



The Nutrition Academy

Fundamentals of Functional Nutrition Course

HISTORY OF NUTRITION TRENDS

MODULE

1

Food and Culture

Lesson 3



Morning market, Maynar, Asia

Food trends

Cultural influences, food, and culture

Food is fundamentally one of the most important factors for human health. The food we eat influences our physical, mental, and emotional well-being and therefore influences who we are ^{1,2}. You have probably heard the term “you are what you eat”. It is not quite clear the origin of this phrase but it was thought to first appear in 1826 when the French lawyer, politician, and famous gastronome, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, wrote “*Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es*”, which translates to “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are” ³. While this phrase is certainly true today with many people succumbing to disease and ill health due to poor nutrition, our nutrition also underpins our culture.

Anthropologists have revealed that our diet emphasises our cultural identity and our sense of place in society ⁴. Humans across the globe are united by the universal need to eat and drink. Food transverses race, culture, class, and politics in uniting the planet and in asking that all-important question, “what’s for dinner?” ⁵.

Food is used in every society to communicate messages. The culture of food is influenced by drivers of food-related factors that encompass our

environment, socialisation of food and cultural practices ⁶. Food culture drivers include ⁶:

i. *Our social milieu*: influences from the media, our interactions, and behaviours with others, and how we understand food ⁷⁻⁹.

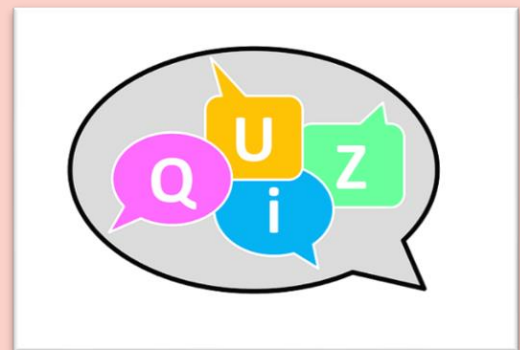
ii. *Place*: the physical settings of the home, work environment, neighbourhood, and educational settings that we engage with and consume food ¹⁰.

iii. *Guidelines*: these are expectations, rules, and instructions within a society that guide people around food-related behaviour^{9,11}.

iv. *Food literacy*: how we understand food and food-related behaviours. These can be influenced by temporal (perception and time) and spatial (perception of physical space) dimensions, cultural practices, economic resources, and habitual practices that can be linked to peer pressure or on a larger scale, changes in global and traditional food placement, selection, preparation, and consumption¹².

v. *Food systems*: activities associated with “paddock to the plate” practices, that are driven by policies, health, ethical, and sustainability concerns ¹³.

Which factors have more of an influence on you: Personal or Environmental?



Take the quiz to find out!

Question 1: Your favourite food is your favourite because:

- It reminds you of something you ate growing up
- It is always easy to find

Question 2: There are certain foods you eat because

- They are healthy and nutrient-dense
- You saw an advertisement on TV for them

Question 3: When figuring out what to eat, the most important thing is

- The taste of the food
- How much time you have to eat the food

Question 4: You buy local produce because

- Its cheaper
- It supports local farms and agriculture

See your results in the next side banner below

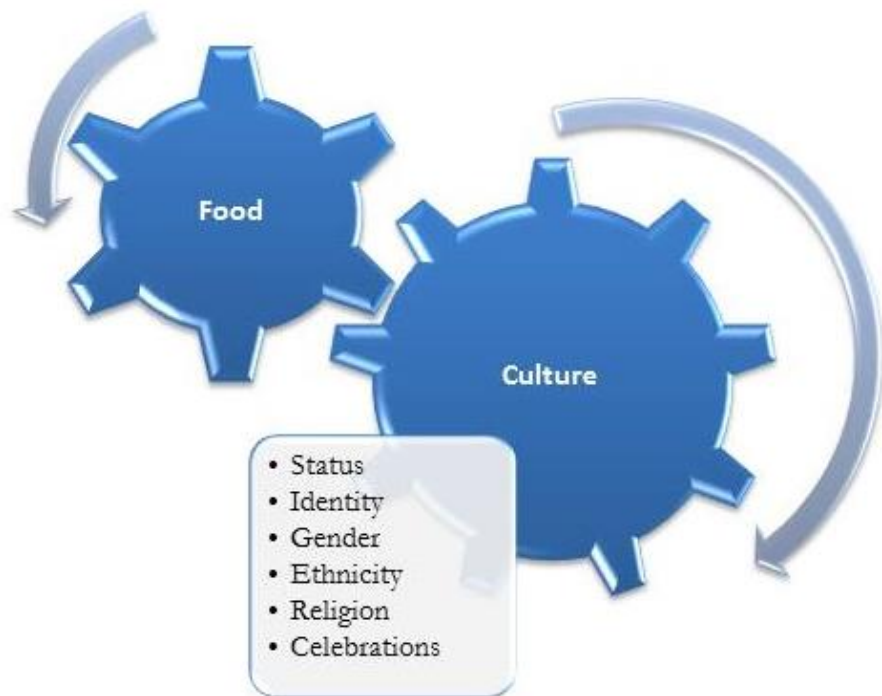


Figure 1: Food and culture relationship.

Extra food-related messages

Status, gender, role, ethnicity, ect.

Other food-related messages are characteristics of status, gender, role, ethnicity, religion, identity, and other socially constructed systems ¹⁴. It is often used in celebrations and special occasions; it is subject to snobbism, debate, and overindulgence. (Figure 1 above). Can you think of other ways that food and culture are related?



The term food habits denote how we use foods and include everything from how food is selected, obtained, distributed, prepared, and served ¹⁵.

These habits are essentially unique to humans. Why don't people just simply eat foods that our ancestors ate? Why do we spend our time, energy, and money on eating? The answers to these questions can be found in the biology and psychological makeup of humans. This can be explained to some extent in what Michael Pollan terms, "The Omnivore's Dilemma" ¹⁶.

Food habits: also called food culture or foodways.

Food Quiz Results



If you chose mostly A's:

Your food choices are more influenced by personal factors than by environmental factors.

If you chose mostly B's:

Your food choices are more influenced by environmental factors than by personal factors.

If you chose the same number of A's and B's:

Your food choices are equally influenced by personal factors and environmental factors.

The omnivore's dilemma

When choice is hard.



Humans are omnivores, meaning that they can consume both a wide range of plant and animal products. While we are not dependent on a single food for survival, we are compelled by the need for variety ²². Michael Pollan wrote about this in his book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma" where he suggested that the dilemma results from the need to experiment with new

foods while remaining attracted to the foods we are most familiar with ¹⁷. For example, have you ever been to a restaurant where you are attracted to, and would like to try new foods but are compelled to stay with the choice you are most familiar with? This results in two conflicting and contradictory psychological impulses.

The omnivore's dilemma is certainly not a new concept and is deeply rooted in evolutionary history. It reflects the conflict in which an organism needs to seek out new food sources (neophilia) for survival and the fear (neophobia) that these new foods may be detrimental to the health of the organism ¹⁸. The omnivore's

dilemma is illustrated in the primate's use of their environment. Primates have developed a broad and variable diet based on seasonal changes in foods foraging behaviours, and the reliance on fallback foods (resources that have relatively poor nutritional value but become important during times when preferred foods are scarce) ¹⁹.

Primates need to be cautious and avoid potentially harmful novel food items (e.g. plant toxins) while selecting those items that are safe and worth harvesting ²⁰. Once novel safe food is identified, primates communicate this information to other primates with their call sequences ^{20,21}.



Market foods

The choice of foods

It's complex

The industrialisation of the food system has ensured that modern societies have an increasing diversity of food choices. The availability of food is so wide-spread that its selection is only limited by the conceptual boundaries around its recognition²³. The commercialisation of food on a global scale has been accelerated by modern advances in food technology and rapid transport systems. Moreover, foods purchased from fast-food outlets, restaurants, and vending machines, for example, are becoming an increasingly important part of people's diets²⁴. However, the choice of which foods to consume is

further complicated by the psychological concept of the incorporation of food¹⁵. For some people, it is the incorporation of food (i.e., the physical properties of nutrients and how they are absorbed) that provides a specific process such as observed with bodybuilders that may consume rare meat or protein products to build muscle. In other cases, the character of the food is incorporated into belief systems. For example, in some Native American communities it is believed that because milk is a food for infants it will harm and weaken adults¹⁵.



Humans use food symbolically

Humans also use foods symbolically. This could be due to relationship status, association, or convention. In many countries, food is offered as a tradition during specific celebrations. In Thailand, older women gather, prepare, and offer food at Songkran, the traditional New Year's day²⁷. These symbolic meanings of food act as a medium to carry food to their

function of cultural identity. For example, beef is taboo among Chinese Buddhists, and it was also taboo by most Chinese in the recent past for the reason that one should not eat cattle that till the rice fields²⁵. In the Middle East, a person that consumes pork would most probably be a Roman Catholic and not Jewish or Muslim¹⁵.

The development of food culture suggests how social dynamics are paralleled by trends in food, eating, and nutrition²⁶ (Table 1). Thus, structural changes in society result in changes in the broad trends in food culture.

Described below are each of the structural changes (globalisation, modernisation, urbanisation, and migration) and the impact on food culture change (consumerisation, commoditisation, delocalisation, and acculturation).

Table 1 Developmental perspectives of food culture from structural changes in society

Structural Change	Food Culture Change
Globalisation: local to global organisations	Consumerisation: indigenous and locally produced foods to mass-produced foods
Modernisation: muscle power to fuelled power	Commoditisation: homemade to manufactured foods
Urbanisation: rural to urban residence	Delocalisation: producers to consumers only
Migration: original to new settings	Acculturation: traditional to adopted foods

Source: Adapted from Kittler et al. 2012¹⁵.



ancestors. The symbolic meaning of food is also an essential.



Globalisation

Structural changes in society

Developmental perspectives of food culture

Globalisation of local, regional, and national organisations creates changes in cultural food habits (**consumerisation**) that in turn facilitate a transition from producers of indigenous and locally produced foods to consumers of mass-produced foods. This impacts the livelihood of small-scale local farmers and drives these producers to more unethical and unsustainable practices ²⁸.

Modernisation creates new technologies from more traditional processes which replace homemade foods with processed, marketed commodities (**commoditisation**). Ultra-processed foods are becoming mainstream in the food supply chain and are shaping the global food system and contributing to retailing and fast food service corporations ²⁹.

Urbanisation occurs when a large percentage of the population leaves the rural low-density lifestyle in the favour of high-density urbanisation. Population decline in rural regions can have a major impact on people's health, the economy, and the environment. There is an abundance of evidence indicating that people living in rural settings experience poorer health compared to metropolitan regions ³⁰. The reasons for this are highly complex but are mostly due to a mix of socio-economic factors including income, education, employment opportunities, and having less access to health care services and professionals ³¹⁻³³.

Delocalisation occurs when connectivity among local producers, growing, harvesting, cooking, and eating food are lost. For example, meals that are purchased from convenience stores, large-scale supermarkets, and restaurants (convenience eating) over the preparation of food and cooking ³⁴.

Finally, the **migration** of populations from their original homes to new regions results in the loss of specific traditional foods from that region to the adoption and acceptance of new diets and foods (**acculturation**). Dietary acculturation, specifically the adoption of western dietary habits, may result in adverse health effects such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and type 2 diabetes ³⁵.

On a more individual level, food choice is established before people even enter a restaurant, convenience store, or supermarket. The consumer food choice model outlines the factors that contribute to individual decisions about

food (**Figure 2**) ³⁶ and is discussed below.

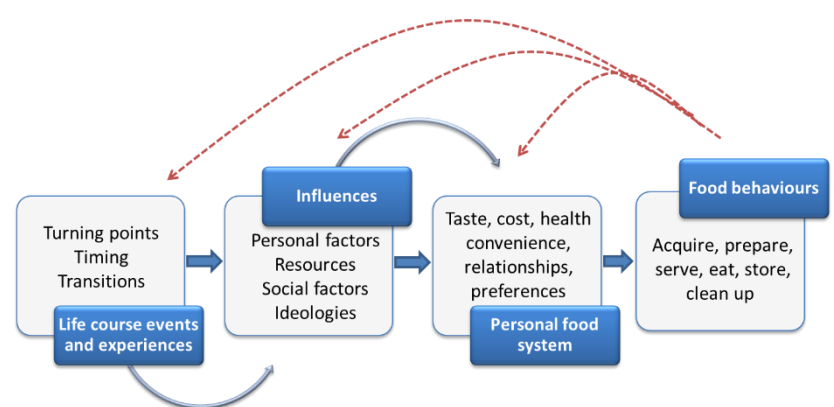


Figure 1: Food choice process model

Life-course events and experiences include turning points and transitions that are shifts in a person's life that led to changes in food choices. These could be turning points such as thoughts, feelings, strategies, and actions about food choices. Transitions are changes in personal circumstances, changes in health, place of residence, and employment status. The timing of events considers when the life course event change happens. For example, people in particular ethnic groups establish food choice patterns that they learned during critical periods of their lives as they were socialised into ethnic food cultures ^{37,38}.

Influences such as personal factors are attributes or characteristics of individuals that influence their food choice decisions and include physical factors (e.g., genetic predisposition to disease, sensory sensitivity to foods), psychological factors (e.g., personality, food preferences), and social factors (e.g., gender, roles). Resources are assets that individuals consider when they make decisions about their food. For example, financial capital (wealth, income), material capital (equipment, space), human capital (skills and knowledge), social capital (relationships, connections), and cultural capital (ideologies, tradition). Social factors are the systems of relationships of individuals that contribute to food choices ³⁸. Some relationships provide opportunities for making a specific food choice decision such as supportive families that encourage individuals to make healthy food choices.

Personal food systems are cognitive processes that an individual makes about food choices that guide their eating behaviour (e.g., taste, cost, convenience, relationships, and values) and the specific meanings and feelings that people attach to these considerations. For

example, a person with diabetes may choose foods that are crucial for maintaining their health over cost, taste, and convenience.

Food behaviours are shaped by life course events, influences, and personal food systems that facilitate structure within an individual's daily schedule. These in turn 'feedback' and influence each step in the consumer choice food model. Thus, food choices are multifaceted and historical across time and scale and may also be situation-specific so that no perspective within the food choice model can capture the full complexity of eating behaviours.

Summary

Food is used in every society on earth to communicate messages. Among these messages are characteristics of status, gender, role, ethnicity, religion, identity, and other socially constructed systems. Similarly, our food habits denote how we use foods and include everything from how food is selected, obtained, distributed, prepared, and served. Moreover, the diversity of food choices has become, in many aspects, overwhelming and confusing. Accordingly, understanding what drives food trends and food choices will help us as individuals make better decisions about our food behaviour and subsequent health outcomes.

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