

Dietary practices of university students: Reflections on values, autonomy, and commensality

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Abstract *The article analyzes the knowledge and practices involved in the food choices of university students in the academic environment. Using a qualitative approach, focus groups and interviews were carried out to understand how hegemonic conceptions are formed and influence individual and group interactions. From an interdisciplinary perspective and the Theory of Practices, the results revealed the interaction of nexuses: understandings, procedures and engagements, involving the antinomic relationships between hedonic eating and traditional eating. Students report being the protagonists of their food choices, but express the need for greater autonomy. Conventional approaches, including the current management model, contradict students' identity and symbolic issues, while environmental interventions at a macro environmental level are more accepted than personal recommendations. It was concluded that affection, trust and freedom are essential values for students to have greater independence in their choices. Improving programs that promote changes in identified behavioral factors becomes essential not only to reduce risks, but also to improve the quality of life in this community.*

Keywords *Medical Sociology, Organizational Food Environment, Health Promoting University, Food practices*

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Introduction

This article presents an analysis of the university food environment, seeking to understand the system of ideas of the actors involved and how those types of knowledge are organized and connect socially, environmentally and scientifically to each other, without the supremacy of one over the other. This research is located in the field of social studies of science and health sciences, mainly in the areas of sociology and nutrition, promoting interdisciplinary and open dialogue, taking the complexity of the topic into consideration.

The research consisted of valuing the use of mixed methods that articulated qualitative and quantitative data, in which the difference was not to bring a technical perspective, but an expanded relationship of the place of speech and of the students' types of knowledge. The reflections and interpretations arising from discussions between the human and health areas collaborate and support each other, and both are valued. The importance of looking at public policies for access to adequate and fair food in Brazil is also emphasized, because they are fundamental for promoting human rights.

From this perspective, aiming to fill a gap in the field of nutrition and contribute to the promotion of health on campus, the main objective was to analyze the students' types of knowledge and eating practices, investigating their dispositions in relation to purchasing food in the university environment.

The article is organized into four sections, as follows: first sections addresses the theoretical frameworks of the sociology of nutrition and health, including the concept of commensality, and the theoretical framework used to interpret data. Second section describes the methodology and Theory of Social Practice, including data collection and processing and the use of software for qualitative analysis. Third section presents the analysis of empirical data as a thematic map, divided into subsections corresponding to the nexuses of the Theory of Practices (TP). The main results of the field research are also discussed. Finally, fourth section presents the empirical and theoretical conclusions of the study.

Environments and practices theoretical perspectives

Food Environment (FE) refers to the physi-

cal, economic, political, and sociocultural context in which consumers find themselves and interact with the food system in order to make their decisions about food acquisition, preparation, and consumption. This definition was accepted by a panel of experts, described in the report *The High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition*,¹ and it is used to analyze accessibility, availability, quality, prices of products, and evaluation of the relationship between environment and eating behavior, aspects that influence people's nutritional status.² Organizational FE encompasses food sales and supply locations at institutions, such as schools and companies, presenting governance challenges that transcend individual decisions.⁶

Because they influence the way people access, prepare, and consume food, some authors argue that the high supply of foods rich in energy and poor in nutrients, provided by convenience, would imper choices considered traditional and healthy. This shift in behavior is one of the reasons for the increased incidence of obesity and other Chronic Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs).^{3,4,5} In this way, FE role stands out as a point of interrelationship between consumers and food systems in the tendency for healthy and sustainable choices,⁶ that is, consumers' practices, including meal choices, preparation techniques, consumption and sharing.

Although materiality is a central dimension in studies on practices, some of the authors establish the inclusion of ontological issues and symbolic representations that are based on the meaning attributed to behavioral issues.⁷ According to Diez-Garcia,⁸ eating behavior is intricately linked to the human groups' eating practices. This complex interaction involves sociocultural and subjective aspects, covering decisions, food combinations, search for preferences, and reflections on consumption.

At the decision level, individual reasons are necessary but insufficient to explain personal choice, which can be structured around the individual issue, their physiological state, food preferences, nutritional knowledge, perception of healthiness, and other psychological factors. However, the decision to adopt a healthy diet or appropriate behavior is much more complicated than a simple personal choice, as eating is a highly contextual behavior.⁹ Collective determinants such as the environment, physical, economic, and social spaces, and public policies endorsed by the government of each country

exert more interpersonal influences than personal reasons.⁹

The Brazilian public university adopted affirmative actions through a slot system, aiming to overcome inequalities in access to higher education, characteristics that influence the retention of students who enter through this quota system.

Perez et al.¹⁰ indicate the need for additional implementation of measures to promote healthy eating and Food and Nutritional Security (FNS) among all university students, especially among quota-holder groups, which, based on evidence in studies, demonstrate practices that are even more unfavorable to health.

In this sense, the concept of Health Promoting University (HPU) emerges, based on intersectorality and healthiness, addressing historical and institutional changes in the areas of education and health in contemporary Brazil,¹¹ promoting interaction between individuals and the social environment to improve health. Recently, projects and networks have strengthened the movement, highlighting the importance of academic environments in promoting FNS.⁶

Considering the information presented, food consumption is permeated by symbolic and cultural meanings and should be seen as one of the structuring elements of social organization. In this context, it is noteworthy that the Social Food Space (SFS)¹² is an instrument that allows researchers to better understand the multiple dimensions related to food.

Sociology of food, spaces and commensality

Sociology of food emerged as a field of study that added an analytical perspective to the act of eating, going beyond the traditional nutritional approach. In social sciences, food is understood as a social construct in constant transformation, influenced by each individual's culture and social context.

Poulain and Proença¹³ introduce the concept of SFS, which explores the relationship between a human group and its environment with regard to dietary patterns. SFS goes beyond the physical space and covers the social and cultural aspects that influence the community's choices, and food is intrinsically linked to the construction of social, cultural, and symbolic identities. In this context, there is a space of freedom among the variety of food possibilities, in which individuals make choices that should satisfy their nutritional needs, but which are also influenced by social and cultural factors.¹²

In this context, food is no longer considered just a consequence of biological phenomena and has become one of the structuring elements of social organization.¹⁴ Furthermore, motivational aspects intrinsic to each individual began to be considered, which allow a peculiar understanding of cultural aspects. According to Morin,¹⁵ culture is a set of habits, customs, practices, knowledge, rules, beliefs, values, and myths that are transmitted from generation to generation and that are reproduced in each individual, generating and regenerating social complexity.

Claude Fischler,^{16,17} a pioneer in commensality studies, examines food as an object of research. His research on modern food highlights overabundance, the reduction of social controls, and the proliferation of discourses about diet. Influenced by Edgar Morin, his contributions identify that the rules and deregulations of commensality are fundamental determinants of eating behavior.

Given the above, it is possible to note in Figure 1 that social sciences have offered significant contributions to the understanding of commensality.

Case study with university students

Methods used

An exploratory qualitative study was carried out, using thematic content analysis with a view to understand students' dispositions towards purchasing food at the campus. The disposition suggests a purposeful inclination that, once triggered, is consistent with the self-activation tendency that underlies habituation.¹⁹ It was considered that the term involves stimuli and limitations (environmental triggers), intentions (perceptions of healthiness) and motivations (teleo-affective values).

For fieldwork, two public university centers were intentionally selected, namely: Health Sciences (HS) and Philosophy and Human Sciences (PHS). The research involved eight focus groups (FGs) of students and five in-depth interviews with institutional employees. The sessions took place through a Web Conference, on the National Research Network (RNP) platform and were conducted by two researchers – a moderator and an observer –, and the procedure was recorded on a hard disk.

The research followed ethical principles (Res. CNS nº 510/16) and was approved by the

<i>APPROPRIATE ENVIRONMENT SURROUNDINGS</i>	<i>REGULARITY AND ATTENTION (time and focus)</i>	<i>EATING TOGETHER (sociability)</i>
Clean, comfortable, quiet places where there are no incentives to consume unlimited amounts of food. Avoid using cell phones, TV sets, eating at your desk, eating standing and on public transport. Offer of smaller portions (tendency to eat more than necessary when large portions are offered). Reduce the supply of fast-consuming foods and ultra-processed foods. Avoid noisy environments (they encourage eating more quickly)	Eat daily meals in similar or regular schedules, allocating adequate time. Enjoy what you are eating, with no engagement in another activity. Eat slowly and mindfully is the best way to control what is being consumed. Chew food more often increases the pleasure provided by flavors and textures.	Give preference to consume food with family, friends and colleagues. Share the household activities that precede and follow the meal consumption. Eat together is a natural part of social life. When you are away from home, eat in company of someone else is excellent opportunity to exchange experiences, get along and to having a sense of belonging.

Figure 1. Sociological contributions to the practices of commensality and their definitions..

Source: adapted from Ambrosi¹⁸.

Human Research Ethics Committee (CEPSH) under opinion No. 3.946.638 and CAAE 29545320.0.0000.0121, on 03/31/2020. Confidentiality was guaranteed, and all participants signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF). FGs followed methodological criteria, and verbal and non-verbal communication were integrated in the analysis.²⁰ Data collection was carried out through conversations guided by guiding questions,²¹ aligned with the research objectives.

The textual corpus was established through complete verbatim transcription of the audio content, done manually, by using DOCX files, which were exported and analyzed on NVIVO[®]11 software. Data organization occurred at interdependent moments: coding, transformation of the global text into units of analysis (classification), and categorization. Exploring the material aimed to identify the phenomena based on the categories originating from the TP and from the statements, creating the themes and sub-themes that were represented by the word “nodes,” identified in the analysis by the software.

Data analysis followed the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke, who detailed the foundations of Thematic Analysis (TA) and contribute with their study, exercise and mastery,^{22,23,24} establishing a total of six methodological phases, an expanded coverage throughout the process that enriches the analysis.²⁵

NEXUSES as an analysis category – contribution from the Theory of Practices

TP is a set of cultural and philosophical accounts that focuses on the conditions surrounding the practical realization of social life, having roots in Heidegger’s philosophy and social origins in the works of Bourdieu, Giddens and Foucault.²⁶ More recently, TP was merged into a philosophical ontology composed of organized practices, developed by Schatzki, adapted to the field of consumption by Reckwitz,²⁷ being called a “set of arranged practices.”²⁸ Schatzki^{28,7,29} defines the elementary and ontological structures of a social practice through mechanisms that connect discourses and actions: practical understanding, rules, and the teleo-affective structure.

TP was used to analyze eating practices, considering them as behavioral reproductions mediated by nexuses, which, according to Reckwitz,²⁸ encompass understandings, procedures, and engagement mobilized in a unique way by individuals in a specific practice. These nexuses, which incorporate elements such as rules, principles, emotions, and aspirations, are analyzed to understand both the structural and procedural aspects of practices, in addition to taking shared codes and rules into account, as well as the variations between people who adopt practices, which result from adaptations, improvisations, and individual experiences.

In this sense, TP emphasizes the influence of habits, routines, and rules on society, transcending the individual control attributed to the theory of rational choice.³⁰ Empirical studies based on TP reveal social structures shaped by practices and people who adopt them.²⁹ Thus, TP epistemological approach benefits organizational research by introducing new concepts and insights.

Results and discussions

Based on the GFs and TP nexuses, Figure 2 illustrates the categories and subcategories of nodes identified in the initial analysis. In effect, the results encompass all the interrelationships discussed through a review of the literature, the interviewees' responses, and the theoretical and empirical framework used. This combined approach resulted in the construction of a solid set of findings, demonstrated in Figure 3.

Two types of fundamental understanding were identified exerting a strong influence on their individual decisions: the first type is the escape from eating monotony, which promotes reflection on the importance of consuming "real food," interpreted as a cultural rescue. The second type involves modeling innovative

strategies in the field of commensality, valuing the possibility of experimenting different approaches. Nevertheless, these reflections also reveal insecurities, a feeling of impotence in the face of a lack of social support, dubious scientific and media information, as well as the influence of the food industry and distrust in relation to marketing and government policies.

Additionally, students confront personal dilemmas linked to ethical principles, environmental sustainability, and institutional restrictions, impacting their way of life, choices, and vision of health-disease. This intricate dynamic can be interpreted as "anomie," denoting a loss of certainty in the food context.

The presence of significant engagement was observed in the relationships established between the hedonic value of eating for pleasure and traditional eating, associated with the family environment. The act of eating appears as a form of subversion to the system rules, limitations of food choices, and restrictions imposed by time, academic demands, financial aspects, and the university environment. Such affective values give rise to hopes and expectations regarding future goals and projects, reflecting the trust placed in those who guide knowledge and science.

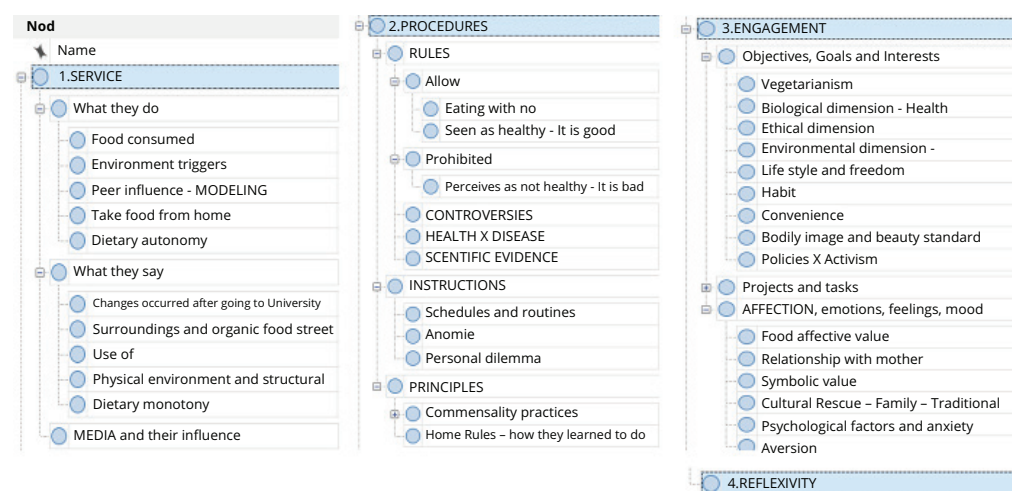


Figure 2. Coding by themes derived from the empirical theoretical integration of nodes and their subcategories on NVIVO® 11 software

Source: elaborated by Ambrosi¹⁸

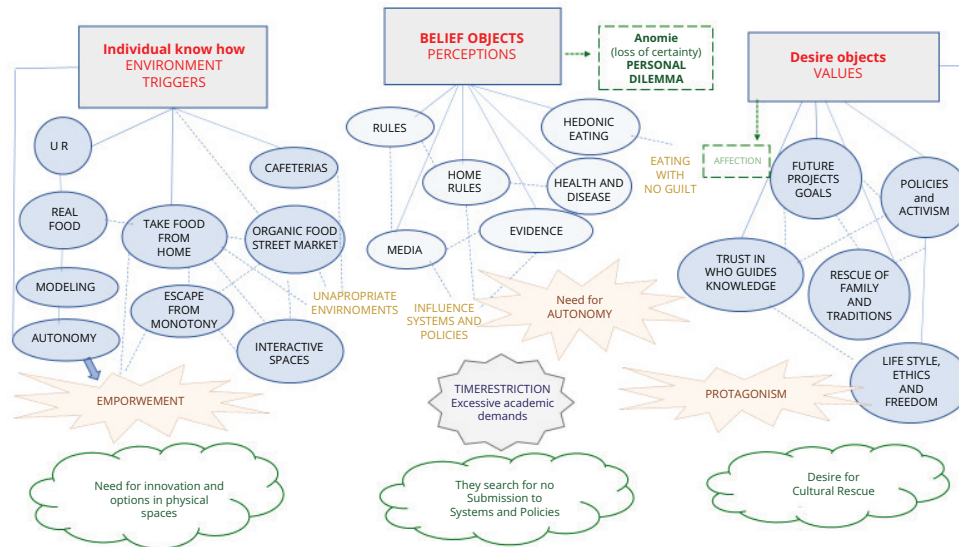


Figure 3. Initial theoretical map that corresponds to phase four of the Thematic Analysis.

Source: elaborated by Ambrosi,¹⁸ based on checking levels 1 and 2 of analysis, proposed in TA.

The analysis and interpretation of the data revealed significant interrelationships between the students' introspective and reflective values, which highlighted the assumption of food leading aspect (Figure 4). These relationships were represented in a final thematic map, corresponding to phase five of the field research thematic approach, which illustrates the externalized values and their connections between practices and knowledge.

Students demonstrated their choices both individually and collectively, whether at the campus or at their homes. They expressed a need for autonomy in relation to their diet, evidenced in the complex interrelationships observed. The objects of food desire revealed values associated with sensory pleasure, culture, family, traditions, activism, and subversive practices, representing symbolic, ethical, and freedom dimensions.

A discussion was organized based on the thematic axes that emerged: commensality and healthiness; autonomy and empowerment, and freedom, trust, and affection. These themes provide a framework for understanding the different facets of students' eating practices and object of desire, as well as their implications for eating experiences in the university context.

Commensability and healthiness

The study revealed need to rethink other ways of eating, as well as ways to differentiate oneself from others, eat with no guilt, adopt activist practices and follow modern approaches, including restricted consumption of plant-based foods. These contemporary ways of eating reflect specific values related to sensory pleasure, culture, ethics, and freedom.

Commensality emerges as a relevant theme, highlighted both in the students' statements and in the theoretical categories (available in Figure 1). In addition to being a striking expression of human sociability, it is intricate in the structural process which we live in, not excluding social contradictions and power relations. Eating in appropriate environments, regularly and attentively, and eating in company are mentioned:

And, another thing that I had never thought about is that we eat for emotion, or when we are with certain people we eat one way and when we are alone we eat another way, I found it very interesting to think about it under this perspective (Health Area, 22 years old, Female).

Discussing these results, one found the most diverse motivations for choosing menus, such

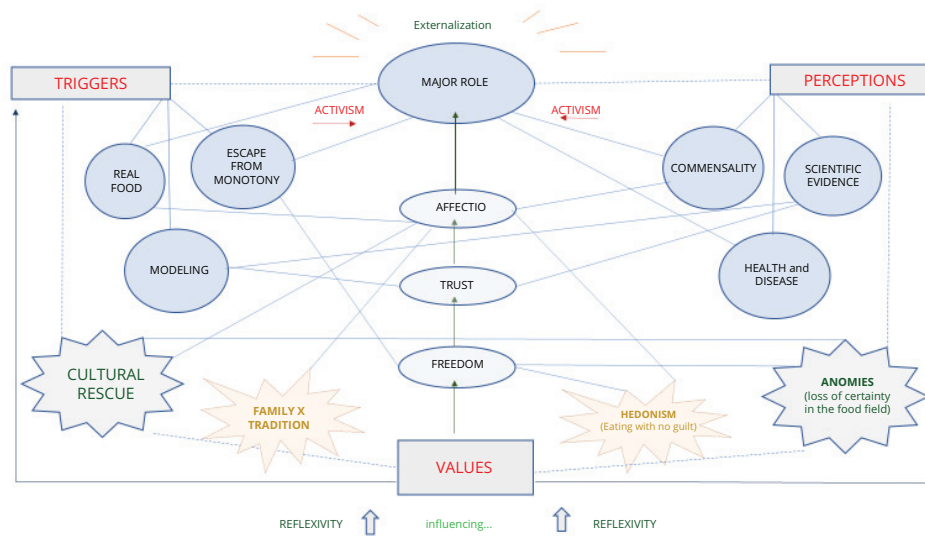


Figure 4. Final Thematic Analysis map.

Source: prepared by Ambrosi,¹⁸ based on phase five of analysis, proposed by Braun and Clarke²²

Observations: In TA, one named the final themes of analysis for the exploratory question:

When you need to consume food at the campus, what values do you consider fundamental?

All interrelationships found in the software analysis were considered.

as moral, rational and hedonistic ones.¹⁴ There are also motivations that include elements of pleasure for the body and soul, but which, between rationality and subjectivity, imply culture, economics, and politics.³¹ There are those that involve bonds of affection, but they bring the question of healthy based on *how* you eat much more than *what* you eat. For this reason, eating is defined as an affective, ethical, and political act.³²

The Food Guide for the Brazilian Population (GAPB) represents an advance in promoting shared eating, highlighting commensality, although this emphasis does not correlate directly with the promotion of healthy practices or health protection.³³ One of these practices is the suggestion on eating in conducive environments, avoiding stimuli for excessive consumption and promoting conscious choices, crucial in overloaded environments, where a lack of time and concentration can hinder reflection on food choices.³⁴

Commensality in the sphere of social reproduction requires bonds of affection, and the act of eating together is an element that goes

far beyond nutritional needs: it is important to think about autonomy.³⁵ *After entering university, peer influence and gain of independence* are factors described in the literature, which were a common characteristic identified in the groups:

[...] I had more emotional bonds with my colleagues and I think being together when eating had an influence on this. In the laboratory, it is very common for each person to take something to eat and share, for example, sometimes we had lunch together and each person took something: rice, beans, salad, meat [...] although the corridors are no suitable environment for a meal. But I think that a lot of our bond, and the friendship that we still have today, comes from that time when we shared food in the laboratory and also went to the university restaurant, always together (Humanities Area, 30 years old, Female).

Students consider that a healthy diet should be affordable and offer balanced and tasty culinary options, in addition to having an adequate portion size, and sensorially and/or culturally well-accepted preparations:

I notice a total difference with food, in how it affects our health, I notice it when I left home, when I had a diet more controlled by my family it was different. When I started managing my own food and preparing food [that was] easier to prepare, we just pick it up, put it in and it's ready [sic], and because we work and study this becomes a more easier routine for us, and this totally affected my quality of life. (Humanities area, 22 years old, Male).

Expressed values should guide the development of institutional programs that foster healthy environments conducive to well-being at the campus. It is crucial to create "zones of access and choice freedom" in SFS. Bourdieu¹⁹ emphasizes cultural capital, covering inherited and acquired culture, as an analytical key to understanding social dynamics.

Studies show that efforts by means of nutritional guidelines and recommendations, as well as intervention campaigns, are not very effective in achieving effective changes.³⁴ One of the problems lies in the transposition of idealized standards of a "healthy diet," constructed and validated only for individual cases or in the validation of standards based on epidemiological parameters.³⁶ These general recommendations do not consider the specificities of food, cuisine, and regional cultures and customs.

In this context, the theme of healthiness emerges as a central point of discussion. Therefore, a holistic approach has to be adopted in health educational initiatives, considering individual peculiarities and seeking to revive the cultural and identity components associated with food. This consideration gains particular relevance in the sphere of social nutrition and collective health, in which it is essential to integrate elements that promote cultural and identity preservation in the food sector.

Autonomy and empowerment

Autonomy and individual empowerment are fundamental aspects of self-care in health. Vincha et al.³⁷ observe that self-determination implies transformations constructed by the individuals themselves, resulting from the confrontation of determinants, accountability, and internal negotiation. Empowerment promotes the ability to think and act critically when faced with choices, and its effectiveness is reinforced by autonomy, which leads to adjustments and decisions in individual actions.

By understanding the responsibility for their choices, the person takes an active attitude in caring for themselves.³⁸ Therefore, if choices are based on what they think and feel, it is introspection (self-perception) that fosters confidence, self-care, autonomy, and empowerment. Elements that make individuals be in charge of their food history could be observed:

The concerns I have today are the same ones that my mother has had all her life, so what changed the most was my participation in this process, so much so that I became the person in charge and thinker within this process of my eating, I became the person who makes the decisions, but the decisions themselves haven't changed much, because the concerns I have today are the same ones my father and mother had with regard to me (Health Area, 24 years old, Male).

Dahlgren and Whitehead³⁹ emphasize that macro social determinants, such as socioeconomic and cultural ones, impact individual choices and autonomy in health. Social sciences play a crucial role in offering concepts and methodologies for health policies that promote healthiness and combat illness in society.⁴⁰

Taking responsibility for eating practices demands being in charge of decisions. Nonetheless, power relations and environmental influences, with barriers and facilitators, make decisions more complex. Individual empowerment does not ensure autonomy, as the environment is crucial for food choice freedom.

Freedom, trust and affection

Based on Fischler's gastronomy,¹⁴ food generates doubts and anxieties, especially due to the exclusion of traditional culture and commensality.⁴¹ In addition to symbolic meanings, food is permeated by affective dimensions, influencing choices and relationships, as Canesqui and Garcia⁴² point out. The affective and cognitive dimensions shape personal perceptions, beliefs, and values.³⁷ Restrictive diets can lead to loss of pleasure and freedom, resulting in harmful behaviors.³⁴

On the other hand, happiness, reduced stress, and recognition of the importance of healthy eating have a positive influence on eating behavior. Such factors not only promote health outcomes and reduce the incidence of obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases, but also contribute to environmental and global sustainability:

I think that food itself would be a more objective aspect, and what we do with it is what matters, which for example, as my colleague said, there is a lot of food that is comfort food and it's all right, it's okay to have some food that will make us comfortable, and that at some point we will want (Humanities Area, 21 years old, Female).

According to Nestle,⁴³ the forefront of nutrition policies is aimed at promoting diets that simultaneously address three objectives: fight against hunger, prevention of chronic diseases, and preservation of the environment. Thus, food issues are intrinsically linked to environmental and sustainability discussions, covering the entire production chain and the impacts of inadequate management practices. In this context, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) plays a crucial role in promoting food security, sustainable agriculture, and rural development.⁵ Many initiatives were identified:

I like to buy from family farming, I like street markets, I think it's really cooled to have a relationship with the community, and know where the food comes from (Health Area, 25 years old, Male).

If, on the one hand, eating is an act of love and shared eating brings back affective memories, on the other, meals can be moments of tension when conflicts overflow, revealing the relationships of oppression that reinforce the power structure of food. According to Lahire,⁴⁴ individual and collective feelings have differentiated from each other and become more complex to the point of producing the feeling that the intimate, the singular and the personal are distinct from society and opposed to it, since people are individual assets of plural dispositions or capabilities.

Contrasting the view of empowerment as individual responsibility for self-care, it is crucial to recognize that university FE requires public policies aimed at promoting healthy eating. Research in this field and knowledge dissemination initiatives are supported by the HPU movement, in line with the purposes of Brazilian federal institutions and supported by students.

Understanding the meaning of "real food" and the desire for cultural recovery arise from reflection on students' experiences and the knowledge shared in FGs. The connection between the words "knowledge" and "taste" is clearly noted, both derived from the perception

of flavor, which, in a broader sense, represents understanding and knowledge.

The way food is enjoyed and the pleasure associated with eating are intrinsically linked to the contexts of spaces, times and companionship at the table, fundamental to eating practices. These elements constitute the essence of the hedonic dimension in human actions related to food choice, preparation, and consumption.

Conclusion

Based on the qualitative results of this study, it can be concluded that the university students' eating practices are intrinsically linked to introspective and reflective values, which influence their choices and behaviors. The perception of anomie in the food field indicates a loss of certainty and complexity in decision-making related to food, influenced by several factors, such as social inspirations, lack of support, dubious sources of scientific information, food industry influence, and personal dilemmas. Nevertheless, values such as affection, trust, and freedom emerge as essential elements in this process.

On the one hand, one perceives a situational intertwining between knowledge and eating practices, in which individuals are challenged by the dichotomy between autonomy and cultural rationality. Students are responsible for their choices and their individual thinking is constructed from diverse relationships with plural knowledge. By reflecting, feeling, and practicing their preferences, they develop as human beings, actively adapting to their environments and improving their perceptions, knowledge, skills, and attitudes for taking their decisions.

On the other hand, the environment and power relations exert a significant influence on dietary decisions, and commensality, autonomy, and individual empowerment are essential elements for health self-care. The emphasis, however, is on the fact that the context in which they are inserted limits students' self-governance. Furthermore, the appreciation of freedom, trust, and affection reveals the complexity and internal and symbolic meanings associated with food, with emotions and memories externalizing the need for being in charge of exercising choices.

These conclusions highlight need to consider cultural, social, and emotional aspects when developing public policies and institutional programs that promote adequate and healthy

eating in the university context. Interdisciplinarity between human sciences and nutrition emerges as a promising approach to address this complexity and promote positive changes in students' eating practices. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to improving spaces on campus, expanding and facilitating access to healthy foods, promoting triggers that value student's major role and providing a FE conducive to cultural, conscious, and healthy choices.

Collaborators

C Ambrosi worked on development, research, methodology, drafting and final formatting; M Grisotti collaborated in the conception, drafting of the research and the final review of the manuscript.

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