



Cultural influences on dietary choices

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ABSTRACT

Food choices and dietary behaviors are inherently complex and influenced by numerous interconnected factors including individual preferences such as taste, meal timing, and social interactions, alongside external elements like affordability, cultural norms, marketing, and policy environments. The physical contexts of food consumption - homes, schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods- further shape these behaviors, as do societal expectations and generational food literacy. Underpinning these dynamics are food systems, which are influenced by health, ethical, and sustainability considerations throughout the food production and consumption continuum. Cultural influences, encompassing traditions, rituals, and shared beliefs, play a pivotal role in shaping dietary practices. Distinctions between “cultural food” and “food culture” illustrate the deep integration of cuisine within identity and daily life. Historical events, globalization, and modernization have reshaped food traditions, leading to the adoption of new eating patterns and the erosion of others. Religion, socioeconomic status, and social networks also critically impact dietary behaviors, while contemporary challenges such as the nutrition transition and fast-food culture contribute to rising chronic disease burdens. Addressing these issues requires culturally tailored interventions and a focus on food environments, integrating modern tools like social media to promote healthier, community-oriented behaviors while recognizing the social and emotional roles of food.

Food/dietary choices

Food choices and associated dietary behaviors are profoundly intricate, shaped by a myriad of factors. Examples of factors include decisions about the type of food consumed, timing and setting of meals, portion sizes, methods of preparation, and the interplay of cultural, social, ethical, and sustainability considerations. Personal preferences, such as taste and the desire for companionship during meals, further add to this complexity.¹ Additionally, external influences such as time constraints, affordability, food availability, local, national, and international policies, cultural norms, and the persuasive power of marketing and advertising, can profoundly impact an individual's choices.^{2,3} The following graphical abstract details the interplay between various factors.

One's engagement with and consumption of food is further contextualized by variations in physical settings such as homes, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods that individuals inhabit. Rules, expectations and societal norms can also influence food-related behaviors, while food literacy, transmitted across generations, reflects the interplay of cultural

practices, economic environment, traditional habits and evolving global trends. Underpinning these factors are food systems, encompassing the journey from production to consumption and disposal, which are shaped by policies, economics, and considerations of health, ethics, and sustainability. Together, this myriad of factors creates a dynamic, interconnected and complex framework that influences dietary practices at every level.⁴

From a neurobiological standpoint, food choices and dietary practices are thought to be influenced by the neuro-computational mechanisms underlying decision-making, as well as the homeostatic regulation of feeding, which is shaped by potent metabolic and endocrinological factors. Evidence strongly indicates that dietary decisions are governed by a complex interconnected system involving three distinct controllers: Pavlovian, habitual, and goal-directed.⁵

Importance of culture in dietary choices

Robert Axelrod, in his seminal work *The Dissemination of Culture: A Model with Local Convergence and Global Polarization*, defines culture

Abbreviations: NCD, Noncommunicable disease; SES, Socio-economic status; UK, United Kingdom.

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as a set of shared traits or attributes that are subject to influence and change through social interaction.⁶ Accordingly, culture can contain both tangible and intangible components and encompasses the way people interact, communicate, and perceive the world around them, as well as the arts, language, religion, cuisine, and other practices that are passed down through generations. Importantly, culture is then engrained in all aspects of life, including, in this context, diet and food choices. While it is impossible to offer a definitive description of culture due to its evolving and dynamic nature, culture undeniably shapes what food is produced and how it is consumed. Beyond consensus debates regarding various definitions, culture profoundly influences dietary practices, weaving its influence into every aspect of food production and consumption.⁷

While this commentary does not argue the merits of semantics, it is prudent to highlight two pertinent terms that may contribute to some ambiguity. Specifically, the terms *cultural food* and *food culture* are closely related but refer to different aspects of the interrelationship between food and cultural identity and practices:

1. **Cultural Food:** refers to specific foods or dishes that are tied to a particular culture, region, or ethnicity. These foods may carry historical, symbolic, and traditional significance and are often prepared using recipes, ingredients, and methods passed down through generations. For example, sushi in Japan, pasta in Italy, or tamales in Mexico are considered cultural foods because they are emblematic of the cuisine and identity of their respective cultures.⁸
2. **Food Culture:** is a much broader concept and encompasses the practices, rituals, values, and social norms surrounding food within a particular culture. This includes how food is grown, prepared, shared, and eaten, along with the customs and traditions that influence these activities. Food culture involves factors like meal times, etiquette, communal eating, and even the symbolic or ritual meanings attached to food.^{8,9}

In short, *cultural food* refers to the actual dishes unique to a culture, while *food culture* describes the overarching practices, beliefs, and customs that define how food is integrated into daily life and social structures within that culture. Across the globe, cuisines are deeply interwoven with the cultures, traditions, passions, and religious practices of people from diverse countries and continents. Iconic dishes like sushi, curry, kebabs, pasta, and tacos are emblematic of specific nations, reflecting their culinary heritage and identity. On a more granular level, cuisines can often be distinguished by the unique ingredients they employ and the intricate techniques that define their preparation, showcasing the remarkable complexity and diversity of global culinary traditions.¹⁰

Values, beliefs and food

Culturally, the shared values, beliefs, and attitudes that characterize any group of people are often influenced by their food choices, the context of their meals, and the company they keep.¹¹ Additionally, the types of food consumed can vary based on the situation, often reflecting local social customs that imbue everyday life with meaning. From the perspective of food anthropology, the role of food is to fulfill an essential life need, integrating cultural, psychological, and biological dimensions. Food culture forms a cornerstone of traditions across all societal sectors. This evolution is accompanied by long-standing traditions, such as the practice of ‘food sharing,’ which has been integral to human development and cooperation.¹² Across cultures, eating together is widely celebrated, while in some societies, eating alone is discouraged and even stigmatized. Nevertheless, values and beliefs around food evolve continuously, shaping and reshaping consumption patterns over time. An example of this is the rise in ‘locavorism’ – a distinct preference for a diet consisting only or principally of locally grown or produced food.¹³

Values, beliefs, and dietary practices often intersect deeply, with the

avoidance of specific foods being a widespread practice across various cultures. This is particularly evident with foods of animal origin. Food-related customs can sometimes reach extreme forms – for instance, while cannibalism is widely condemned, it is accepted as a ritual in a small number of cultures.¹⁴ Less severe food taboos, however, are much more prevalent and exist in virtually every society. These include customs tied to religious beliefs or specific life stages, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, which are often rooted in practical necessity.¹⁵ Conversely, some value-based food practices seem less rational.¹⁶ For example, food choices and preferences are sometimes used as a means to signal social status or reinforce societal hierarchies.¹⁷

Traditional foods and eating practices

Traditional foods are deeply rooted in culture, identity, heritage, and lifestyle. Their classification as “traditional” typically depends on their transmission through generations over an extended period. Beyond generational continuity, factors such as the use of traditional ingredients, unique cooking techniques, and varied consumption methods, such as eating with hands, spoons, or chopsticks, also contribute to defining their traditional status.¹⁸

While the global nutrition transition has somewhat homogenized food cultures – marked by contemporary diets high in sugar, oils, and fats – distinctive features of certain cuisines continue to reflect the unique dietary patterns of specific countries. For example, Japanese food culture has traditionally revolved around rice-centered meals,¹⁹ maize and beans are staples in the Mexican diet,²⁰ Brazilians are known for their high meat consumption,²¹ Indians for their reliance of plant-based meals,²² and an abundance of dairy-based foods is a hallmark of traditional Turkish cuisine.²³

Understanding the diversity of food cultures, their defining characteristics, and the similarities and differences between them is challenging due to the vast heterogeneity of dietary practices worldwide.⁸ While certain dietary patterns are often cluster based on geographic proximity and regional similarities within and across countries, this represents only a small part of the picture. The blending of ethnicities and cultural influences, increasingly common in contemporary societies, has introduced significant diversity in food habits, even within a single nation.²⁴

Geopolitical events of historical significance have played a crucial role in shaping the cultural aspects of diet. A notable example is the transformation of South Asian cuisines following colonization. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the traditional diet of earlier times was predominantly plant-based and nutrient-rich, featuring a diverse array of indigenous grains, legumes, roots, tubers, green leaves, fruits, vegetables, and spices.²⁵ However, in the post-colonial era, influenced by neoliberalization and neocolonization, Sri Lanka's food culture has undergone significant Westernization. This shift has introduced a proliferation of Western fast-food chains, contributing to the erosion of the once traditional and healthy dietary practices.²⁶

Religious influences on dietary practices

Religion is a fundamental aspect of culture, with much of the global population identifying with one of the major faiths, such as Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, or Sikhism, which are among the most widely practiced (<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>). Religious dietary guidelines also vary widely, influencing food practices and potential nutritional outcomes. Judaism emphasizes kosher laws, breastfeeding, and fasting, with possible risks like iron deficiency from specific practices. Christianity generally has fewer dietary rules, though fasting and abstinence in some sects may offer health benefits or risks if prolonged. Islam prescribes breastfeeding, restricts alcohol, and follows halal practices, with fasting during Ramadan posing risks like dehydration or dyspepsia if improperly managed. Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism often promote lacto-

vegetarian diets, discouraging alcohol, with nutritional concerns such as iron and B12 deficiencies if unbalanced. Chinese philosophies and folk religions focus on balanced diets and breastfeeding, with limited specific dietary restrictions.²⁷

Familial and societal (including social networks) influences

Food and dietary choices are commonly influenced by three main categories of factors identified in the literature: 1) food-related features; 2) individual differences; and 3) societal influences.² Within the individual and societal domains, key determinants include cultural influences, economic factors such as price and income, and policy frameworks.²⁸ Recently, the concept of the “food environment”, encompassing physical, economic, policy, and sociocultural contexts that shape opportunities and conditions for food choice, has gained recognition as a critical factor in defining and reshaping consumption patterns.²⁹ The “social food environment” on the other hand, encompassing food-related interactions among friends, family, and peers, is also of significance as it plays a vital role in shaping individuals' intentions and actual food behaviors.³⁰

These dietary patterns are shaped by changes in the natural environment, lifestyle shifts, and, more prominently, advancements in technology.³¹ A noticeable paradigm shift has occurred, leaning toward predominantly unhealthy food choices in tandem with drastic transformations in global food systems and supply chains.³² For example, increasing national wealth and urbanization have driven higher consumption of animal products and processed foods while reducing the intake of healthier options like whole grains and legumes. This transition is further fueled by environmental factors that facilitate easy access to unhealthy foods, their affordability, and aggressive marketing strategies promoting them.

Understanding the factors that drive consumer behavior, the intricate dynamics influencing these decisions, and the stimuli shaping food cultures and dietary patterns is notoriously challenging. Frameworks such as Social Cognitive Theory emphasize the interaction between personal, environmental, and behavioral factors, with an individual's social network forming a key part of their social environment. This environment can shape behavior by offering social support, acting as a model for actions, or providing access to resources. Consequently, numerous societal factors can influence food and dietary choices. Similarly, models such as the Friedkin-Johnsen framework also offer valuable insights into how changes within social networks impact the spread of information and influence consumption patterns. It also underscores the significant role of societal influences, such as government policies and business practices, in shaping these outcomes.³³

Socioeconomic status and diet choice

The impact of socioeconomic status (SES) on dietary patterns is well-established³⁴ with those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum typically being disproportionately disadvantaged.³⁵ Therefore, when discussing culture, diet, and food, it is crucial to address the influence of SES, particularly in relation to disease prevalence and etiology.³⁶ Substantial evidence demonstrates a strong connection between SES, sub-optimal dietary behaviors, and disease outcomes.³⁷

A crucial link between SES and dietary patterns lies in the distinctive features of food environments tied to SES. Residing in a disadvantaged area can negatively impact dietary intake due to factors such as limited availability of food stores or healthy food options, challenges in accessing these stores, and the higher cost of nutritious foods. Lower-SES neighborhoods frequently encounter restricted access to healthier food choices and the establishments that provide them.³⁸

The regional characteristics of townships and neighborhoods are particularly relevant in this context, as the accessibility and affordability of food, along with the effects of SES, tend to be more pronounced in rural areas. For instance, food prices in rural and regional areas of

Australia are reported to be at least 30 % higher than in urban centers.³⁹ Tasmania, a largely welfare-dependent state with significant SES disparities, serves as another illustrative example. Despite its favorable environmental conditions for food production, Tasmania faces substantial challenges, including one of the highest rates of food insecurity in the country.⁴⁰

Geographical and environmental influences

Environmental factors, such as climate and topography, play a foundational role in shaping regional cuisines by influencing the availability of foods. For example, the Mediterranean diet, prevalent in Crete, Greece, and southern Italy, relies heavily on the region's warm climate and nutrient-rich soil, which support year-round cultivation of staple ingredients.⁴¹ Similarly, coastal regions often emphasize seafood-rich diets, whereas inland areas typically center around crop-based food traditions.

Geographical and climatic factors have also driven mass migration patterns in the modern world, profoundly impacting dietary practices and food cultures globally. Among the many examples, the influence of South Asian immigrants on Western diets stands out as particularly significant. South Asians, who comprise approximately 25 % of the global population, are increasingly settling in Western countries such as the United Kingdom, North America, and Australia. In the UK, South Asians represent the largest non-white ethnic group, making up about 5 % of the population.⁴²

The migration of South Asian communities to the UK, initially driven by economic opportunities and post-colonial ties, has also reshaped British food culture. This migration also stems from geographical pressures, such as dense populations and climatic challenges in South Asia, prompting individuals to seek better opportunities abroad. Over time, South Asian migrants introduced spices, cooking techniques, and dishes like curry, biryani, and samosas to British cuisine. These influences were adapted to local preferences, resulting in iconic dishes like “chicken tikka masala,” often regarded as a British national dish. Today, South Asian-inspired cuisine is deeply embedded in British culture, affecting food availability, restaurant offerings, and supermarket products. The phrases “going for an Indian” or “out for a curry” have become synonymous with British social and cultural life since the 1960s. This dynamic interplay between migration and geography highlights how relocation can transform a region's food culture, making it an essential aspect of culinary evolution.⁴³

Globalization and modernization

Globalization and urbanization are closely tied to the cultural shifts and lived experiences of the modern world. These phenomena have profoundly influenced every aspect of human life, including diet and food practices. While much can be debated about the shift from traditional to modern dietary habits, the reality is that these practices will continue to evolve. Rather than debating what defines traditional or modern diets, it is more productive to focus on the impact of modernization on cultural dietary practices, particularly in the context of physical and psychosocial health and the sustainability of food systems. The transition from traditional to modern eating patterns, including the adoption of traditional diets by new cultures and the emergence of new foods and eating habits, is an inevitable part of this evolution. However, the effects of these changes on health and well-being must not be overlooked.⁴⁴

Many cultures and communities today have experienced the effects of the ‘nutrition transition,’ marked by a relative excess of saturated fats and sugars. This shift has often been described, somewhat ironically, as ‘Coca-colonization’ or ‘McDonaldization,’ referring to the pervasive influence of fast-food culture.⁴⁵ The reasons behind this phenomenon are numerous and interwoven, forming an intricate and complex web of factors. However, at its core, it is largely driven by the rapid

advancements in technology and the relentless forces of the global free-market economy, which leave few untouched.⁴⁶ Overall, the most significant consequence has been the widespread rise of preventable chronic metabolic diseases, which severely impact the healthspan of countless individuals worldwide.⁴⁷

While there may be arguments highlighting the positive economic effects of these widespread dietary transitions, the persistent issues of hunger and malnutrition, particularly in developing nations, underscore that much more progress is needed as a global collective. Initiatives like the ‘Green Revolution’ and other notable advancements in agronomy undoubtedly hold merit.⁴⁸ However, the downsides of phenomena such as the ‘supermarket revolution,’ which has largely supplanted traditional and cultural diets, cannot be overlooked.⁴⁹ As with many contemporary challenges, navigating these changes involves a process of learning and adapting, with the hope that common sense will guide the adoption of beneficial aspects while phasing out the negatives. Encouragingly, the growing interest in revisiting elements of traditional dietary practices under the broader framework of ‘sustainability’ suggests that positive change may be on the horizon.

Concluding remarks

We remain entrenched in a chronic disease polycrisis driven largely by poor health behaviors influenced by multisectoral factors tied to physical, social, and economic environments. NCDs are the leading causes of death globally, with poor diet contributing to a significant proportion of these fatalities with the risk for diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, at an all-time high. Addressing dietary habits can substantially reduce the burden of NCDs.

Research shows that exposure to a healthy food environment is a more effective driver of healthy eating behaviors than traditional health promotion and education efforts.⁵⁰ Historically, efforts to encourage healthy living have relied on a one-size-fits-all approach, offering uniform advice to individuals and populations alike. This idealistic model has often failed to achieve meaningful changes in health behaviors. Recognizing and understanding the unique cultural contexts of populations and groups may reveal opportunities to identify underlying drivers and develop tailored interventions to improve health choices. Accordingly, recent interest in strengthening Indigenous food systems is deeply intertwined with the cultural, spiritual, and ecological knowledge of Indigenous communities in some parts of the globe.

Furthermore, interventions targeting the food environment - such as altering the availability, pricing, information, or composition of food products - show significant potential. In the context of modern times, integrating social media interventions may also prove effective in encouraging and enhancing dietary behaviors, especially when these interventions are interactive, tailored to individual needs, and foster a sense of community. However, eating is about more than health; it is deeply intertwined with social functions and serves as a source of pleasure, which often explains why individuals may not consistently adhere to healthy dietary patterns.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sisitha Jayasinghe: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Nuala M. Byrne:** Writing – review & editing. **Andrew P. Hills:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest to report.
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Nothing to disclose.

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