

Understanding Disordered Eating Among College Students Through the Theory of Planned Behavior

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Introduction / Background / Goals

- Disordered eating among college students has risen sharply, 51.8% of college women and 31.3% of college men reported disordered eating behaviors in 2021 (Tavolacci et al., 2021).
- These behaviors can cause severe health issues, including death (ANAD, 2024).
- It is driven by social pressures, societal expectations, and media influence (Tavolacci et al., 2021).
- Research uses the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to explore how attitudes, norms, and perceived control affect eating behaviors (Fila & Smith, 2006).
- Objective: To evaluate how TPB constructs predict disordered eating behaviors among college students and identify evidence-based strategies recommended in the literature to improve student health outcomes.

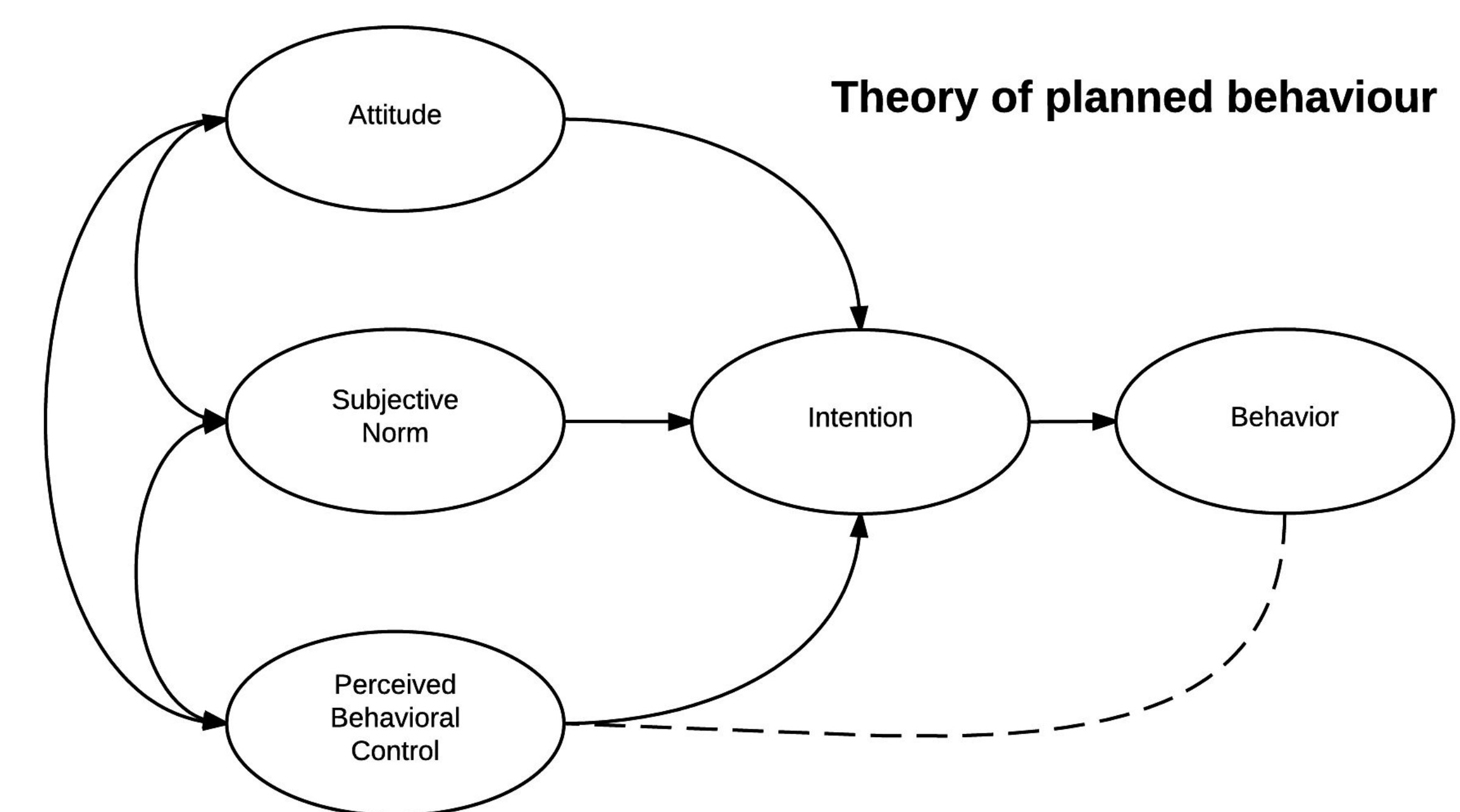


Figure 1: Conceptual model of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)

Methods

- Conducted a comprehensive narrative literature review during Spring 2024.
- Searched for studies examining disordered eating behaviors among college students.
- Search terms included: "disordered eating," "eating disorders," "college students," "university students," "Theory of Planned Behavior," "TPB".
- Focused on research applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) constructs: Attitudes, Subjective Norms, & Perceived Behavioral Control.
- Performed deductive descriptive analysis to understand how the studies align with TPB constructs.
- Analyzed how well TPB predicts disordered eating behaviors and identifies intervention opportunities.

Results

- A total of 10 peer-reviewed articles were reviewed to understand the relationship between TPB constructs and disordered eating among college students.
- The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) effectively explained intentions behind disordered eating among college students.
- Attitudes toward eating (e.g., fear of weight gain) significantly influenced behavior.
- Subjective norms (social pressure from peers, media) were strong predictors of disordered eating patterns.
- Perceived behavioral control influenced behavior by affecting students' confidence and ability to manage healthy eating (e.g., limited access to nutritious food or time constraints).
- Studies showed that external barriers—such as mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety, depression reducing motivation or self-regulation) and environmental factors (e.g., lack of access to healthy food or supportive campus resources)—also influenced behaviors.
- Intervention strategies that addressed TPB constructs—such as peer support groups, education programs, and digital self-monitoring tools—showed promise in reducing disordered eating behaviors.

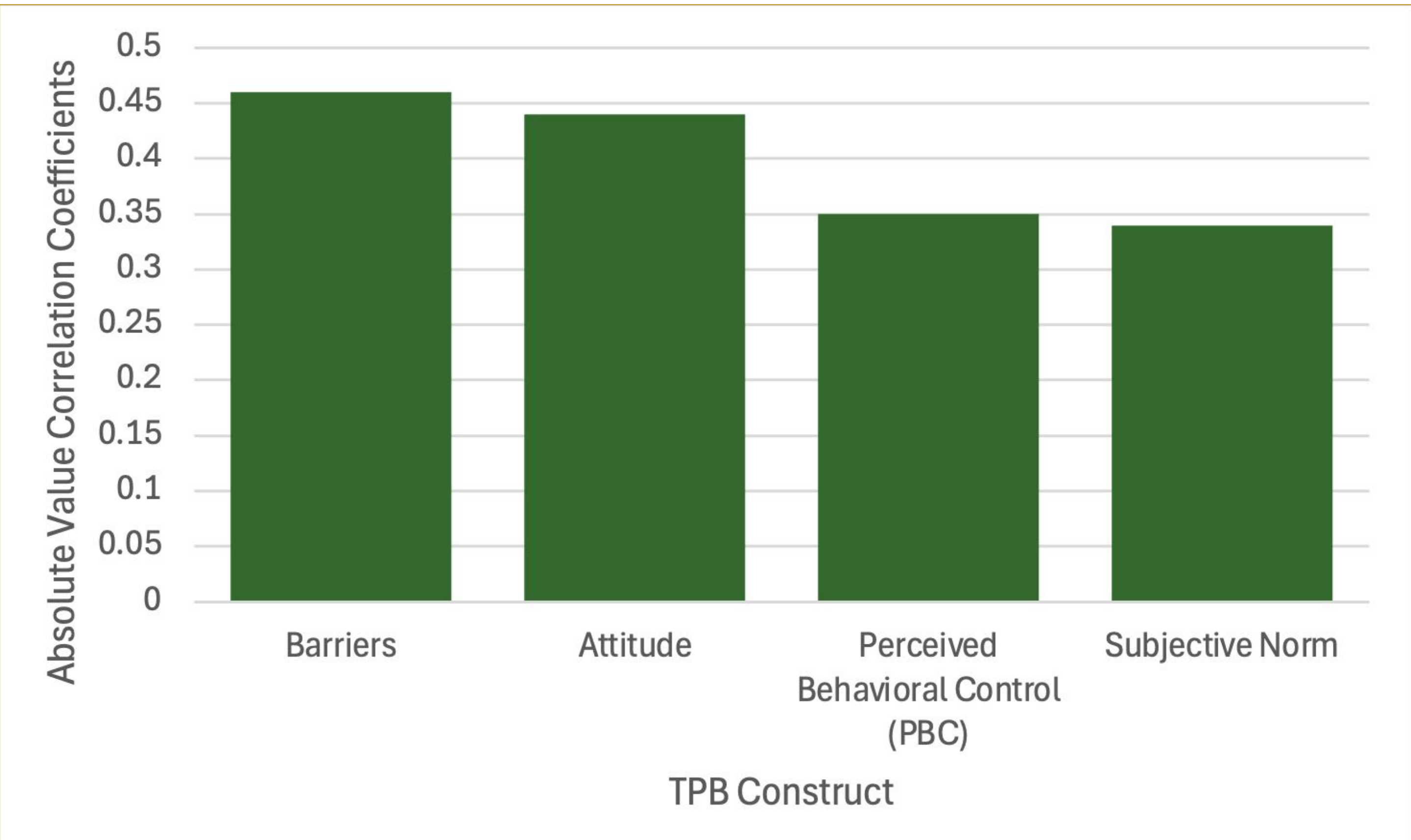


Figure 2: Correlations between TPB constructs and healthy eating behaviors. Adapted from Fila & Smith (2006), International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity.

Conclusions / Discussions

- This project applied the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to examine cultural, social, and psychological drivers of disordered eating in college students.
- Attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control significantly influence eating behavior intentions.
- Disordered eating is spurred by social and psychological pressures, not just individual choice. (Fila & Smith, 2006)
- Interventions that target social norms, self-efficacy, and behavioral control are likely to be most effective.
- TPB provides a strong, theory-based framework for developing targeted public health promotion strategies. (Ajzen, 1991)

Future Directions / Next Steps

- Implement TPB-based programs on college campuses.
- Use peer groups and digital tools to promote behavior change.
- Integrate health education to address eating habits and media influence.
- Combine TPB with other models to enhance effectiveness.
- Conduct long-term studies to track changes in behavior and intention and to monitor ongoing risk factors.

References

- Citation 1: ANAD. (2024). Eating disorder statistics. <https://anad.org/eating-disorder-statistic/>
- Citation 2: Ajzen, I. (1991). Theory of Planned Behavior. In Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes (pp. 179-211). Academic Press.
- Citation 3: Fila, S. A., & Smith, C. (2006). Applying the theory of planned behavior to healthy eating behaviors in urban Native American youth. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 3(11). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-3-11>
- Citation 4: Tavolacci, M.-P., Ladner, J., & Déchelotte, P. (2021). Sharp increase in eating disorders among university students since the COVID-19 pandemic. Nutrients, 13(10), 3415. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu13103415>