

## Research Article

### Muslim Youths' Perception on *Sunnah* Diet: A Survey on IIUM Students

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**Abstract:** Although many people realize that their food intake affects their health, they often choose food for a variety of reasons. In Islam, there are many commands that direct the believers to the necessity of keeping the physical body healthy so that the soul and spirit also remain healthy. This study which was conducted at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), aims to examine Muslim youths' attitude to *Sunnah* diet. The survey collected valuable data on several *Sunnah* diet related conditions such as sources of food, start-up age, frequency and practicality of practice, availability of the diet, reasons for non-practice, societies' observance and their difficulties to keep to the diet. The resulting wealth of information is very useful to establish university policy on nutrition education, food assistance programmes as well as examine the relationship between *Sunnah* diet and health.

**Keywords:** Awareness and health, diet, muslim youths, *Sunnah*

## INTRODUCTION

Islam is a way of life that absolutely focuses on aspects of physical and spiritual health. The Quran says, "And said one of them: "O my father! Hire him! Verily the best of men for you to hire is the strong, the trustworthy" (The Noble Quran, 2001). 'Strong' in this verse is all about the health of a human being that composes of physical and spiritual health, being knowledgeable, capable and having excellent faith.

According to renowned Muslim scholar, Al-Ghazali, the heart is an important element that connects the physical and spiritual elements of a person (Al-Ghazali, 2004). A person needs to pay special attention when it comes to choosing the right food as it may greatly affect the heart and even the soul. This fact is also supported by a Western scientist, Green (1979), who believes that the heart becomes the major element in shaping one's identity. In a famous *hadith*, Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) said, "In a body, there is a lump of flesh, if the flesh is good, the whole body becomes good and if the source is bad, the whole body becomes bad and indeed it is the heart" (Al-Bukhari, 2002).

A *Sunnah* diet is among the many teachings of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) that greatly improves our health and our overall life. The *Sunnah* diet consists of the recommended food of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) such as honey, dates, *habbatussauda* (black seeds), milk, melons and many more. The Quran says, "Those who follow the Messenger, the Prophet, who can neither read nor write, whom they find written in the Torah and the Gospel-for he commands them what is just and

forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure): he releases them from their heavy burdens and from fetters that were upon them. So those who believe in him, honour him, help him and follow the light which is sent down with him-it is they who will be successful" (The Noble Quran, 2001).

Despite the above, only a small number of Muslims follow this diet even though there are many evidences that highlight the benefits and goodness of the *Sunnah* diet. To some people, the advice may seem quaint, old-fashioned or simply bizarre. Some may feel that particular statements about the Prophet's diet have not been or cannot be confirmed by scientific knowledge. However, all of the statements and actions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) are woven upon Divine inspiration and people cannot admit to any error, inaccuracy or amendment. At the same time, Islam prohibits all things that can remove the consciousness, weaken the nerves and cause bodily harm (Al-Qaradawi, 1985).

Thus, the study is designed to identify the perception of young Muslims regarding *Sunnah* diet. The study was conducted on IIUM students to gauge their awareness about practising the *Sunnah* diet. This study also aims to encourage and make them realize and acknowledge the significance of *Sunnah* diet and hopefully inculcate good dietary habits.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to measure the level of awareness about *Sunnah* diet, 45 respondents were randomly chosen.

This research utilized the quantitative research methodology through a questionnaire containing 18 items which comprise of different types of questions such as yes-no, category, ranking and optional questions. Library research was another method of data collection of empirical studies on the subject matter. Several different sources were used in this study comprising of both Islamic and scientific materials.

The respondents of the study were undergraduate students from different fields and of different genders at International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Gombak Campus. A total of 50 questionnaires were distributed to 25 male students and 20 female students who were students at Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Medicine, Faculty of Dentistry and Faculty of Nursing. However, 45 of the questionnaires were returned. In the analysis, the data were extended into the computer using Microsoft Office Excel 2007 software. Results are presented through pie charts and bar charts below.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion in this study is based on the questionnaire given to the respondents. The following diagrams (graphs, charts and tables) are used to illustrate the data gathered from the survey.

The pie chart in Fig. 1 shows several types of food of which only five are *Sunnah* food while the others are not. The result clearly demonstrates that the majority of the respondents knew that dates, milk, honey and *habbatussauda* (black seeds) are *Sunnah* food. However, only a few of them realized that pumpkins and melons are also part of the *Sunnah* diet. This may be due to lack of knowledge and exposure to these two types of food.

Dates are the best kind of fruit as they can be consumed simply. The high content of carbohydrates can easily be absorbed by the body (Pamplona, 2004). The Prophet (p.b.u.h) said, "A family of a house which do not have dates are hungry" (Ibn Majah, 2000a). Dates as an example of good food are also highlighted in the Quran, "And from the fruit of the date palms and grape, you derive strong drink and goodly provision. Verily, therein is indeed a sign for people who have wisdom" (The Noble Quran, 2001).

Honey is not just sugar but also a complex combination of enzymes, organic acids, esters, antibiotic agents, trace minerals and as yet unidentified components. The goodness of honey has been proven scientifically as it contains a mixture of sucrose, fructose and glucose (Yanovski, 2003). The Quran even claims that honey is a medicine for cough, "From its (the bee's) belly, comes forth a drink of varying colour, where in is a cure for people. Surely there is a sign for

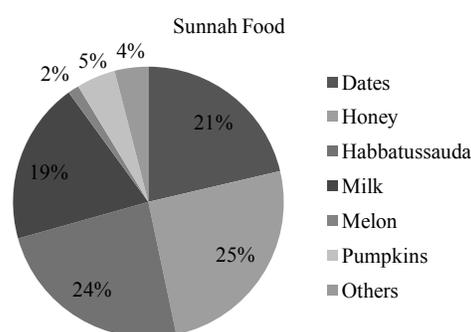


Fig. 1: Food considered part of the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h)

those who would give thought" (The Noble Quran, 2001). Thus, honey is a source of healing for mankind. In an authentic tradition of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), a man came to him and said, "My brother has some abdominal trouble." The Prophet said to him "Let him drink honey." The man came for the second time and the Prophet said to him, "Let him drink honey." He came for the third time and the Prophet said, "Let him drink honey." He returned and said, "I have done that." The Prophet then said, "Allah has said the truth, but your brother's abdomen has told a lie. Let him drink honey." So he made him drink honey and he was cured" (Al-Bukhari, 2002). In addition, in a study, "Honey as a Dressing for Wounds, Burns and Ulcers: A Brief Review of Clinical Reports and Experimental Studies," Molan (2006) says that honey has proven to be useful medicine in his practice.

*Habbatussauda* or black cumin (seeds) is another diet of the Prophet (p.b.u.h). It contains over 100 valuable components. It is a significant source of essential fatty acids, proteins, carbohydrates and other vitamins and minerals. All contents of black seeds are ideal cure for the prevention and treatment of cancer. The Prophet (p.b.u.h) said, "Use this black seed regularly, because it is a cure for every disease, except death" (Al-Bukhari, 2002). Scientifically, these seeds which are called *Nigella Sativa* have been proven in extensive pharmacological studies to justify the Islamic traditional therapeutic value of black seeds (Mohammad Akram, 2008).

Another important drink of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) is milk. The Prophet said, "Drink milk, for it wipes away heat from the heart as the finger wipes away sweat from the brow. Furthermore, it strengthens the back, increases the brain power, augments intelligence, renews vision and drives away forgetfulness" (Ibn Majah, 1998). Milk is the very source of calcium (around 120mg/100g). Consumption during childhood and adolescence helps prevent osteoporosis in adulthood (Weltan *et al.*, 1997).

Table 1: The level of awareness among IIUM students on honey, *Habbatussauda* and Milk

	No		Not sure		Yes		Firm	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Honey is the most eatable (nutritious) food mentioned in al-Quran.	0	0	4	4	4	8	12	7
<i>Habbatussauda</i> can cure all diseases except death.	0	1	8	9	6	4	5	5
Milk is the best drink described in al-Quran.	0	0	10	13	7	4	3	3

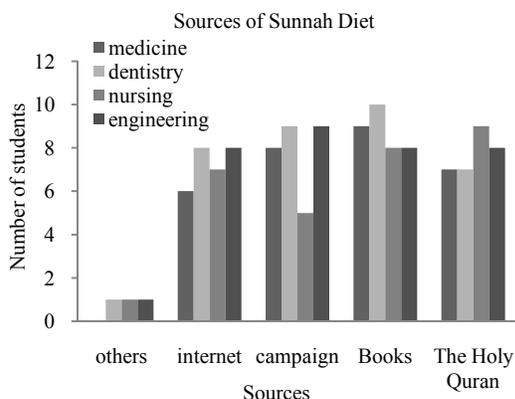


Fig. 2: Respondents' sources for information on *Sunnah* diet

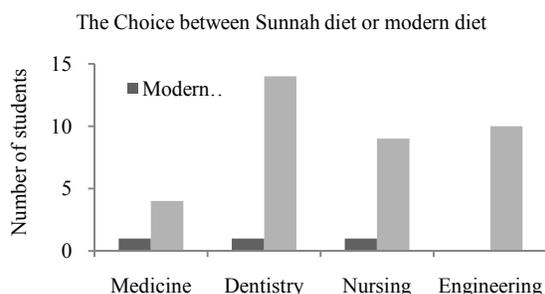


Fig. 3: Respondents' choice between *Sunnah* diet or modern diet

Table 1 provides data on the students' level of awareness on the three different foods. The data suggest that male students had notably more firm awareness compared to female students on honey as the most eatable food. However, their level of awareness on the other two foods, namely *habbatussauda* and milk, was balanced.

Meanwhile, pumpkin is also permissible and was enjoyed by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h). In a tradition, Anas bin Malik said, "A tailor invited the Prophet (p.b.u.h) to a meal. He prepared the barley bread and soup containing pumpkin and dried meat. Prophet (p.b.u.h) very affectionately ate the pumpkin pieces from the dish, so he had always liked pumpkin since then" (Abu Dawud, 1990). Pumpkin is one of the most nutritional foods available all year round. It is rich in antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. Both flesh and seeds of the pumpkin provide many health-boosting

nutrients. With a diet rich in potassium, pumpkin acts to prevent hypertension and its negative consequences such as aerial blood clots and stroke (Mahan and Arlin, 1992).

Similarly, the Prophet (p.b.u.h) was very fond of melons. According to a tradition, Aishah said, "I saw the Prophet eating melon with fresh dates" (Abu Dawud, 2001). Eating melon cleanses the body and helps to expel stones from the stomach and it is quicker to digest than cucumber. Melons increase the solubility of the acidic salts that make up uric calculi and facilitate their dissolution and elimination (Hesse *et al.*, 1993).

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of students from different fields and their choice of sources for getting information about *Sunnah* diet. The main types of sources given were the Holy Quran, books, lessons, the Internet as well as others.

There are differences and similarities in the selection of students from different fields at IIUM Gombak Campus. The majority of the students agreed that the most common sources to get information about *Sunnah* diet were books, followed by the Quran. These two sources are very important as they relate to a very important *hadith*: the Prophet said, "I leave among you two weighty things, the Book of Allah (the Qur'an) and my *Itrat* (progeny); if you hold fast to them you will never go astray; and these two shall never separate from each other till they meet at the heavenly fountain of *Kauser*" (Al-Tabari, 1997).

This is an expected result because by looking at the Islamic environment in IIUM, we can tell that IIUM students love to read and take the Holy Quran as their companion in everyday life. It is a normal situation to see IIUM students carry the Holy Quran with them wherever they go. Besides, the Internet is also one of the popular sources for students to gain information about *Sunnah* diet. There are a lot of websites and blog spots that provide this information as well as social networks on which students share information. Last but not least, students also get information from campaigns. IIUM often organizes such campaigns and sermons to increase the awareness among students and encourage them to always practise *Sunnah* diet rather than modern diet.

Figure 3 presents the preference of students from the four faculties between *Sunnah* diet or the modern

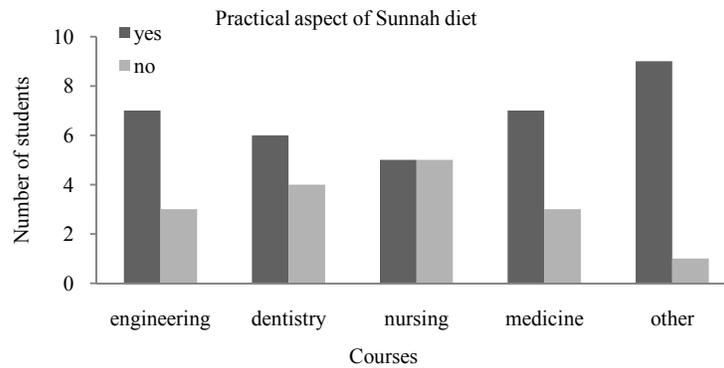


Fig. 4: Respondents' belief in the practicality of *Sunnah* diet

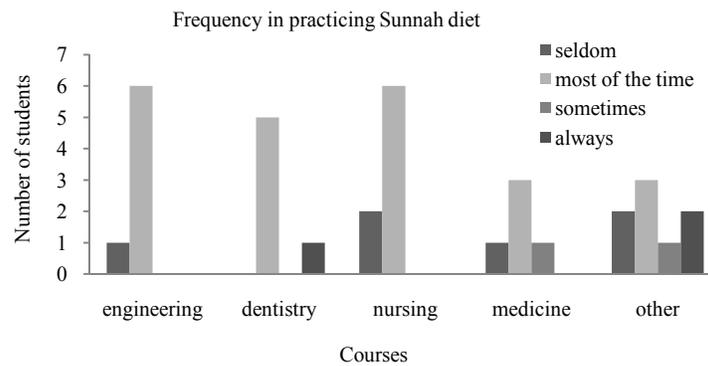


Fig. 5: Respondents' frequency in practising the *Sunnah* diet

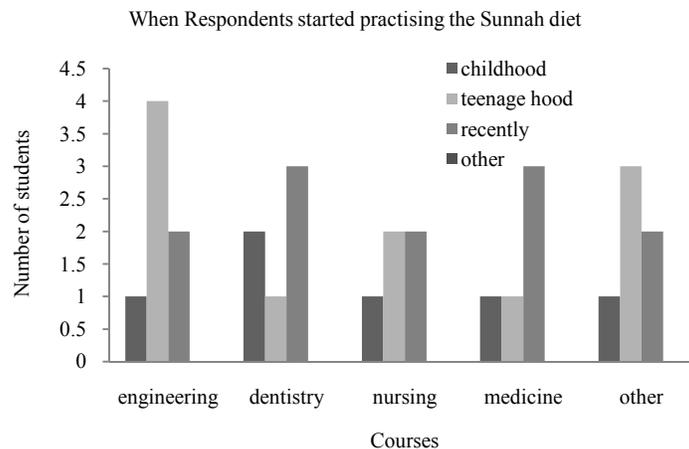


Fig. 6: When respondents first started observing the *Sunnah* diet

diet. The students were asked to choose between modern diet and *Sunnah* diet; which of these two do they preferred. The result indicates that all Engineering students preferred to practise *Sunnah* diet over modern diet. Meanwhile, a student from each Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Nursing preferred to practice

modern diet. This is because these students are medical sciences students. They are exposed to modern food and they are convinced that modern diet is more relevant and better for today's lifestyle. They learn in detail about the benefits of modern food compared to *Sunnah* food.

On the other hand, when it comes to believing that *Sunnah* diet can improve health, all students from every faculty realized this matter. This may due to their belief that *Sunnah* diet is part of the Prophet's teachings.

This graph in Fig. 4 shows the distribution of students at IIUM Gombak in their belief in the practicality of *Sunnah* diet. It is clear that most of the students practised *Sunnah* diet in their everyday life. Although more students practised the diet, the level of awareness was still moderate. There were some reasons for those who did not practise the diet as shown in the graph. It is, however, good that most of them chose to take on the diet that had been practised by the Prophet (p.b.u.h).

Figure 5 indicates the distribution of students based on their frequency in practising *Sunnah* diet. Most of them observed the diet most of the time. However, it is hard to see students who always observed the diet in their life. Only students in Dentistry and in other fields kept observing it. Actually, it was an excellent move made by the students as they realized the importance of it.

In his well known book, *Praise of the Folly*, Erasmus (1990) states, "A nail is driven out by another nail" and "Habit is overcome by habit" (Erasmus, 1990). If humans decide to change their habits, they need to find one that is better and keep practising it. Then it will become a new habit for them. Someone who does not practise the *Sunnah* diet in life can improve it by making the diet a habit. They should start slowly and take steps to ensure that it gets better as time passes; in other words, practice makes perfect.

Figure 6 presents the students' responses on the initial observance of *Sunnah* diet. A general pattern is recorded in that the majority of the students began to observe the diet rather late; either recently or during

their teenage period. This indicates that man should start cultivating good values at a very early age; strike the iron while it is hot. It is easier to instil good things at an early stage. There were indeed a small number of respondents who started practising the diet at a very young age. It is clear that only a small number of students from Engineering, Nursing, Medicine and other fields that inculcated *Sunnah* diet since they were children. For Engineering and students from other fields, most of them started instilling *Sunnah* diet as their habit since they were teenagers. Meanwhile, for Dentistry and Medicine students, many of them only recently observed *Sunnah* diet in their life. This is actually a good move in improving their eating styles as it is better late than never. In addition, equal numbers of nursing students stated that they started taking *Sunnah* food when they were teenagers as well as only recently. Responsible parties should also advertise or campaign about the importance of *Sunnah* diet in the media to raise public's awareness of this important fact as most people nowadays depend on the media to get current news and other information.

Man's actions might be influenced by factors such as the environment, culture and family background. The family is actually a major influence on someone's act. A child usually learns faster at a young age compared to any other age. To instil good values and decent morals in humans, parents should teach their children at that age as they are the closest figures to their children during that period. A good friend can also help another to be morally upright and vice versa. Many social problems occur nowadays as a result of choosing bad company and from the pressures of family problems.

The bar graph in Fig. 7 illustrates the distribution of respondents regarding the persons they practised the

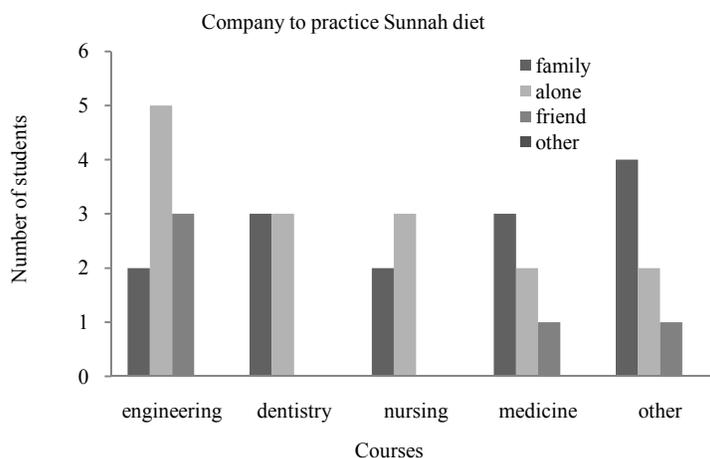


Fig. 7: The company respondents kept to observe *Sunnah* diet

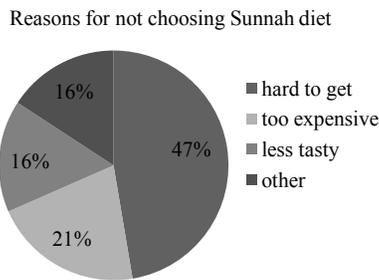


Fig. 8: Respondents' reasons for not choosing *Sunnah* diet

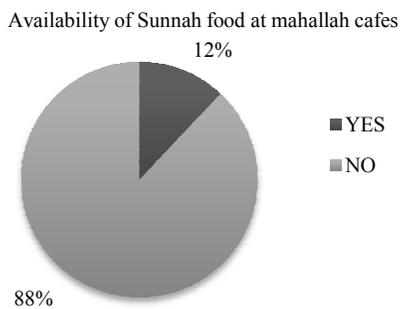


Fig. 9: The availability of *Sunnah* food at *Mahallah* cafes

*Sunnah* diet with. Most of the respondents observed the diet by themselves without any company. Only a few of them practised with friends. Other than that, there were some from every field who practised the *Sunnah* diet with their beloved family. Therefore, the family should always cultivate noble values to develop successful generations in this world and in the Hereafter. The family is actually the bedrock of a society. If families are in a good state, so will the society. The one who rejects the *Sunnah* diet might have no one to encourage them to do so.

Figure 8 indicates the distribution of students based on their reasons for not choosing *Sunnah* diet. The reasons included the fact that the food is hard to get, it is too expensive, it is less tasty and other reasons.

There were some students who did not prefer the *Sunnah* diet. Half of the respondents thought that the food was hard to get. Perhaps some students who lived in rural areas found it difficult to get the food. However, nowadays there are a lot of companies and business corporations that sell food recommended by our beloved Prophet (p.b.u.h) such as dates and milk. Indeed, the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said that dates are the most important food during the month of *Ramadhan* (Mahran, 2005) which is a month full of *barakah* (blessings). The Prophet (p.b.u.h.) said, "Allah said: All the deeds of Adam's sons (people) are for them, except fasting which is for Me and I will give the reward for it" (Ibn Majah, 2000b).

Fasting is a shield or protection from committing sins and from the hellfire. If one is fasting, he should

avoid having sexual relations with his wife and quarrelling and if somebody wants to fight or quarrel with him, he should say, 'I am fasting.' "By Him in Whose Hands one's soul is the unpleasant smell coming out from the mouth of a fasting person is better in the sight of Allah than the smell of musk. There are two pleasures for the fasting person, one at the time of breaking his fast and the other at the time when he will meet his Lord; then he will be pleased because of his fasting" (Al-Bukhari, 2002).

About one sixth of the respondents felt that the recommended food is sold at a high price. Some sellers charge exorbitant prices on those types of food to gain profit. However, there are some places that supply it to the public at a reasonable price. The same number of respondents said that these types of food are less tasty or had other reasons. About 16% of IUM students found that the food is less tasty. Perhaps they enjoy fast food or other modern food better. Fast food actually contains a lot of preservatives that may harm humans' health. Meanwhile, some respondents decided not to choose *Sunnah* diet as they had no will power to do so; it was also due to lack of knowledge on the matter.

Figure 9 illustrates the respondents' knowledge on whether or not their *mahallah's* cafés provided the food according to the *Sunnah*. It is clear that the vast majority of the respondents concluded that their cafés did not supply dishes according to the *Sunnah*. Only 12% agreed that their cafés provided menus based on the *Sunnah*.

The café managers should be aware of the importance of *Sunnah* diet in the everyday life of the students. A well-balanced diet supplies adequate and balanced amounts of nutrients and appropriate amounts of energy. This in turn promotes health, psychological well-being and healthy body which are essential requirements for developing minds (Williams, 2005). The managers may consider giving away free dates every Friday, for example, to encourage students to practise taking dates every week. Dates generally contain many minerals, nutrients and vitamins that can supply energy to man all day long. Dates, the fruit of the date palm, pack a powerful nutritional punch. They are rich in natural fibres, low in sodium, offer an abundance of nutrients and contain more potassium than an orange or a banana per ounce (Jones *et al.*, 2006). Dates are filled with carbohydrates, are excellent source of energy and act as natural laxatives that can be easy remedy for constipation.

Figure 10 presents students' responses to the statement regarding the consumption of dates, "Dates are usually consumed during the month of *Ramadhan* only." This statement was asked to students during the survey. The result shows that the majority of the students agreed with this statement. Their reasons may be based on a narration by the Prophet (p.b.u.h) who

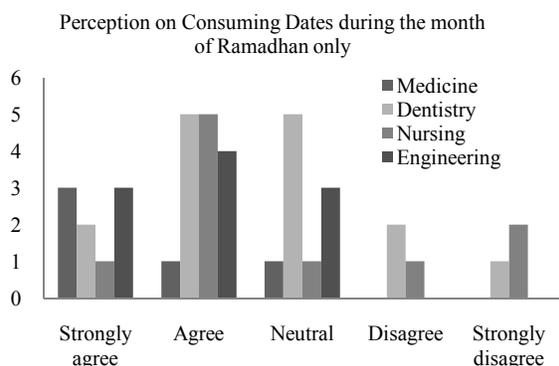


Fig. 10: Respondents' perception on consuming dates during Ramadhan only

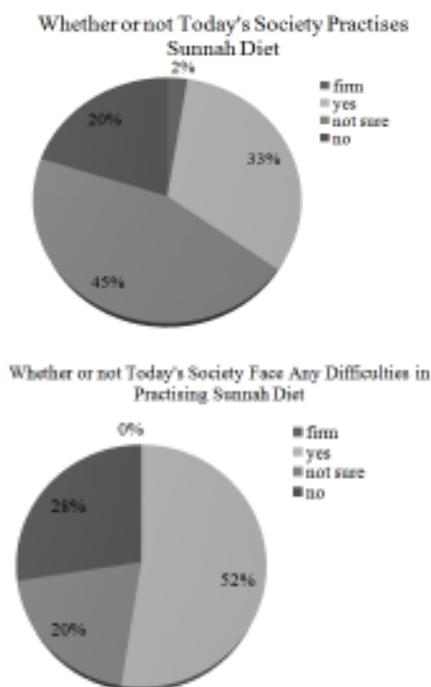


Fig. 11: Respondents' views regarding current practices of Sunnah diet

said, "He who finds a date, let him break his fast on that. If he finds no date, let him break it on water. For verily that is purity" (Al-Tirmidhi, 2006).

Dates have become a common ingredient in Muslim diet during the month of Ramadhan. However, a small number of students from Dentistry and Nursing disagreed with this statement. This may be due to their different views regarding the significance of dates. They believed that dates should not be consumed during Ramadhan only but all year round as dates are fat-free and cholesterol-free and can also boost high energy.

Figure 11 shows the students' perception on the practice of Sunnah diet. The above figures depict students' knowledge about surrounding society's level of awareness about Sunnah diet. The first pie chart shows whether or not today's society practises Sunnah diet and the second pie chart reveals whether or not society faces any difficulties in observing Sunnah diet.

It can be clearly seen from the first pie chart that 45% of the students at IIUM were not sure whether or not their surrounding society practises Sunnah diet. On the other hand, about 52% of them believed that nowadays, society faces challenges and difficulties in observing the Sunnah diet. The results show that some of the IIUM students were not really aware of their surroundings and they merely focused on things closer to them. However, there were also some of the respondents who were sure that Sunnah diet was part of societal practice. As we studied the pie charts further, we find that the main factor that influenced society to practice Sunnah diet was the environment. Living in the environment where people generally practise Sunnah diet will make it easy for an individual to follow it. Religion also plays a vital role in encouraging people to practise Sunnah diet. One simple example is that most pious people seem to practise Sunnah diet more compared to people who are less religious because they are already aware about the rewards and benefits behind Sunnah diet.

## CONCLUSION

Sunnah diet is not only about the food that the Prophet (p.b.u.h) took but also promotes good health by consuming the right nutrition. Islam teaches us much etiquette on eating and drinking. The Prophet (p.b.u.h) made a point of developing remarkably clean and healthy eating habits for his followers. Eating, like any other acts of a Muslim, is a matter of worship when performed according to Islamic guidelines. The importance of healthy eating, a balanced diet and hygiene can be understood in the light of the Quran and Sunnah.

From this research, it seems that the students at IIUM Gombak realized the importance of Sunnah diet in Islam. They might not practice Sunnah diet regularly but in the future they wish to make Sunnah diet as part of their daily life. The university authorities should take actions to promote this Sunnah diet as the diet comprising of dates, honey, black seeds, milk and melons are important sources of healthy food. The research has thus provided scientific evidences that the diet contains the essential nutrients to ensure health and well-being.

The study also demonstrates the synergy of an ideal relationship between faith and science. Islam has provided the basis of dietary intake as well as limits within which man could enjoy the pleasures of food to maintain health. The *Sunnah* of the beloved Prophet (p.b.u.h) teaches us a balanced diet to ensure healthy body as he said, "The son of Adam does not fill any vessel worse than the stomach. It is sufficient for the son of Adam to eat a few mouthfuls, to keep going. If he must do that (fill his stomach), then let him fill one third with food, one third with drink and one third with air." (Al-Tirmidhi, 2006).

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