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Eating to Belong: Food Practices, Identity, and Social Structure among Contemporary University Youth. An Approach from the Anthropology and Sociology of Food

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the eating styles and practices of young university students from two interrelated fields: anthropology and sociology. The eating practices and habits acquired during such a crucial stage of life as youth are determinants of health in adulthood. Beyond its biological function, food serves as an instrument of socialization and identity construction among young people. The methodology chosen for this research was a literature review from the perspective of the anthropology and sociology of food, and an in-depth, semi-structured questionnaire administered to 40 young university students between the ages of 18 and 25. The questionnaire was structured around three dimensions: (1) food, identity, and personal trajectory; (2) social, cultural, and media influences on eating choices; and (3) the values and meanings attributed to the act of eating, including health, ethics, and sustainability. The results indicate that young people's dietary choices and eating habits are influenced, among other factors, by their socioeconomic context and the influence of social media, which exerts substantial pressure on their image and eating habits. Furthermore, the results also reflect the coexistence of traditional diets, such as the Mediterranean diet, with newer eating patterns. Finally, it was found that students with knowledge of nutrition or food science are less susceptible to media pressure regarding eating practices.

Keywords: Food; eating habits; youth; identity; socialization.

INTRODUCTION

Youth is a particularly significant stage of life for studying and intervening in the eating practices of this group, among other reasons because the eating habits acquired during this period tend to become established in adulthood and influence long-term health (Pérez-Gallardo et al., 2015), thus making it a particularly relevant period.

Nutrition has a significant impact not only on physical health but also on mental health. Recent studies have shown that a higher-quality diet is associated with greater emotional well-being and fewer depressive symptoms in young people, while a poor diet is linked to more psychological problems (Wang et al., 2022; Tucker et al., 2025). Therefore, the choice of diet and eating habits at this stage is crucial, as it can shape both their present and their future.

On the other hand, the eating habits chosen by young people also influence their identity formation, since food is part of the socialization process and functions as a marker of group belonging, an instrument of social differentiation, and an expression of values and cultural positions (Fischler, 1988; Stead et al., 2011). In this regard, the social sciences generally recognize that eating, in addition to its vital nutritional function, is a social act (Mauss,

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1925) that structures and has implications in different spheres: social, economic, political, and cultural (Álvarez Munárriz, Antón Hurtado y Esteban Redondo, 2019; Mennell et al., 1992; Díaz Méndez and Gómez Benito, 2005). In the case of university students, this choice is especially conditioned. Leaving the family home, unstable schedules, and academic pressure, among other factors, can lead to unbalanced eating patterns that deviate from nutritional recommendations (Rodrigo-Cano et al., 2022). In this regard, new socialization scenarios through social media and advertising are particularly relevant, as their influence on food choices and body image in young people has been extensively documented (Martínez Guirao, 2014; Blanchard et al., 2023).

In short, studying nutrition during such a crucial life stage as youth allows us to understand not only eating habits and customs but also how the context influences and shapes lifestyle choices.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to analyze the eating habits and practices of young people from an anthropological and sociological perspective. To this end, a theoretical review of the current state of research was conducted, and an in-depth questionnaire was administered to 40 university students in order to compare the patterns identified in the literature with the practices, experiences, and perceptions of the young people themselves. This questionnaire was structured around three interrelated dimensions: the relationship between food, identity, and personal trajectory; the social, cultural, and media influences that shape their food choices; and the values and meanings that young people attribute to what they eat, ranging from health and ethics to sustainability.
The article is structured around these three dimensions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Food as a social and symbolic fact

From an anthropological perspective, food has been understood not only as a necessary practice for survival, but also as a social and symbolic phenomenon, since it is through food that essential aspects of human existence are organized. Like any other area of life, food is governed by social norms, which translate into actions such as what is eaten, how it is eaten, with whom it is eaten, when it is eaten, and so on. Furthermore, eating is an eminently socializing act. We not only learn to eat (in different places such as school, home, and with friends), but any event that humans consider important—a celebration, a meeting, a friendship, and any other act that symbolizes the expression of a significant event—is organized around food. In addition, daily life activities (schedules, events, roles, rituals) are organized around food (Monterrosa et al., 2020; Higgs, 2015; Belasco, 2008).

Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas developed studies from the social sciences, including structural anthropology, social anthropology, and sociology. In their work, they revealed that cooking food is a form of thought and structures the social order (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). In other words, cooking is a symbolic process. As previously mentioned, when people transform food from its natural state into another type of food, they also carry out the transition from nature to culture. Likewise, according to Douglas (1972), food develops as a social language since it reflects social status, norms, belonging, traditions, and modernity. Therefore, young people not only consume food but also the cultural symbols that situate them as individuals within the social group to which they belong, a process mediated by enculturation (Fischler, 1988).

Focusing on adolescence, food is a key element in the creation and evolution of identity, as it is through food that one identifies with social groups, lifestyles, and processes of differentiation (Álvarez Munárriz y Álvarez de Luis, 2009; Stead et al., 2011; Fischler, 1988). In this sense, personal choices regarding specific diets, such as healthy or vegetarian food, or the spaces where they are consumed, manifest as a way of expressing oneself through food (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002).

The eating habits of young people range between tradition and new forms of modern cuisine promoted by globalization and new technologies, which help to reinterpret traditional cooking (Appadurai, 1996; Ritzer, 2004; Popkin, 2017).

One of the most significant influences during adolescence comes from social media: TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook not only provide information about food but also transmit lifestyles and models of body image, health, and consumption that are sometimes not only unethical but can also produce negative dynamics and practices due to a lack of scientific rigor (Coates et al., 2022; Chung et al., 2021). From an anthropological perspective, these platforms are spaces or areas where food is displayed, establishing social and symbolic representations and creating associations between certain foods and the qualities attributed to them, thus influencing eating habits. In this way, food is also made visually more attractive, making it more appealing and generating more desire and consumption, while promoting the preparation of one's own food, turning it into a support for the identification of the food practices and styles that are being consumed on social networks (Holmberg et al., 2016; Vaterlaus et al., 2015) and, in a veiled way, maintaining the monitoring of the influencers who promote them.

However, alongside social media, biomedical discourses exist. Foucault, in his theory of biopower, finds a link between biopolitical power and the transition from the need to feed oneself to a normalized territory that requires

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responsibility and self-control (Foucault, 1976; Furtado & Camilo, 2016; Crawford, 2006). In the youth context, this theory is associated with the guilt that poor eating habits can generate, as well as with identifications linked to health, especially those related to healthy food and fitness.

From a materialist perspective, eating practices are conditioned by socioeconomic inequalities (Harris, 1985; Darmon & Drewnowski, 2008), influencing access to healthy food, spaces for consumption, and activities that require a specific type of diet. In the case of young people, these structurally conditioned factors generate differences in eating habits according to each individual's circumstances. These habits are heavily influenced by the family, as it is the environment where one first learns to eat, what type of food and how it is cooked, when and at what time, as well as the norms, codes, and meanings that govern the act of eating (Scaglioni et al., 2018; Contento, 2016). However, young people can accept, change, or reject these eating practices to design their own strategy for finding and adapting to their lifestyle.

Considering the above and acknowledging that eating in company can strengthen social bonds, food, and ultimately the act of eating, acts as a parameter by which human beings are socially included or excluded (Warde, 1997; Bisogni, 2012). We can share eating practices and styles in very different times and situations, and the way we do so either helps or hinders social integration and belonging, as it places us within or outside the group in which we develop one style or another.

Thus, the act of eating in the youth population is a process in which not only identity or belonging converge, but also culture, the economy, biopower and of course globalization, since eating is not only an act to survive but has multiple meanings for each group in the life cycle; in young people, the recognition of oneself through the groups to which one belongs and the place one occupies in society is especially important.

The Sociology of Food and Young People: Structure, Distinction, and Social Change.

From a sociological perspective, the study of food helps us understand how social structures, through habits and customs, are replicated and transformed in different contexts. In this sense, the sociology of food—based on the work of Mennell, Murcott, and van Otterloo (1992)—considers eating behaviors not to be personal choices, but rather practices conditioned by society throughout history.

In the case of young people, studying their eating habits allows us to understand the lifestyle they choose and the social factors that influence the construction of their identity. In this regard, research on food and its social dimensions has shown that eating patterns are related to the structural conditions in which they occur. In the case of young Spaniards, the choice between traditional Mediterranean cuisine and the new consumption patterns characteristic of post-industrial societies is not merely cultural: it has tangible social and health consequences (Sánchez Vera, 2019).

This choice is determined, among other factors, by economics, changes in family structure, and the intensification of lifestyles. Having the option to eat healthily or not is an indicator of food inequality, which also translates into social health inequality.

Along the same lines, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction (1979) states that food preferences—what is eaten, how it is presented, and with whom it is shared—represent class habitus. Thus, depending on their social origin and the context in which young people develop, their food choices are largely shaped by socialization, which, in the case of young people, is especially relevant for the construction of their identity and social adaptation.

Other authors, such as Warde (1997), consider that food choices are conditioned by a dilemma—between the new and the familiar, the healthy and the pleasurable, the economical and the symbolically valued—that people constantly face. In the case of young people, this dilemma is even greater: the pressure exerted through social media for a healthy image and lifestyle coexists with the ever-increasing proliferation of fast food and ultra-processed foods, which are usually cheaper, easier to prepare and share, and thus become a vehicle for socialization among young people.

In this sense, at the beginning of the 20th century, Simmel (1910) referred to the act of eating together, "commensality," as one of the principles of socialization. For young people, meeting up to eat together becomes a tool for their social integration. Sharing a meal, meeting up at a fast-food restaurant, or ordering takeout with friends is part of social integration. Throughout history, these habits have evolved, but the socializing function of eating in company remains.

In this regard, from a sociological perspective, Giddens (1991) states that "while in the early modern period food was largely inherited and reproduced unreflectively, in late modernity young people adopt active dietary positions: they become vegan, flexitarian, or practice fermentation cuisine, not only for nutritional reasons, but as part of their biographical self-construction."

Based on this, the choice of diet and eating habits forms part of identity construction and becomes a declaration of values and social positioning that reflects the inequalities, culture, and history of the social context in which they live.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the objectives set forth in this research, a qualitative methodology was chosen. First, a literature review of scientific literature specializing in the topic was conducted to establish the theoretical framework and contextualize the object of study. Second, to understand young people's perceptions and opinions on eating habits, a semi-structured, in-depth questionnaire was selected as the data collection technique. This questionnaire is organized around three main interrelated analytical dimensions:

1. Food, identity, and personal trajectory.

2. Social, cultural, and media influences.

3. Values and meanings of food.

Regarding the sample, participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure heterogeneity in the selected profiles through variables such as gender, sociocultural background, lifestyle habits, and young people with specific conditions such as celiac disease or eating disorders, among others. The questionnaire was administered to 40 university students between the ages of 18 and 25, most of whom were enrolled in degrees related to Health Sciences and Food Science and Technology.

The data was analyzed using an interpretive thematic analysis. The responses were coded, identifying recurring patterns, potential discursive contradictions, and symbolic elements linked to food practices. This approach allows us to understand the interpretation and meaning that participants give to their experiences, linking these perceptions to the concepts and theoretical contributions identified in the prior literature review.

Having detailed the methodology used, the following section presents the results and discussion.

RESULTS

As mentioned previously, the results are structured around three fundamental axes:
- Food, identity, and personal trajectory
- Social, cultural, and media influences
- Values and meanings of food

1. Food, identity, and personal trajectory
To the question, "How would you describe your eating habits and what role do they play in your daily life?"

The people who answered the questionnaire stated that their eating habits are quite balanced but also have contradictions typical of university life. They want to eat well: they talk a lot about home-cooked meals, fruits, vegetables, and proteins, as if each meal were an attempt to find a balance between taking care of themselves and the daily chaos. However, the reality of university life is characterized by inconsistent schedules and constant changes in class dynamics, which often lead to fast food and/or processed products.

"When stress overwhelms me, I lose that balance, and my eating becomes unstable, with me eating whatever is available, regardless of whether it's healthy or not."

Eating is a biological necessity for survival, but it also has a cultural dimension, as it's a time for socialization and a break from the daily routine of academic life.

"Food is part of my daily life because it structures my schedule and is also a time for rest and spending time with my family."

Some informants, however, express their relationship with food in a more disciplined way. Those directly involved in sports or studying Human Nutrition describe their eating habits in relation to the specific benefits they can have on their physical performance, since nutrition optimizes their functioning.

"My eating routines are a dynamic balance between scientific rigor and my mother's legacy. In the mornings, my technical side predominates: I design functional breakfasts where I prioritize nutritional density. However, lunch is dictated by family tradition and the 'dish of the day."

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"I don't see food only as pleasure, but as a necessary function for my body to perform and recover."

Another group of people with special health conditions, such as eating disorders, celiac disease, and other health problems, report that eating is not something they can improvise, but rather something they have to plan, sometimes even controlling and weighing the ingredients, or at least paying close attention to what they ingest, which can be quite stressful. In these cases, eating does not reflect the rest or relaxation mentioned earlier. This highlights that the relationship with food is highly conditioned. Habits, time, finances, studies, and personal experiences are all intertwined.

"My habits are heavily influenced by health and safety. As a celiac, my diet requires constant planning; I can't improvise. In my daily life, food plays a central role because I must be vigilant to avoid cross-contamination".

Perhaps it could be said that the food system at the university requires better organization to adjust to good eating patterns, taking into account some of the conditions that the university population presents, instead of understanding it as an unstable equilibrium, such as those quick coffees that are taken between classes, which are not enough, but are necessary to keep going.

To the question, "To what extent does your eating habits form part of your personal identity?"
Most people believe that what they eat is part of who they are as a person. Some people think that eating a certain way shows that they take care of themselves, that they are balanced, or that they are disciplined. However, others don't believe that what they eat is the most important thing about them. Many people want to eat healthily, but we also want to enjoy our favorite foods from time to time. The idea is to find a balance between taking care of ourselves and allowing ourselves some treats.

"My eating habits are an extension of my self-discipline. Being 'the person who chooses the healthy option' isn't a restriction for me, but a statement of principles about how much I value my health and physical ability."

"I identify with a flexible, mindful way of eating that is adapted to my lifestyle."

It is also observed how food can become a cultural and emotional expression. Some participants link their food identity to family traditions, the Mediterranean diet, or a mix of cultures, as is the case with those who combine Spanish and Colombian or Spanish and Moroccan practices.

"My identity lies precisely in that intersection: the effort to integrate academic knowledge with my grandmother's recipes without creating an internal conflict."

"My diet reflects a mix of cultures that defines me as an experimental person. It's normal to see paella with plantain chips on my table."

In profiles more closely linked to sports or food science, food appears tied to self-discipline, technical knowledge, and building a healthy lifestyle.

In other cases, especially in narratives related to health problems or eating disorders, food is presented as an element deeply linked to social and emotional identity, even defining how the person perceives themselves and how they are perceived by others.

"It's a very deep part of my identity. Being celiac defines you socially ('you're the one who can't eat gluten'). Also, having gone through an eating disorder, my relationship with food has been central to my identity for a long time."
To the question, "How and why have your eating habits changed over time?"

Changes in eating habits are often related to the transition from adolescence to adulthood and the acquisition of greater autonomy. Participants say that they used to eat impulsively or according to what was available at home. Now they are more aware of the importance of nutrition and make more thoughtful choices.

"I've gone from eating somewhat out of habit to being much more conscious of what I put on my plate. The big change came with my first diet; that's when I started researching and understanding the value of what I ate."

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"Since transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, snacks have become less frequent; instead of eating a sandwich, I choose a piece of fruit."

University life has changed eating routines. At this stage, they tend to cook more if they live in student apartments, trying to adapt their schedules, which also leads to changes in the frequency, type of food, cooking methods, and how they structure their meals. Many mention that they have eaten less pastry, more fruit and vegetables, and have started cooking healthier meals.

"Starting the degree was a real eye-opener when I began studying ultra-processed foods and their metabolic impact."

"Over time, I've learned more about nutrition and health, and now I try to better organize my meals, prioritize nutritious foods, and pay more attention to protein and overall balance."

Students enrolled in the Food Science and Technology degree program are more aware of what they eat, and this changes their relationship with food. They adopt health-related habits, not only focused specifically on food, but also recognizing that food helps in the process of developing new practices such as exercise and improving physical and mental health.

"My habits have shifted from inertia to knowledge. Before, I systematically consumed ultra-processed foods or fried foods out of pure ignorance. The degree program was a turning point when I understood the real impact of these products on my health."

• Does your eating habits connect you to any social group, lifestyle, or collective identity?

Most people don't consider themselves part of very strict dietary groups, such as veganism or specific diets. However, they do feel a connection to certain lifestyles. Many people identify with a "balanced" lifestyle, which is associated with young university students who try to take care of themselves without going overboard.

"Yes, I suppose I would identify more with the typical young athlete who goes to the gym and watches their diet very strictly."

"I don't follow any specific diet that identifies me with a particular group."

In some cases, eating habits are related to fitness culture, sports, or personal care. These people follow planned eating routines, pay attention to nutrients, and believe there is a strong relationship between food, performance, and personal discipline.

"It definitely connects me to the fitness and healthy living community. There is a common language among those of us who take care of ourselves: respect for rest, effort, and nutrition."
"It connects me directly with the celiac community; we share strategies and safe places."

There are also groups of people who identify with Mediterranean culture, family traditions, or belonging to specific communities, such as the celiac community. Some people emphasize that it is possible to combine scientific knowledge with cultural roots, and that traditional practices can be maintained without neglecting health and nutrition.

"I feel part of a collective of future healthcare professionals who seek to reconcile scientific evidence with modernity, without abandoning their roots."

2. Social, Cultural, and Media Influences

• What social influences (family, environment, culture) have shaped your eating habits?

Family is the main influence in almost every story. People say their current eating habits come from home-cooked meals and the routines they learned at home as children.

"My family instilled in me the ideas of how to eat, mainly because they were the ones who fed me."

"Mediterranean culture is my foundation, that's clear. Although I didn't receive formal nutritional education at home, I was accustomed to eating real food."

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Family meals are often related to the Mediterranean diet. This includes traditional stews and fixed mealtimes. It also focuses on sharing meals as a family.

"My family's influence is huge. I grew up with the culture of stews, eating until I was stuffed, and showing affection by adding more food to your plate."

Due to the multicultural nature of the classrooms, it's clear that culture plays a significant role in eating habits, reflecting a connection to certain foods and flavors, such as the Mediterranean cuisine of Murcia or that of countries like Morocco or Colombia.

"At my table, it's normal to see paella accompanied by plantain chips. This fusion of flavors allows me to enjoy the best of both worlds."

Regarding their environment, the students' responses show that while they feel like a consolidated part of university social life, their habits adapt to new schedules and customs, developing preferences and aversions to food due to the disconnect from their family's culinary traditions and the experience of living with classmates.

Their eating habits have changed. They adopt new customs and schedules.

"*Living in Murcia, it's quite normal to eat fruits, vegetables, and fresh produce."*

• What role do your social relationships play in your food choices?

This question clearly demonstrates the link between social interaction and food. Many informants report that their eating habits tend to be more flexible when they eat with family or friends, in situations focused on leisure and relaxation, as it is considered a social practice. However, when they eat alone, they prioritize health criteria.

"Social life in Spain happens around a table and a few beers. I try to make better choices if the setting allows it, but I prioritize the psychological enjoyment and being with my friends over being the 'nutrition nerd' of the group."

"Food becomes more of a way to spend time with other people than something related to health."

The testimonies show that food choices are influenced by social relationships.

"The social interactions that usually occur on weekends help me disconnect from the daily grind and enjoy meals with friends and family without restrictions."

Some young people state that they adapt to the tastes, schedules, or habits of their social group, changing or modifying their own. In some cases, especially for those with a more structured exercise routine, informal settings symbolize moments of "disconnecting" from their usual diet.

"In those moments, the important thing is to get along with the group and enjoy the time, rather than counting calories."

"When I'm with friends, my habits tend to change slightly, as I'm usually more flexible and prioritize the social aspect."

• Have you experienced social pressure or unspoken rules about how you should eat? How do they affect you?

Most people admit to having felt social pressure surrounding food and their bodies. This pressure is often related to the idea of being thin, eating healthily, or meeting certain expectations about what and how much to eat.

"There is social pressure to eat 'clean' or 'perfectly,' which is very dangerous when you have had an eating disorder."

"Yes, there is some social pressure to eat 'right' or maintain a certain physique."

Some people talk about feeling guilty about eating certain foods or following restrictive diets due to external influences.

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"There were certain foods that, as much as I wanted them, I saw as bad and avoided eating them. I wanted to have a body like the ones I saw on social media."

In some cases, this pressure comes from family, especially during childhood. In other cases, it arises from social media, university, or even people who study nutrition. There are also unspoken rules about table manners, politeness, and social etiquette in certain situations.

"In my academic and social environment, there's an expectation that a food technologist should be a paragon of nutritional purism."

However, many say that over time they have developed a more critical and flexible attitude toward food. They try not to obsess over it and prioritize balance in their diet.

"Over time, I've learned to put things in perspective and understand that healthy eating also includes flexibility."

• How do you interpret the social ideas of "eating well" and "eating poorly"?

There is a consensus that these categories are not rigid enough.

Most people think that socially, "eating well" is associated with restriction, control, or only eating healthy foods.

"I believe there is a social distortion surrounding these concepts. 'Eating well' is often associated with severe restrictions or expensive products."

While "eating poorly" is automatically associated with fast food, ultra-processed foods, or excess.

"Eating poorly isn't about enjoying a traditional stew, but about depending on nutritionally worthless products and developing unfounded fears about certain foods."

However, the participants advocate a more flexible and balanced view. For them, eating well means having a varied, sufficient, and sustainable diet in the long term, without extreme prohibitions or guilt.

"Eating well isn't just about eating salad or restricting yourself, but about having a varied, sufficient, and sustainable diet over time."
Eating poorly doesn't refer to occasionally eating unhealthy foods.

It's about maintaining consistently unbalanced habits or having a problematic relationship with food.

"I know that there isn't an absolute 'eating well' or 'eating poorly,' because in nutrition, not everything is black and white; the key is balance."

Students in Science and Technology and more technical fields also criticize nutritional misinformation and the demonization of certain foods.

"Eating poorly isn't a one-off thing."

• What influence do media and social networks have on your relationship with food and your body?

The overall impact of social media is considered ambiguous. On the one hand, they are seen as sources for recipes, information, and motivation regarding healthy habits. On the other hand, most people say they generate comparisons, unrealistic body image expectations for men and women, as well as bipolar codes of healthy eating.

"Social media promotes impossible body standards and food fads that can trigger risky behaviors."

"Sometimes they can motivate self-care or provide useful ideas, but they can also generate unrealistic comparisons."

For a considerable number of them, social media was created during adolescence; unhealthy behaviors centered on their bodies and food; restrictive diets associated with guilt about eating or desires to achieve impossible physical ideals. The explosion of fake news, miracle diets, and pseudoscientific discourse is also criticized.

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"I wanted to have a body like the ones I saw on social media."

"Advertising on both television and social media makes us question what we eat and also generates social pressure regarding perfect bodies."

However, several stories indicate that they become critical of this content, especially through education or experiential accounts that allowed them to question these narratives.

"The digital environment is saturated with chemophobia and unfounded alarmism. My role is not to change my diet because of a viral video, but to exercise constant critical thinking."

3. Values and meanings of food

• How does your diet relate to values such as health, ethics, or sustainability?

Health is the most prevalent value in virtually all discussions. Participants link food to feeling good physically and mentally, maintaining energy, preventing health problems, and improving athletic performance. In many cases, healthy eating is understood as a form of self-care and balance rather than a strict restriction.

"I always try to buy products that are as healthy as possible and as minimally processed as possible."

"For me, health is the main value, but not only physical health, but also mental health. I try to make my diet ethical, first and foremost, for myself."

Sustainability appears in a more secondary role, although several participants mention practices such as avoiding food waste, consuming seasonal products, buying fresh food, and reducing the consumption of ultra-processed foods and packaging. Some people say that these practices are related to what their families always did, such as reusing leftover food or eating local products.

"I try not to waste food and make the most of what I have at home." "Prioritizing real, seasonal foods not only benefits my performance but also reduces the environmental impact of ultra-processed foods."

"Interestingly, my scientific values align with my family's traditional customs. My mother already practices sustainability intuitively: she consumes locally sourced products and applies a 'zero waste' philosophy."

Ethics isn't something that's often mentioned, but in some cases, it's related to taking care of our bodies, feeling good, and being aware of how the food industry affects the environment and society. Among Science and Technology students, these values are more developed and connected to scientific knowledge about how food is produced and consumed.

"Eating well is an act of personal ethics toward my own body."

In summary, and as a preliminary conclusion, the results obtained show that, for young university students, food, beyond its biological and nutritional function, represents a space for identity construction and socialization. Eating habits are directly related to different cultural values and life purposes. In certain fields, such as those related to nutrition or sports, food takes on particular importance.

On the other hand, the results reflect the coexistence of traditional food models and practices, such as the Mediterranean diet, with emerging and novel eating habits driven by globalization, continuous social transformation, and social media. While young people replicate many family eating habits, significant changes occur during university, where the shift in context and the new routines they encounter influence their eating patterns.

In this sense, social media and health and nutrition content on platforms like Instagram and TikTok have a decisive impact on young people's perceptions of socially accepted body and food ideals. This influence can, in some cases, lead to eating disorders. Finally, it should be noted that, although many of those interviewed expressed interest in following a healthy diet, this initially individual choice is conditioned by socioeconomic and cultural variables, highlighting that structural inequalities also exist in food and lifestyle choices.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Food in adolescence is a social and cultural phenomenon that extends beyond nutritional or survival aspects. This study has demonstrated that food is a crucial aspect in the construction of identity through young people's eating practices, functioning as a means of negotiation between tradition and modernization and managing the

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influence of food on health and the body. In this sense, Bourdieu (1984) and Fischler (1988) argued that eating practices are a form of social differentiation and construction of identity, self, and social belonging.

From the results, it can be concluded that university students struggle between the desire for self-care and the conditions that define academic life, characterized by immediacy, speed, and social pressure. Healthy food is an ideal, as the pace, economic, and social conditions shape eating styles. These opposing discourses between what people desire to eat and what reality dictates were described by Fischler (1988), who pointed out that in contemporary society, food choices are becoming increasingly individualized, generating anxiety and uncertainty about food. In this sense, Bourdieu (1984) argued that food choices are not solely due to personal preferences or tastes, but are heavily influenced by social and material characteristics closely linked to lifestyles and economic and cultural realities.

From an anthropological perspective, food, culturally, provides a wealth of information about its consumers, as it serves not only for survival through its consumption but also reveals lifestyles, tastes and aversions, and social positions.

There is a coexistence between the global and digital world, influenced by fitness and healthy living culture, and traditional family food characterized by the Mediterranean diet and home-cooked meals. Young people, who live in student apartments during the week and at their parents' homes on weekends and holidays, coexist without difficulty with these two seemingly contradictory eating styles. In this regard, Contreras (2021) pointed out that traditional eating practices did not disappear with food globalization, but rather that hybrid eating patterns emerged, combining family-style Mediterranean cuisine with fast food and healthy eating discourses; Krawczyk & Łuszczyńska (2023) argued that young people embraced the healthy eating trend while continuing to adopt traditional diets.

Similarly, this study shows that social media influences how body image and food perceptions are shaped through normative narratives about bodies and health in relation to personal, professional, and social success. Thus, the pursuit of this success can lead to eating disorders. Kilbourne (2020) supports the idea that social media fosters body image norms associated with beauty linked to success and self-control; this idea is also supported by Krawczyk & Łuszczyńska (2023), who state that social media can transmit messages related to food that can cause anxiety and encourage risky behaviors. However, this study also reveals a more analytical and critical attitude and approach to this topic, especially among those with more specific training in nutrition and health; this idea is shared by Bourdieu (1984) and Truman, Lane, & Elliott (2017), who consider that food discourses or narratives on social media can be challenged by education and culture.

In addition to the above, young people with dietary restrictions or medical conditions report that the experience with food is not the same for everyone, since problems related to health, finances, and even autonomy determine their food choices. Therefore, the social context is essential for assessing and interpreting eating habits and styles. This idea is shared by Contreras Hernández & Gracia Arnáiz (2021), who argue that food must be considered from three perspectives: social, economic, and cultural.

In conclusion, it could be said that the diet of young people helps us understand the cultural shifts in today's society, where tradition and globalization, autonomy and social pressure, performance and well-being coexist. From a sociological perspective, it could be argued that society is producing young people with a high capacity for self-regulation, but with significant emotional difficulties; they possess a wealth of nutritional information, but their goals often revolve around maintaining and developing normative body types, which hinders a harmonious relationship with food.

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