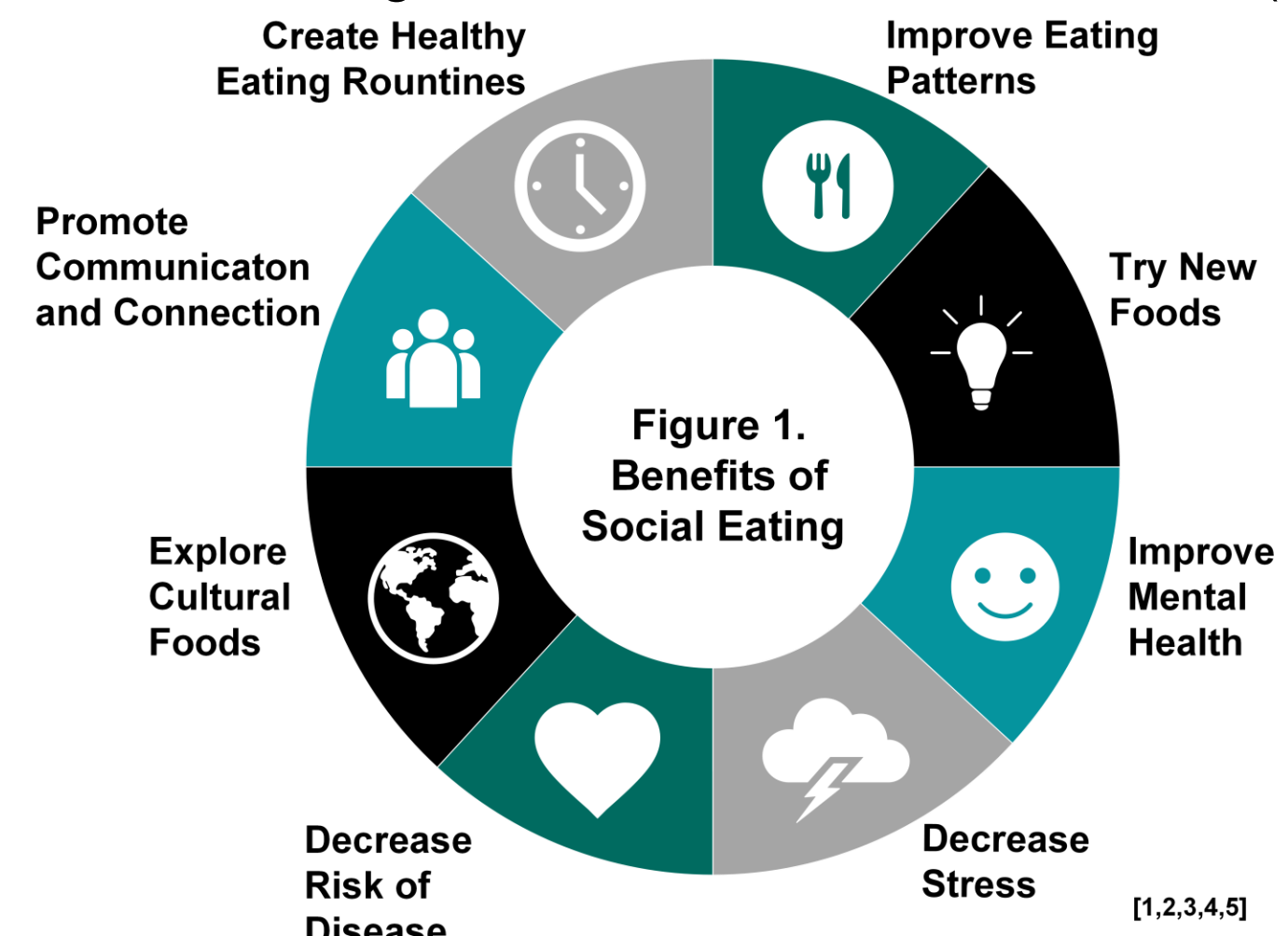


Attitudes and Practices Towards Eating with Others Among the University of Saskatchewan Community

Carlie Meikle, Caitlyn Oakenfold, Carolyn Stadnyk, Kailee Wilson

INTRODUCTION

In addition to providing healthy eating recommendations, Canada's Food Guide and various diets (e.g., Mediterranean diet) have recognized that eating meals with others is beneficial¹ (Figure 1).



Several studies have investigated the benefits of eating with others for children, seniors and within families. Limited studies exist that have investigated the association of eating with others and mental health issues in young adults but not in a University population.

According to the 2022 National College Health Assessment, 43.7% of college students surveyed felt isolated from others some of the time, while 28.9% felt isolated⁶, which we believe may affect students' mental health and ability to benefit from eating with others.

Given the recent recommendation of Canada's Food Guide to eat meals with others, we thought it would be useful to investigate the attitudes and practices of the USask community regarding eating with others, not only to provide information to bridge the gap in research but also inform the USask community of the potential benefits and strategies to incorporating eating with others into their routines.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the attitudes and practices regarding eating with others among the University of Saskatchewan community?

METHODS

This study consisted of ten survey questions; five questions captured participant demographic information and five questions investigated the attitudes and practices towards eating with others. Questions prompted participants to reflect on their eating habits and included single and top three answer multiple choices.

The online survey was posted on SurveyMonkey from October 23, 2023, until November 4, 2023.

Participants, including current USask students, staff, faculty, and post-doctoral fellows, were recruited through the USask PAWS website and NUTR 230 student promotions via paper, email, text, and social media posts.

Data analysis was performed in Microsoft Excel, utilizing descriptive statistics to summarize, visualize, and identify patterns for comparisons.

This project has received ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Board (BEH 291).

RESULTS

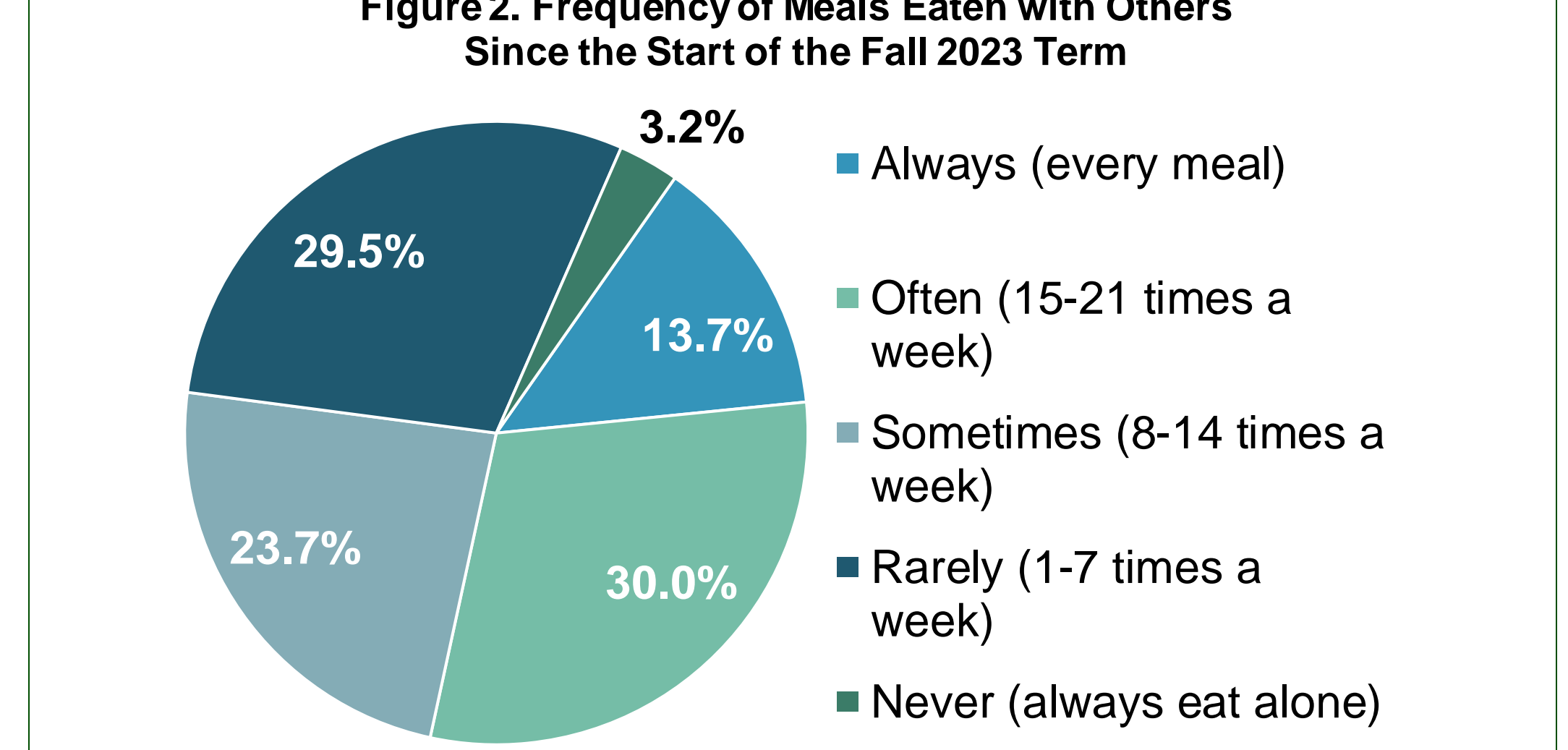
Data Cleaning

- n=232 participants entered the survey; n=215 participants provided consent, completed all demographic questions and met eligibility criteria; n=190 participants completed one or more survey questions about eating meals with others and was our final sample.

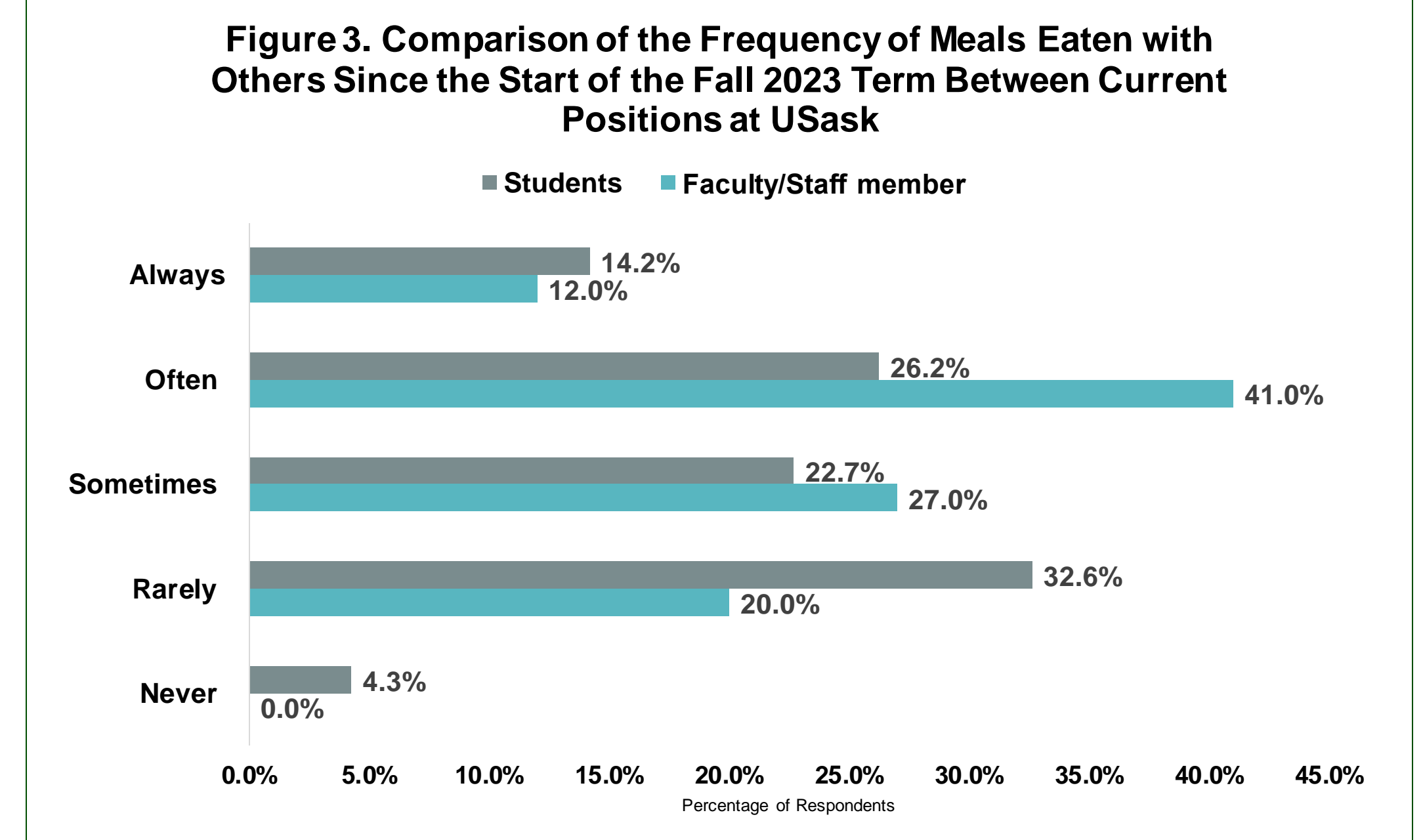
Table 1. Participant Demographics

Gender	n (%) [*]
Men	31 (16.4)
Women	154 (81.5)
Other (Non-binary, Trans man, Non-identified)	4 (2.1)
Age (years)	
≤19	29 (15.3)
20-24	88 (46.3)
≥25	73 (38.4)
Position at USask	
Undergraduate Student	129 (67.9)
Graduate Student	12 (6.3)
Faculty/Staff	49 (25.8)
Member of Health Science College	
Yes	64 (33.7)
No	126 (66.3)
Taken a Basic Nutrition University Course	
Yes	54 (28.4)
No	132 (69.5)
Currently Enrolled in NUTR 120	4 (2.1)

^{*}n=number of respondents; %=percentage of respondents
^{**}The # of respondents who answered each survey question varied



30.0% of participants said they often eat a meal with others, while 29.5% said they rarely eat a meal with others (Figure 2).

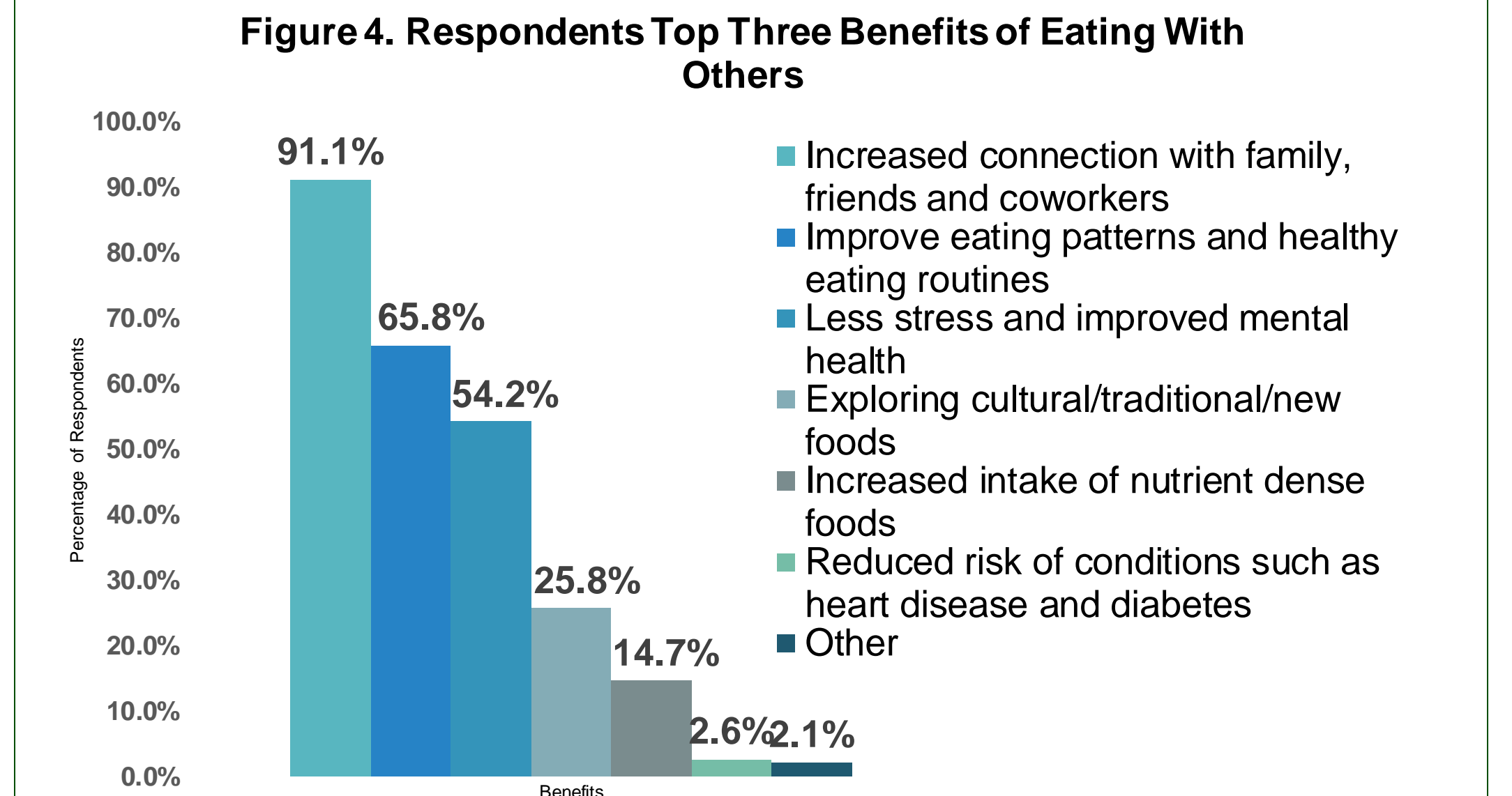


Faculty and staff most commonly answered that they ate meals with others "often" (41.0%), while students most commonly answered that they "rarely" ate meals with others (32.6%) (Figure 3).

Respondents top three barriers that inhibited their ability to eat with others were:

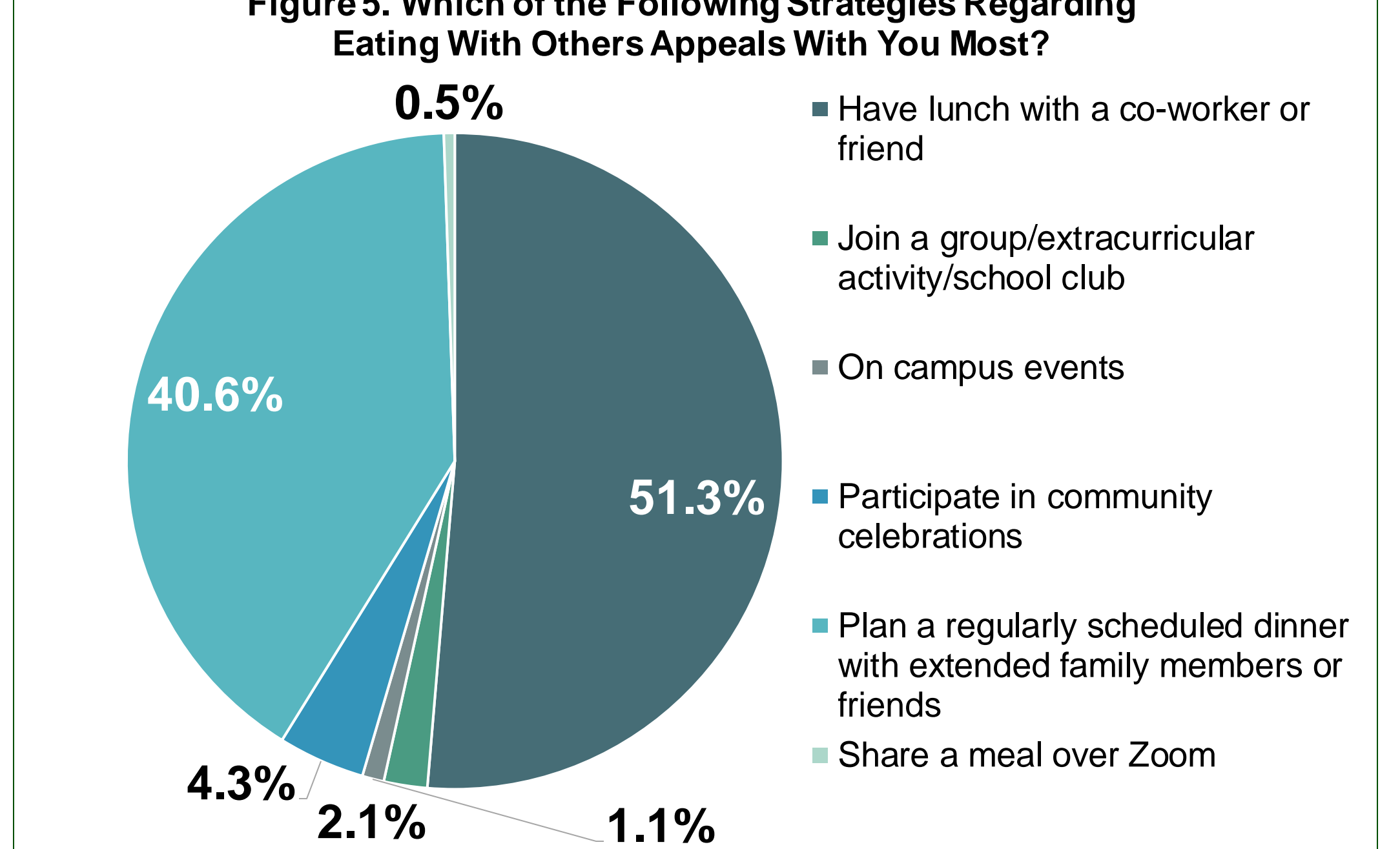
1. Conflicting schedules (43.7%)
 2. Live alone (14.7%)
 3. Lack of time (5.8%)
- Other responses were <4% and included: prefer to eat alone, do not enjoy it, restrictive diets, physical/mental health concern, cost of food, and far distance from family and friends
- 23.2% of participants answered "no barrier"

RESULTS

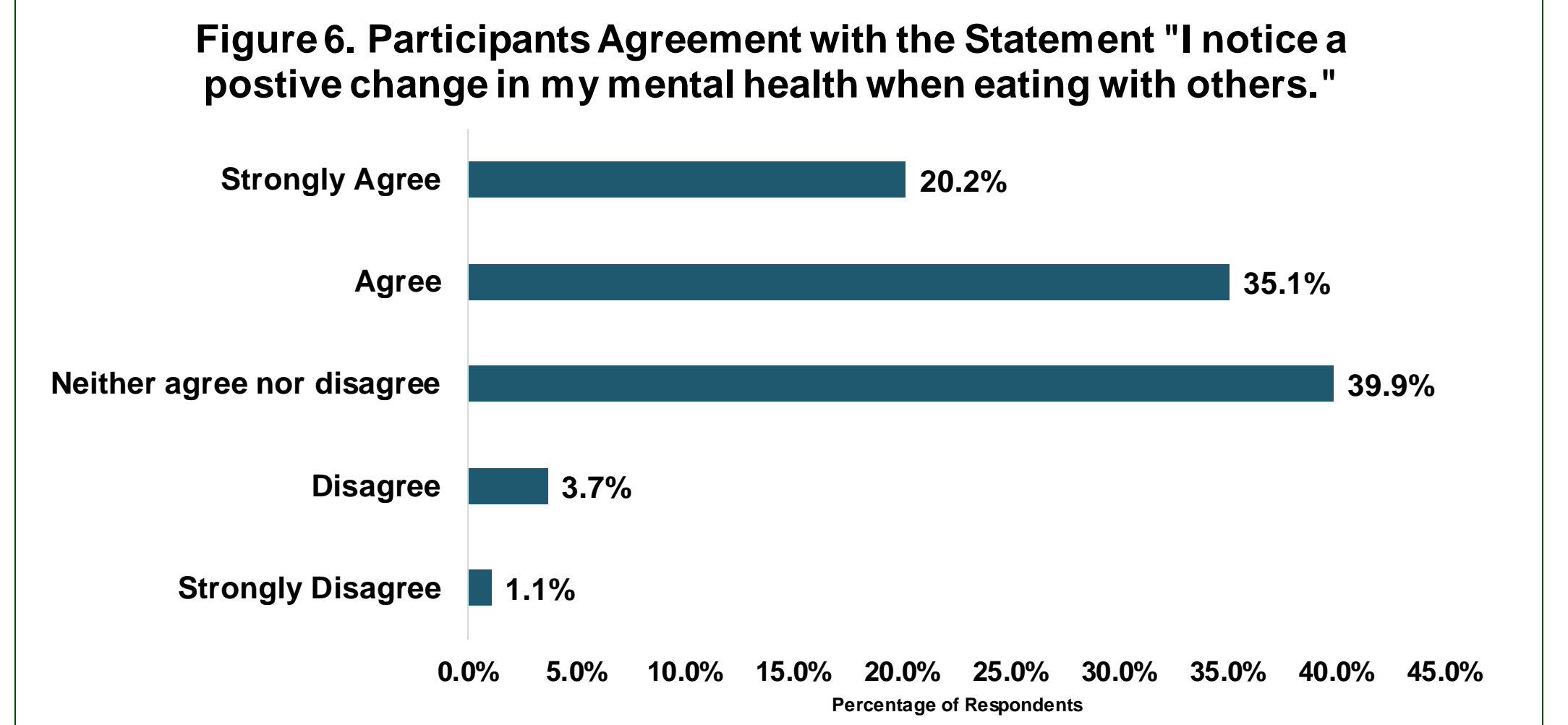


Other responses include slower rate of eating, less food waste, and shared expenses

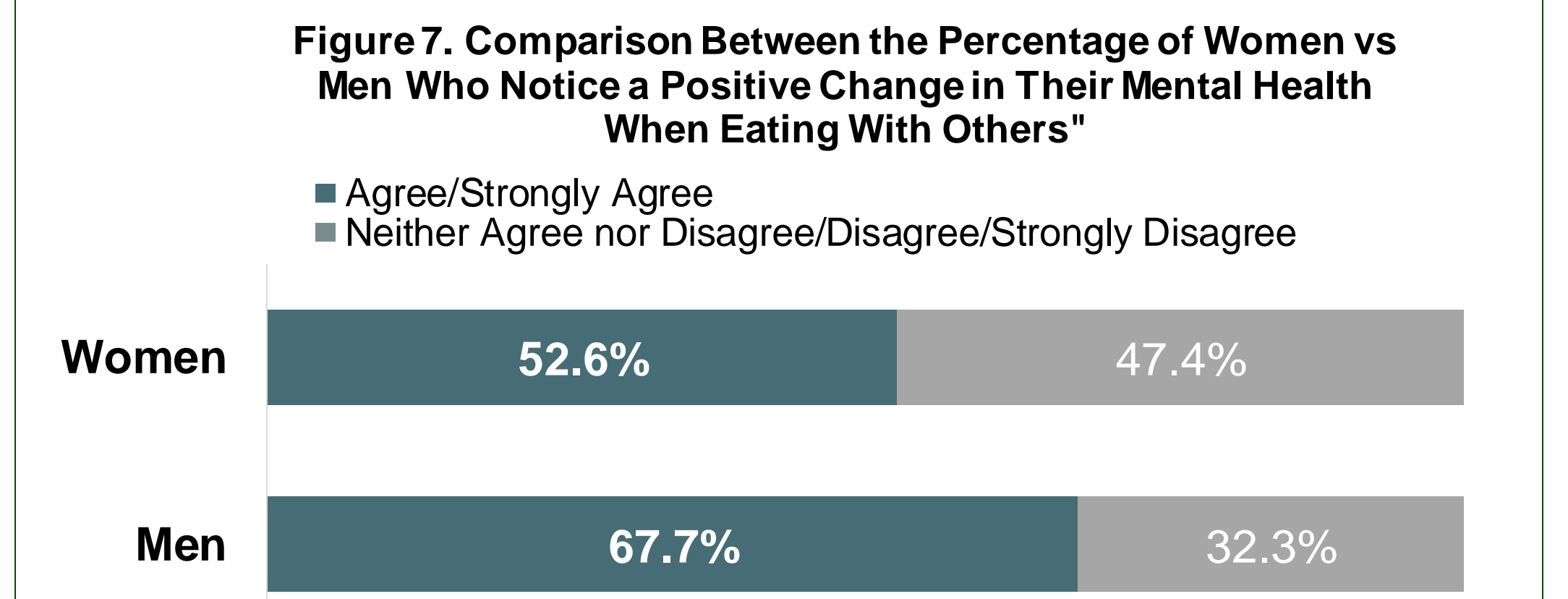
- 91.1% of respondents chose an increased connection with family, friends, and coworkers to be the top benefit of eating with others (Figure 4).



The majority of respondents chose to either have lunch with a coworker or friend (51.3%) or plan a regularly scheduled dinner with extended family or friends (40.6%) to incorporate eating with others into their routine (Figure 5).



The majority of respondents (55.3%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I notice a positive change in my mental health when eating with others", while 39.9% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 6).



A larger percentage of men either agreed or strongly agreed that eating with others had a positive effect on their mental health (67.7%) compared to women (52.6%) (Figure 7).

CONCLUSION

- Our study showed that 76.8% of respondents reported a barrier that inhibited their ability to eat with others with conflicting schedules being the most common barrier (43.7%).
- Under half of respondents (43.7%) reported that they "always" or "often" ate meals with others (Figure 2).
- 67.4% of respondents reported that they ate a meal with others at least "sometimes" (Figure 2) compared to 91% of United Kingdom residents from a national stratified survey⁷.
- Our study showed that 55.3% of the USask community either agreed or strongly agreed that eating meals with others had a positive effect on their mental health (Figure 6) and 54.2% cited less stress and improved mental health as one of their top 3 benefits of eating with others (Figure 4).
- Studies show that eating alone was associated with the stress of being isolated from others for many Australian, Japanese, and French young adult participants^{8,9}.
- A study by Kim et al. (2020) of Korean adults concluded that the odds of stress were 1.308 times higher in individuals who ate dinner alone compared to those who ate dinner with others. Depression symptoms were 1.711 times and 1.531 times higher in individuals who ate lunch and dinner alone, respectively compared to those that ate with others¹⁰.
- Our survey results could be used by USask Wellness and Peer Health services as a potential source to develop interventions to help individuals eat more with others. Examples could include expanding on the Good Breakfast program to provide lunches, unique late night dining experiences, pop up events and food trucks to highlight culturally diverse foods,
- Limitations of the study included the disproportionately fewer number of men that completed the survey compared to women (Table 1) and the subjective statement used to assess participants' mental health change when eating with others.
- Future research could involve the impact of social eating interventions on mental health of University students.

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