready-to-eat snack consumption on campus is the result of interactions among economic factors, environmental conditions, knowledge, and students' habits.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that the consumption of somay as a ready-to-eat snack in the environment of Tadulako University is a phenomenon shaped by the interaction of economic factors, practicality, accessibility, student consumption culture, and levels of food safety understanding. These findings confirm that students' food choices cannot be understood merely as individual decisions, but also as responses to a campus environment that provides fast, inexpensive, and easily accessible food options. In higher education settings, such consumption behavior is commonly found among students with high mobility and intensive academic schedules (Almeida et al., 2024).

However, this study provides an important local context. As a large university in Central Sulawesi with a substantial student population, a wide campus area, and academic activities distributed across many faculties, Tadulako University creates opportunities for informal food vendors to flourish. Under these conditions, snacks such as somay become part of the campus food ecosystem because they are available at strategic points, easily accessible between faculties, and compatible with students' daily routines. Thus, somay consumption at Tadulako University reflects not only food preferences, but also students' adaptation to the campus environment.

1. Somay as a Rational Food Choice for Students

One of the main findings of this study is that somay is chosen because it is inexpensive, quickly obtained, and filling. From the students' perspective, this decision represents rational behavior because it considers time constraints and limited economic resources. Students require food that can be obtained without disrupting lecture schedules, laboratory activities, or organizational commitments. This finding is consistent with Hassan et al. (2024), who reported that students more frequently choose practical foods rather than healthy foods when facing time pressure. However, the present study also reveals a more specific dimension: somay is not merely a modern fast food, but a traditional snack that has transformed into a practical campus food. This is an interesting finding because most previous studies have focused on modern fast food such as

burgers, fried chicken, or sugar-sweetened beverages. This study demonstrates that local snacks such as somay may also perform similar socio-economic functions as campus fast food. This represents one of the novelties of the study.

2. Price and Accessibility as Determinants of Consumption

   Low price emerged as a dominant reason for choosing somay. For students, economic considerations are highly important because many depend on limited monthly allowances. Therefore, foods that are inexpensive yet sufficiently filling are more likely to be selected. This finding supports Ebrahim et al. (2025), who stated that price is a significant predictor of food choice among young adults. However, other studies suggest that students with high nutritional knowledge may still choose healthier foods, even when more expensive, if such foods are conveniently available and appealing. This difference indicates that price is not the sole factor, but interacts with the availability of food choices in the surrounding environment. In the context of Tadulako University, the presence of somay vendors in strategic areas strengthens this price effect. Low-cost food located near academic areas has greater appeal than healthier foods that are farther away or require more time to obtain.

3. Perceptions of Cleanliness Remain Primarily Visual

   This study found that students considered cleanliness before purchasing food, but their indicators of cleanliness were mainly visual, such as clean plates, tidy vending areas, or vendors who appeared clean. This finding demonstrates a gap between lay perceptions and scientific food safety concepts. From a microbiological perspective, food that appears clean is not necessarily safe to consume. Contamination by bacteria, viruses, or cross-contamination often cannot be detected visually (WHO, 2024). Kaddouri et al. (2025) reported that ready-to-eat foods sold in open spaces carry higher risks of exposure to dust, insects, and suboptimal sanitation practices. Nevertheless, other studies have found that visual perception is indeed a rapid mechanism consumers use when making street-food purchasing decisions. This means that students are not entirely mistaken, but rather rely on simple indicators that are easiest to observe. These findings highlight the need for food safety education that bridges scientific knowledge with everyday food selection practices.

4. Academic Background and Food Literacy

   Students from FMIPA and the Faculty of Public Health demonstrated better understanding of bacteria, viruses, diarrhea, and the effects of repeatedly used cooking oil than students from non-science faculties. These results indicate that formal education contributes to food literacy. This finding is consistent with studies published in Foods (2025), which reported that health-related students had higher food safety knowledge scores than non-health students. However, this study also found that better knowledge was not always followed by consistently healthier consumption behavior. Here lies an important contribution of the study: food literacy may improve through education, but consumption behavior continues to be negotiated with convenience, habits, and campus realities. In other words, education alone does not automatically change behavior without supportive healthy environments.

5. The Gap Between Knowledge and Behavior: A Key Finding

   The most important finding of this study is the gap between knowledge of health risks and actual consumption practices. Most informants knew that frequent consumption of ready-to-eat snacks could have negative health impacts, yet they continued to consume them because such foods were cheap, fast, and had not caused immediately perceived consequences. This phenomenon supports health behavior theory, which suggests that knowledge is important but not the sole determinant of behavioral change. Individuals are often more influenced by immediate benefits than by long-term threats. Among students, hunger, busy schedules, and practical needs become more urgent than future health risks. At the same time, these findings challenge the common assumption that unhealthy behavior is always caused by lack of knowledge. In this case, even students with good knowledge continued risky consumption practices. Therefore, the root problem is not only insufficient education, but also the campus food structure that does not yet fully support healthy choices. This is an important novelty of the study.

6. Implications for Tadulako University and Healthy Campus Policy

The findings have direct implications for Tadulako University. As a large university with a high student population, students' daily food needs cannot be separated from the presence of informal vendors. Therefore, purely repressive approaches or prohibition alone are unlikely to be effective. The university should develop a healthy campus food environment policy through vendor training, provision of hygienic vending areas, access to clean water, waste management systems, food safety education, and affordable healthy food alternatives. If healthier foods remain more expensive and less accessible, students will continue to choose the most practical options.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the number of informants was relatively small, consisting of only four students; therefore, the findings were not intended for statistical generalization. Second, the study was conducted in only one university, so the social and environmental contexts of other campuses may differ. Third, the data were obtained through interviews and therefore depended heavily on the honesty and ability of informants to explain their experiences. Fourth, the study did not include laboratory examination of the microbiological or chemical quality of the somay consumed by students. Nevertheless, the study remains valuable because it provides an in-depth understanding of student consumption behavior and campus food environment dynamics from the students' own perspectives.

8. Synthesis and Research Novelty

Overall, this study demonstrates that somay consumption in the environment of Tadulako University is the result of interactions among students' economic limitations, food accessibility, campus consumption culture, and levels of health literacy. The main novelty lies in the finding that local snacks such as somay function as a form of campus fast food, and that even students with good health knowledge may continue risky consumption when the food environment supports practical choices more than healthy choices. Thus, the issue of campus snack consumption cannot be addressed solely through individual education, but requires transformation toward a campus food environment that is healthy, safe, affordable, and realistic for students' needs.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that somay is one of the ready-to-eat snacks that is quite popular in the environment of Tadulako University and has become part of students' consumption patterns. The high level of student interest in somay is influenced by its affordable price, ease of access, practical serving method, and suitability for students with intensive academic activities. In general, students possess basic awareness regarding food cleanliness and the potential health risks associated with consuming ready-to-eat snacks. However, this understanding varies and is influenced by academic background. Students from science and health-related fields tend to have better food literacy than students from non-science disciplines.

Nevertheless, this study found a gap between knowledge and consumption behavior. Some students were aware of the potential health risks, yet continued to consume somay because the perceived practical benefits outweighed risks that were considered not yet tangible. This indicates that students' consumption behavior is influenced not only by knowledge, but also by economic factors, habits, and the campus food environment. Overall, the phenomenon of somay consumption at Tadulako University reflects that student food-related issues cannot be resolved solely through individual education, but require support from a campus environment that provides food choices that are safe, healthy, affordable, and easily accessible.

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