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How sustainable is the Millennials' diet? Reflections on a qualitative study

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Abstract. The world population is growing at a rapid pace. Economic advance is increasing the global demand for food and diversified diets. Agricultural production contributes to the pollution of the environment. Given the limitation of water and land resources, a dietary change is necessary to contribute to food security and ensure the care of the planet. Sustainable and healthy eating, among which the Mediterranean diet is identified, could be the answer. Leaving the parental home to live independently during young adulthood is likely to influence food choice behavior towards the development of unhealthy and unsustainable food choice patterns. This paper draws on a small scale, mixed-methods qualitative study made with young Portuguese and Spanish millennials in 2019 to question the eating practices and perceptions when experiencing transition to adulthood. Based on food diaries and semi-structured interviews, results show that often participants choose the Mediterranean diet. Millennials express interest in continuing to prepare the homemade and traditional dishes they ate before becoming independent, arguing that they are accustomed to flavors, identifying traditional food with healthy food and valuing the affective memories with their family of origin. Overall, millennials' food practices transversally claim for a water-energy-food nexus, embracing SDGs.

Keywords: Family, SDGs, Sustainable food, Socialization, Millennials.

1 Introduction

Transition into adulthood appears to be a critical stage in the development of unhealthy food choice patterns by young people [1]. Particularly, it is likely to influence food choice behavior [2]. When living independently, do young adults cook at home, and if so, what kind of dishes do they cook? Are they incorporating some of the so-called traditional dishes in their daily life? This paper departs from such questions to explore senses of family food among millennials, specifically homemade traditional dishes. This topic is as interesting as millennials are presented as a generation where technology and social media are strongly replacing family rituals and traditions, which used to be passed from generation to generation through tight socialization norms and values [3].

Sociology has long been devoted to the study of generations as a way of looking at social change [4]. While their parents and grandparents lived all these changes as adults, the millennials' socialization was mediated by technology and social media [5] [6]. In fact, this generation accuses some of the characteristics often pointed out to "digital natives", a label created by Prensky [7]. Millennials employ technology and social media for academic, work and personal life, develop daily tasks simultaneously in digital environments (multitasking) [8] and tend to be both producers and consumers of content in social media [9].

At present, the millennials are entering in the adult life, here understood in its traditional meaning of living independently, away from the parents' house [10]. Some studies have come to say that the millennials tend to live longer with their parents, delaying their entry into adulthood as usually associated with the milestones of marrying or having children, which is planned only from the age of 30 onwards [11][12][13]. Portugal and Spain are characterized by having a strong familiastic tradition, especially when compared to other countries in Europe [14].

Previous research found contradictory trends among millennials [15]. While some studies advocate that the millennials belong to a generation that eats away from home and presents bad food habits [12]; others show that this is a generation which bets on cooking and eating at home [16].

Currently, environment is being threatened by scarcity of resources. Which is the role of millennials in this issue? Do they follow a sustainable diet? Are they having friendly habits with environment?

Following a survey conducted by Gastromedia, millennials prefer products that provide health benefits, such as gluten and caffeine free, high in protein, organic, fortified and controlled portions [17]. Millennials are also demanding for more healthful and fresh ingredients, with a greater intake of cereals, grains, fruit and fruit juices, and dairy [18]. They also stand out to demand to pay a fair price in relation to quality [19].

According to the marketeers [12], millennials can be defined as demanding consumers regarding food; they are impatient and original in their tastes [20], and calling a family member to ask for a prescription for information on cooking or food issues is often replaced by a quick search on the Internet [21].

This article focuses particularly in the so called homemade traditional food. This comprises dishes that are considered part of culture and social identity, including recipes that go from generation to generation during the socialization process [22]. In as much as the socialization of these young people was strongly influenced by technology, although always mediated by the family [23], it is worth understanding the extent to which millennials incorporate the gastronomic culture into their daily life.

The primary aim of this paper is to unveil food practices among millennials when leaving the house of the family of origin in the context of the transition to adulthood. More specifically, the objectives comprise to: (1) contrast and compare food practices between the past (at the parents' home) and the present life of the millennials (while leaving independently); (2) understand the place of homemade traditional food in the daily food practices of the millennials (specific dishes, arguments put forward to justify the inclusion (or not) of such dishes in the actual diet and meanings attached to it); (3)

analyze if food practices and diet chosen by millennials are perceived as respecting the environment and being sustainable.

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative, small-case research project [24] was designed aiming to understand latent meanings behind food practices among millennials when they leave the family of origin in the context of the transition to adulthood. The use of a creative and mixed approach [25], based on the combination of data collected through food diaries and semi-structured interviews, was purposely designed as a way to meet in-depth understandings and additional qualitative insight of data [26].

The study used data collected between November 2018 and February 2019. A total of 22 individuals from the millennial generation, at the time of transition to adult life, participated in this study. The selection of cases was determined by theoretical arguments rather than by mathematical or statistical assumptions, as befits quantitative oriented studies [27]. As such, a multiple cases sample, by contrast and depth [28], was developed. Thus, individuals were recruited according to the following inclusion criteria: young people up to 35 years old, both Portuguese and Spanish, with a high level of education (bachelor degree, minimum), experiencing transition into independent life, and living in Portugal. Both Portugal and Spain are well known for a late age in leaving parental home [29], what means that 35 years of age will serve as a milestone for such an event.

Individuals were recruited according to the personal and professional networks of the researchers, and after through a snowball procedure [25]. As the researchers had different occupations and nationalities, the network of participants recruitment was sufficiently broad to avoid entropy, one of the most common criticisms addressed to this sampling process [30].

2.2 Procedures

Data collection was developed in two phases, sequentially. Firstly, individuals were asked to take part of the study and to complete a food diary for at least one week. This study took advantage of new technologies, namely the usage of smart phones and its applications, for the purposes of data collection regarding food practices [31] [32]. Specifically, individuals were asked to share through the mobile phone the photos of their lunch and dinner dishes, conjointly with a small description and to use WhatsApp Messenger for sharing it, being this media useful nowadays to share information, ideas and emotions [33] [34].

Secondly, participants were invited to engage in a semi-structured, comprehensive interview [26]. After a brief set of questions aiming to get socio-demographic data, the interview was structured in three main sections. In section one, the interviewee was asked about the photographs that come closest to a regular meal. Section two was

centered in food practices in the transition to adult life and about differences when comparing their own food practices before leaving the parental home. The third section comprised a set of questions devoted to the daily food practices.

The interviews were carried in Spanish and Portuguese, digitally recorded, and transcribed into the native language. In all phases of data collection, individuals were previously informed about the procedures; their participation was voluntary and unpaid; and oral consent was obtained. Broadly, researchers adhered to the International Sociological Association ethical code [35] and specifically to the Deontological Code of the Portuguese Sociological Association [36].

2.3 Data analysis

Data was explored through a qualitative content analysis for the photos [37] and interview transcripts [38]. The qualitative analysis was performed with NVIVO12® software (QSR, International) [39].

Coding followed a mixed procedure, according to which data segments, either text or image, were associated with meaning coming from the literature and other, including in vivo categorization [40]. Translation, grammatical and style adaptations into English were done only for the purposes of the present paper.

3 Results

A total of 22 individuals, five Portuguese men, five Spanish men, seven Portuguese women and five Spanish women took part in the study. Ages range from 20 to 35 years old, which comprised individuals born across 15 years, from 1983 to 1998. All the participants completed a bachelor's degree, and at the moment they were mostly living with a partner (boy/girlfriend, 6; partner and children, 3), solo living (7), co-workers (5) and friends (1).

3.1 Then and now: continuities and changes during the transition into adulthood

When comparing what the participants in the study eat now with their food practices before leaving their parents' home, the Portuguese millennials highlight the greater presence of "traditional food" then:

"My parents cooked typical Alentejo food, like boiled beans, beans, soups ..." [E07, woman, Portuguese, 31 years old, nurse, lives with her husband and two children].

Often, they also noted that they used to eat more food cooked in the oven, which they associate with a "healthy diet".

"When I lived in the village, my grandmother used to cook, and I ate very well, pan food, in the oven." [E04, woman, Portuguese, 31 years old, doctor, lives with a partner].

Regardless, Spanish young repeatedly mention the presence of fried food at their parents' home and associate it with unhealthy food.

"In my parents' house, I ate a lot of meat and fried fish." [E11, woman, Spanish, 33, psychologist, lives with a partner].

When asked about their actual practices, Portuguese participants refer that they continue to make and eat the dishes that they ate with their family of origin before becoming independent. Examples of this are bean stew and grilled codfish.

"I continue to eat food very similar to my parents, which is traditional Portuguese, like seafood rice, and typical food from the Alentejo region, bean stew, several stews, Portuguese stew with grain ..." [E19, man, Portuguese, 21 years old, sociologist, solo living].

Participants often refer to the introduction of new elements in their habits since they left the house with their parents, namely pasta and vegetarian food. Nonetheless, they kept underlining the will of adapting their diet, incorporating those "new" elements with aspects of the diet that they followed when they lived in the family of origin.

"We now eat vegetarian food, and we adapt dishes from Alentejo by replacing animal protein with vegetable protein, and we really like it." [E07, woman, Portuguese, 31, nurse, lives with her husband and two children].

As for the Spanish participants actual food practices, they mentioned more often the will of not including in their daily meals some dishes "inherited" from their family of origin, which are sometime considered to be "unhealthy". Alternatively, they mentioned the frequent consumption of pastas, assuming that sometimes they made use of the precooked ones when they do not have enough time to cook.

"I prefer to save time, not have to cook and spend more money having to look for a good place to eat, because although there are more fast-food places, these do not give you a good quality." [E05, man, Spanish, 24 years old, teacher, lives with friends].

Facing the pressure of time, the Spanish participants often refer to salads as an easy and healthy alternative to traditional "heavy" food.

"I really like cooked vegetables and salads [...] In the markets I buy fruits, and vegetables, and in supermarkets the pasta, vegetables and other products, where they also come cheaper, but I always look for a good value for money." [E14, woman, Spanish, 33 years old, teacher, lives with a co-worker].

3.2 Homemade traditional food matters

Among the criteria behind their current food practices, the millennials who were interviewed for this study expressed a general interest in continuing to elaborate the homemade traditional dishes that they ate before they became independent. Regardless their nationality, the main arguments used to prepare some of those meals were the fact that they want to enjoy the food and flavors they are accustomed to, and because traditional food is often perceived as healthy food.

"We like the traditional Portuguese food, because of the flavors. What is homemade "does not taste like plastic" [E08, woman, Portuguese, 32 years old, secretary, lives with her husband and daughter].

Often, the interviewees pointed that they intend to pursue a healthy and balanced diet, reason why they keep cooking some of the dishes they learnt with their families,

as they are included in the broader label of “the Mediterranean diet”, which is identified as a good choice and practice.

“I like Spanish food and [that] follow[s] the Mediterranean diet” [E14, woman, Spanish, 33, teacher, lives with a co-worker].

4 Discussion

These results confirm the leaving of parental home as an important milestone in the individuals life course as far as food practices are concerned. As Marquis [41] advocates, recognizing some food as familiar is important in decision making. The Portuguese millennials highlight the greater presence of homemade traditional food then, what implies a certain set of ingredients (e.g., beans, vegetables), but also a specific way of cooking it (e.g. stews, soups, use of the pan or of the oven, etc.). From here results a kind of food considered to be “traditional”, made of “typical dishes”, which is recognized as being “healthy”.

Healthy food is in vogue. In recent years, several trends have been created regarding healthy eating among millennials, which advocate that artificial or “ultra-processed” food is harmful to health, leading millennials to choose natural products, also called “real food”. Regarding ingredients, millennials tend to consume more fruit and vegetables, grains, nuts and seeds, which allow them to connect with the history of the product, a fundamental characteristic to gain the trust of this demanding generation [42].

The Spanish interviewees also remember the stews and soups as frequent meals for their families of origin yet repeatedly mention the presence of fried food (e.g. both meat and fried fish). Fried food at the parents’ home is strongly perceived as “unhealthy” by the Spanish millennials. Differently, the millennials interviewed for this study refer to the importance of maintaining a healthy diet, which already was reported as a trend in foregoing studies [18], and their preferences go to fresh and sustainable products, as previous studies also show [43]. Thus, millennials can, for instance, make a vegetarian dish using the basis of a Portuguese bean stew or incorporate more vegetables and salads when eating dishes considered unhealthier, such as pasta.

Millennials make decisions that they think benefit animal welfare, reducing its consumption, becoming vegan, or partially reducing it, being vegetarian or flexitarian. Likewise, they avoid buying products “ultra-processed”, in order to avoid products that can be harmful, not only to their health, but also to the environment [44]. Accordingly, when justifying the choice for such dishes, millennials often point to the preference for fresh, barely seasoned food, products of easy preparation, with a good aesthetical presentation on the plate and being in good value for money. A sustainable product generally has a higher price than a normal product. However, previous studies point that 37% of millennials would be willing to pay up to 10% more if the product is sustainable [45]. Additionally, millennials prioritize buying at farmers markets, directly from the producer, in small stores, acquiring local products or even growing their own fruit and vegetables.

Traditional Portuguese and Spanish cuisine are under the broad label of the Mediterranean cuisine and millennials who were interviewed for this study are aware of this

fact. Specifically, they point to the fact that the Mediterranean diet is healthy and balanced, based upon the preparation of fresh, barely seasoned food [46]. In this sense, millennials compare homemade with fast food, showing preference for the first as the last is often associated with food that “tastes like plastic”. As millennials are aware of the pollution caused by using plastic, they try not to buy packed products. In fact, according to the data from the Center for Culinary Development, 70% of millennials say they do not buy bottled water due to its high environmental impact [45]. As the Mediterranean cuisine is also a promotor of a cuisine of proximity [46], by using fresh and seasoned products, millennials transversally claim to the quality of the products, their origin and environmentally sustainable impact [47].

Food provides comfort by bringing together affective memories, which connect millennials with the people they love, places of their childhood and adolescence time, and specific moments or occasions considered to be happy or special [48]. This way, food can be perceived as a protective factor [49]. It is a rather interesting remark, as traditional food is usually immersed in family secrets [50], passing from generation to generation. Being given attention by the millennials’ generation, it is not at risk of being lost.

5 Conclusions

This study found that transition into adulthood continues to be an important moment where individuals have to make, on their own, decisions about what to eat. Moreover, it shows that among the millennials there is a strong willingness in continuing to eat some of the dishes they used to eat at their parents’ home. Thus, millennials maintain the greater presence of “traditional food” in their actual food practices and identify “traditional food” with “healthy and balance diet”. At the same time, it is possible to conclude that millennials consider “unhealthy food” the presence of fried food in the diet.

Millennials better their opinion about food practices of the family of origin when they become independent, when they realize the value of eating a healthy diet. Additionally, millennials seem to adapt their diet, in a way, to eliminate unhealthy products they consumed in the family of origin, such as fried dishes, and incorporate those “new” elements that they consider to be healthier or more respectful to the environment. For this reason, millennials tend to consume more fruit and vegetables, grains, nuts, and seeds. This also implies a specific way of cooking it (e.g. stews, soups, use of the pan or the oven, etc.). However, millennials admit that sometimes they make use of pre-cooked or cooked pasta when they do not have enough time to cook, but they are aware that it is an unhealthy practice. Participants often refer to salads as an easy and healthy alternative to traditional “heavy” food.

By conclusions, we can point that millennials show preference for fresh, barely seasoned food, products of easy preparation, with a good aesthetical presentation on the plate and being in good value for money. On the other hand, more millennials make decisions that they think benefit animal welfare, reducing its consumption, becoming vegan, or partially reducing it, being vegetarian or flexitarian. Traditional recipes are

adapted and personalized according to individual preferences and values that generally shape the millennials diet and consumption practices, namely, ideas of health, sustainability, aesthetics, and creativity. Combining the use of fresh, local, and seasoned products with an easy preparation, typical regional cuisine is being appropriated, rather than refused, by the millennials. Most of the Spanish and Portuguese millennials on this study identify the Mediterranean diet as their diet of choice because it meets the criteria they choose for their food, because it is a healthy, sustainable diet and culturally engaged. In short, even at a time of strong pervasiveness of technologies in the daily life, understanding cooking practices among the millennials cannot be done without looking at the cultural and family contexts of both origin and current belonging.

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