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FULL TEXTS BOOK

Editor

Dr. Ernest SHTEPANI

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Dr. Ernest SHTEPANI

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Turkish, English



FOOD CHOICE MOTIVATIONS ON A SAMPLE OF PORTUGUESE CITIZENS

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ABSTRACT

Eating is a basic necessity of the human body to be able to maintain life. The ingestions of macro and micro nutrients ensures the provision of energy and compounds essential for the functioning of the organs and cells in the human body. However, what we choose to eat is not only determined by physiological or nutritional needs, and is influenced by a high number of factors of different nature. Some of these factors include socioeconomic status, demographics, taste, lifestyle characteristics, convenience, food cost, security, access to food, nutrition knowledge, cultural influences, religious beliefs, social groups, among others.

Considering that the social and cultural environments contribute to shape one's eating patterns and food choices, as well as lifestyle variables associated with the ingestion of foods, it is important to study their influence and in what way they are more or less relevant for the definition of people's eating habits. This research intended to investigate the effect of social and cultural aspects on the eating motivations of a sample of Portuguese citizens.

The questionnaire survey was approved by the Ethical Committee of Health School of Polytechnic University of Viseu, with reference nº 04/2017. The questionnaire contained a number of statements to assess people' level of agreement with each of them on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree). The data were collected online through Google Forms and the survey was conducted through email invitation and social networks. A convenience samples was used, recruited by snowball methodology. A total of 1314 validated questionnaires were obtained.

The results of the present study revealed that practically all participants consider that meals are an opportunity for fellowship and pleasure, the great majority said they do not like to eat alone and about half of the participants admitted that when they eat with company they tend to eat more than usual. Regarding familiarity with foods, a great majority do not feel they need to consume foods similar to those they used to consume as a child, and contrarily, like to try new foods and enjoy innovative food experiences. Regarding the influence of other in shaping what the participants consume, more than half admit that they eat what they are expected to eat, and they do not follow food trends. Finally, two thirds of the participants base their food choice in food items from the season.

Keywords: Eating motivation, Food choice, motivational factors



INTRODUCTION

Eating is a basic necessity of the human body to be able to maintain life. The ingestions of macro and micro nutrients ensures the provision of energy and compounds essential for the functioning of the organs and cells in the human body. However, what we choose to eat is not only determined by physiological or nutritional needs, and is influenced by a high number of factors of different nature. Some of these factors include socioeconomic status, demographics, taste, lifestyle characteristics, convenience, food cost, security, access to food, nutrition knowledge, cultural influences, religious beliefs, social groups, among others (Dannenberg et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2024; Xiao et al., 2025).

There are different approaches to assess factors that influence eating Behavior, centring on different aspects. While some focus on the reasons for eating and eating psychology, exploring the brain responses to several types of stimulus, others focus on everyday life food choices. IN fact, during a normal day one person makes tens of food choices, although we do not realise the majority of them because they are so mechanic and the decision is made in our subconscious (Goukens & Klesse, 2022; Mills & Coleman, 2004).

Social influences, the relations with other people, influences from socially acceptable ideals, can have a significant impact on the everyday food choices. In addition, the way one feels towards food can vary among different societies, for example, eating insects is a traditional practice in many entomophagy regions of the globe, while in most Western countries it is not readily acceptable. People tend to feel neophobic towards it and even consider it as a disgusting practice. Other example relates with eating meat of certain animals, like eating pork meat that is unacceptable for muslims and cow meet for Hindu religion people (Florença et al., 2022; Hartmann et al., 2015).

On the other hand, diets vary greatly across cultures, for example around the Mediterranean sea a number of countries practice a diet that has been recognised as healthy and highly characteristic of the peoples' in those countries and also associated with lifestyles. This eating pattern is recognised as the Mediterranean Diet and was inscribed in the list of intangible cultural heritage of the United Nations (UNESCO). Other foods or practices associated with foods, such as for example the Breakfast Culture in Malaysia or festivals, like for example the Funfair Culture in Belgium and France, have also been recognized and inscribed in the list (Andersen, 2024; Guiné et al., 2025; Poulain et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025).

Considering that the social and cultural environments contribute to shape one's eating patterns and food choices, as well as lifestyle variables associated with the ingestion of foods, it is important to study their influence and in what way they are more or less relevant for the definition of people's eating habits. This research intended to investigate the effect of social and cultural aspects on the eating motivations of a sample of Portuguese citizens.

METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire survey was approved by the Ethical Committee of Health School of Polytechnic University of Viseu, with reference n° 04/2017. The questionnaire contained a number of statements to assess people' level of agreement with each of them on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree).

The data were collected online through Google Forms and the survey was conducted through email invitation and social networks. The questionnaire included nine items to investigate the social and cultural factors that influence food choices: 1) Meals are a time of fellowship and pleasure, 2) I prefer to eat alone, 3) I eat more than usual when I have company, 4) It is important to me that the food I eat is similar to the food I ate when I was a child, 5) I like to try new foods to which I am not accustomed,



6) I eat certain foods because other people (my colleagues, friends, family) also eat it, 7) I eat certain foods because I am expected to eat them, 8) I usually eat food that is trendy, 9) I choose the foods I eat, because it fits the season (Guiné et al., 2021).

A convenience samples was used, recruited by snowball methodology. A total of 1314 validated questionnaires were obtained. Statistical analysis of the data was performed with SPSS (version 29) and the graphs were made with Excel 2016.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 presents the results obtained with the answers of the participants for the first statement about meals being a time for pleasant fraternity, and it was found that nearly half of the participants strongly agreed with this statement (49.5% totally agree), while only about 1% disagreed (0.2% totally disagree and 0.9% disagree). Meals serve a connector for social engagement and spend pleasurable moments with the company of other people. It can serve as a moment of sharing not only food but also pleasurable conversations. The concept of the Mediterranean diet, with Portugal being one of the subscribers of the proposal to the UNESCO, includes not only the foods but also lifestyle and social characteristics, like practising physical exercise or sharing meals (Dominguez et al., 2023; Georgousopoulou et al., 2020; Guiné et al., 2025).

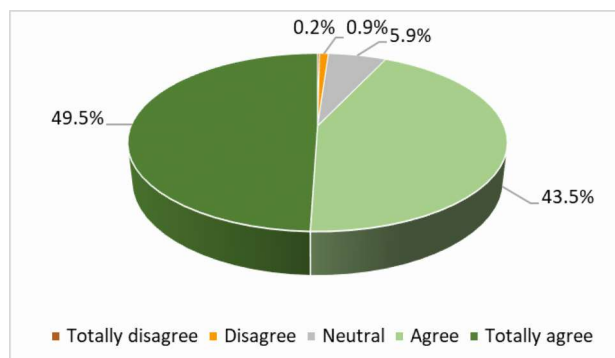


Figure 1. Opinions for statement “Meals are a time of fellowship and pleasure”.

The graph in Figure 2 indicates that clearly people do not like to eat alone, with 18.2% strongly against the statement and 56.2% against it. Additionally, 21.8% were neutral, and a small fraction were in favour (2.8% agree and 1.0% totally agree). People tend to consider meal times as an opportunity to fraternize with colleagues, family or friends. This also contributes to reduce the stress accumulated throughout the day due to work and other activities. A study by Galesi et al. (Galesi et al., 2019) revealed that, among the members of university communities, there are different groups of people. Some experience a desire for consuming foods rich in fat and sugar caused by the pleasure of having meals in a group of people, but also feel guilty of consuming unhealthy foods. On the other hand, healthy foods were considered important but strongly associated with obligation and displeasure. Although the community manifest intention of consuming healthy foods daily in the academic environment, they also pointed out barriers such as an increasing pace of work and lack of time.

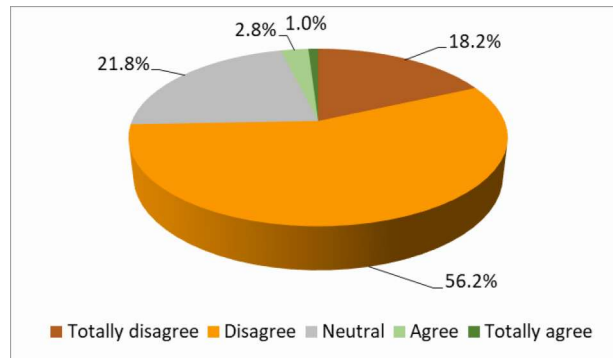


Figure 2. Opinions for statement “I prefer to eat alone”.

The graph in Figure 3 presents the frequencies of response for item related with the effect of having company in increasing the amount of food ingested. While nearly half of the participants consider this to be true (5.9% totally agree and 40.9% agree), a significant fraction was neutral regarding this subject (26.5%). Eating alone or in the company of other people can have different effects on the amount of food consumed and also on the quality of the food consumed. For example a study conducted in older adults analysed the effect of eating alone in body weight change, and found that individuals who ate meals alone were more likely to experience a weight loss than those who reported eating with others (Kubo et al., 2022).

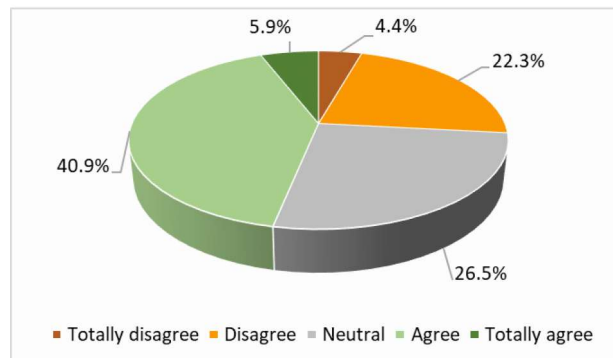


Figure 3. Opinions for statement “I eat more than usual when I have company”.

Figure 4 depicts the results for the statement about the importance of consuming foods that give comfort by being familiar from childhood. This fact was not corroborated at all by the participants, with 19.9% responding totally disagree and 51.8% responding disagree. Additionally, 21.3% were neutral towards the statement, so that only a small fraction agreed (5.9%) or totally agreed (1.1%). These results indicate that the participants are open to experience new foods, and only a smaller fraction tend to be more neophobic, and be less willing to try unfamiliar foods. Food neophobia is major determinant for food choice and greatly affect food preferences (Bisconsin-Júnior et al., 2022; Bölükbaş & Yazicioğlu, 2024).

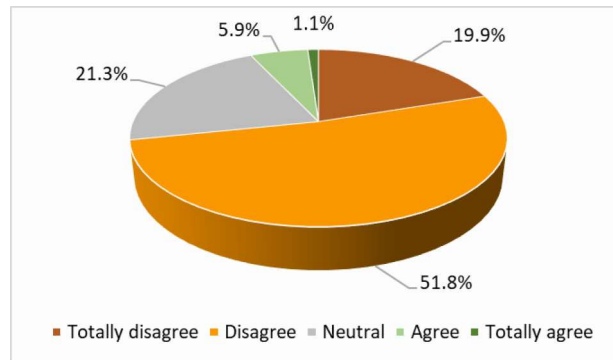


Figure 4. Opinions for statement “It is important to me that the food I eat is similar to the food I ate when I was a child”.

Figure 5 shows the results for the statement about being will to try new foods, even though not being familiar to them. Most of the participants showed a positive relation with trying different foods (58.4% agreed and 10.7% totally agreed). Still, 21.4% were neutral and very few were neophobic, i.e., are not open to try unfamiliar foods. These results corroborate the ones obtained in the previous question. While food familiarity is important for some people, others are eager to try new gastronomic experiences (Cankül et al., 2024; Maratos & Staples, 2015; Thi Kim Vu et al., 2024).

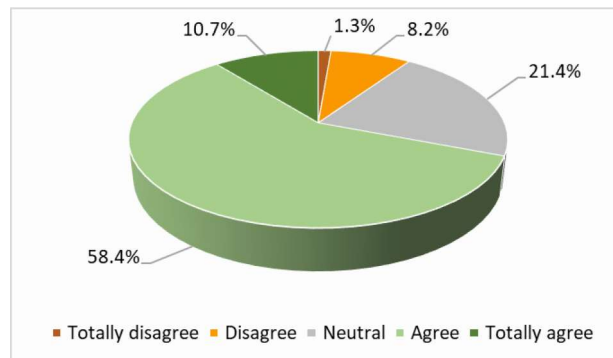


Figure 5. Opinions for statement “I like to try new foods to which I am not accustomed”.

The results shown in Figure 6, regarding the statement about the influence of peers in what people eat, indicate that, similarly to the previous question, people tend to disagree with this (34.0% totally disagree and 45.5% disagree), while 11.1% were neutral and 9.4% were in favour (8.6% agreed and 0.8% totally agreed). Family and friends are among the most influential people to shape one person’s food choices, because they are closer relations and people take into consideration their own opinions and actions (Ragelienė & Grønhøj, 2020; Risti et al., 2021; Salvy et al., 2011).

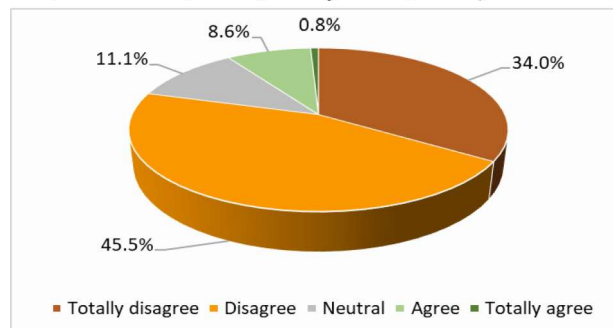


Figure 6. Opinions for statement “I eat certain foods because other people (my colleagues, friends, family) also eat it”.



Figure 7 reveals the participants' responses to the item related with the influence of other people's expectations in one's food consumption. About half of the participants (48.8%) agree and 6.6% totally agree that their eating patterns are shaped by external expectations. Also 18.6% were neutral, and smaller percentages were against the statement. Many people shape their diets according to expected patterns, most particularly, in what comes to eating a healthy diet. They follow recommendations and trends that they believe are favourable for them (Bamberg & Roefs, 2025; Chattopadhyay et al., 2021).

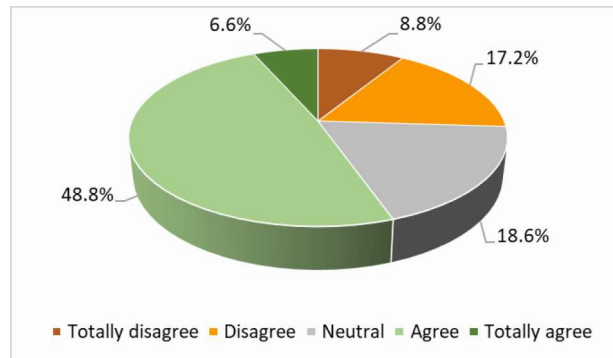


Figure 7. Opinions for statement “I eat certain foods because I am expected to eat them”.

Figure 8 shows the results for the statement which is related to consuming foods that are considered trendy. Only a very small percentage of the participants were in favour of the statements (3.2% agree and 0.8% totally agree). Most were against (48.9% totally disagree and 33.9% disagree), while 13.3% were neutral. Today's society is much dominated by “influencers”, whose role is to lead consumers towards buying some type of products, and this is also true for food items. Many of these influencers are sponsored by food companies to incentive purchasing of their products. Influencers that focus on healthy diets are more prone to have a higher number of followers that influencers focusing on other aspects of food and diet (Añaña & Barbosa, 2023; Sokolova et al., 2024).

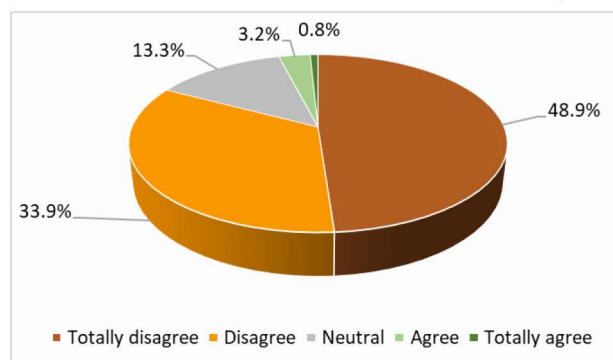


Figure 8. Opinions for statement “I usually eat food that is trendy”.

The graph in Figure 9 presents the results obtained for the statement related with consuming foods from the season. A great percentage of the participants either agreed (49.0%) or strongly agreed (18.0%) with this, while 22.5% were neutral. A smaller fraction of participants (10.5%) tend to consume all foods independent of being or not from the season. Consuming seasonal and local foods from short chain food supply chains has many environmental and social beneficial impacts. Therefore, people with a strong social involvements and environmental awareness tend to prefer local foods and from the season. This reduces transportation and storage, that contribute to the release of greenhouse gases. Additionally the



local foods contribute to the sustainability of local families and companies (Jia et al., 2024; Pasquariello et al., 2024; Petruzzelli et al., 2023; Zanon et al., 2025).

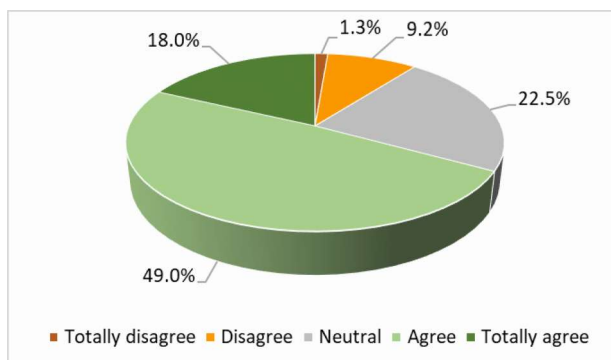


Figure 9. Opinions for statement “I choose the foods I eat, because it fits the season”.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the present study revealed that practically all participants consider that meals are an opportunity for fellowship and pleasure, the great majority said they do not like to eat alone and about half of the participants admitted that when they eat with company they tend to eat more than usual. Regarding familiarity with foods, a great majority do not feel they need to consume foods similar to those they used to consume as a child, and contrarily, like to try new foods and enjoy innovative food experiences. Regarding the influence of other in shaping what the participants consume, more than half admit that they eat what they are expected to eat, and they do not follow food trends. Finally, two thirds of the participants base their food choice in food items from the season. These results are relevant to understand how Portuguese people shape their dietary patterns and food choices according to some social influencing factors.

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