

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CURRENT CONSUMPTION PATTERNS OF YOUNG GENERATIONS FOR THE PRIORITY OF HEALTH NUTRITION ASPECTS IN THE FUTURE CAP. A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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### Abstract

*Knowledge about the current consumption patterns of young consumers play an important role in a food chain aimed to improve and maintain healthy lifestyles. In this context, CAP has a vital role to assure a sustainable environment to sustain such practices. Few studies attempted so far to discuss aspects of healthy consumption related to CAP, thus, the current research intends to assess young generations' habits regarding healthy consumption. Data collected through a questionnaire from 150 students enrolled at UASVM Cluj-Napoca, Romania were analysed using descriptive statistics and chi-square test to test gender differences. Findings indicate that most students adopt mixed diet containing both animal and vegetable products, vegetarian diet being more preferred by female students ( $p < 0.05$ ). No statistically significant differences were found among gender groups with respect to the perception on having a healthy diet ( $p > 0.05$ ), the perception being relatively low (33.33%). Lack of time, high prices and taste of fast-food were reported as motives for adopting a less healthy food diet. Investigating the consumption habits among young people is the starting point for developing public policies that promote sustainable consumption patterns. Future CAP reform should take more into considerations nutrition and health issues.*

**Key words:** consumption patterns, young consumers, gender, healthy lifestyle, policies

### INTRODUCTION

Changes of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) over time contributed to improvements and better adapted policies to the international context aimed to respond to both end actors of the food chain, producers and consumers. First concerns were related to ways to increase the agricultural productivity and to facilitate food supply security [17]. As emphasized by [12], current challenges of CAP regard economic, environmental and territorial aspects. The focus was on creating food chains that provide food quality and food safety while assuring preservation of natural resources and sustaining the rural economy [20].

As reported by [8] public health should be the "core objectives" of CAP measures and food safety should not dominate the health debate related to agriculture.

The connexion between healthy lifestyle and CAP is not a frequent subject in the scientific literature. [27] studied the link between nutrition, health and CAP measures by analysing the different views of key

stakeholders from agriculture, trade and public health sectors. According to their results, there is a need for a stronger involvement of civil society to address nutrition and health related problems and to influence policy makers. [22] assessed the role of CAP to achieve "more sustainable and healthier food systems in Europe", showing the importance of involving all actors in this process, including EU citizens. Throughout its history, CAP had a direct influence on food availability and accessibility [8] and an indirect impact on consumer choices and health. This was due to the food prices (not always affordable for everyone) and to some measures, which subsidized the production of less healthy foods such as dairy products, red meat (both rich in saturated fats) and sugar instead of the production of fruit and vegetables [1, 4]. According to [4], CAP measures did not conduct to a good health of the population: the over-production of beef, milk and sugar and the consumption of ultra-processed foods [19] have negatively influenced the population diet, representing risk factors for cardiovascular diseases,

diabetes and cancers. In this context, including health concerns within CAP became a challenge for policy-makers [1].

A set of new concepts related to agricultural policies and food appeared in the scientific literature in the last decade: “A common Sustainable Food Policy” [1], “Sustainable production”, “Sustainable diets” [3], “Sustainable eating patterns” [2], indicating continuous concern for finding optimal ways to ensure sustainable food systems for all actors involved starting from the producers and ending with the final consumer. The definition of “Sustainable diets” that stands out most is provided by [10]: “are those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations [...] are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources”.

Dietary patterns in European countries were profoundly transformed [5, 19]. There are some common changes, such as the increase in meat and vegetarian proteins availability and consumption, the increase in eating out habit, the increase in fast food availability, the increase in the demand for local food, but also differences between countries some of them being more oriented towards sustainable diets, while others being more oriented to unhealthy diets [5]. As reported by [22], “a number of EU food systems show unsustainable production and unhealthy consumption patterns.” According to [6], changes in consumption patterns could positively improve the whole food system. There are evidences in the literature that support the argument that education is a fundamental tool for promoting sustainable consumption and improving population health [11,18]. Intervention strategies, such as increasing availability of healthy products, providing promotional materials for healthy foods [23] or introducing fruits schemes in schools [12] should be based on consumer behaviour studies among young generations. Studies about the above-mentioned aspects in Romania are sparse. In this context, the current research attempts to

assess young generations’ habits regarding healthy consumption by evaluating students’ daily eating habits.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out using a questionnaire during the 2017-2018 academic year at a major university from Romania: University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca. The preliminary study included 150 students, the questionnaire being self-administered. The data were compiled and analysed using Intercooled STATA 10.0 (College Station, TX). The behaviour of students was measured using descriptive statistics (percentages, mean, standard deviation). Chi-square test and Fisher’s exact test with 5% level of significance were used for differences in responses between male and female students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The sample is composed of 48% female and 52% male students with ages ranging from 18 to 40 years (mean 24.04, S.D 2.17) The majority reside from the urban area (65%).

The most used diet is the one that contains both animal and vegetable products (mixed diet, 86.67%). Even though respondents follow different types of diets (Fig. 1), the percentage is rather small with only 12.67% of the respondents following a semi-vegetarian or an ovo-lacto-vegetarian diet.

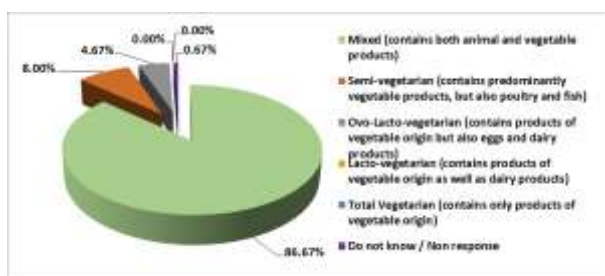


Fig. 1. Types of diets  
Source: Own calculation.

This result indicates that the analysed group of students either prefers to follow the traditional diet and food consumption patterns or has insufficient access to information about the other types of diets such as the vegetarian ones,

which are associated with sustainable food consumption behaviours.

Eating traditional food is perceived in many countries as a way to preserve the culture, being perpetuated through generations [5]. Eating meat is associated with personal values (pleasure), but also with social and cultural ones [15]. According to [21], a meat-based diet is considered less sustainable than a plant-based diet due to high consumption of energy, use of land and water resources.

[15] emphasize the concerns of scientists related to reducing meat consumption and lack of awareness at the consumers level. They also suggest policy makers to pay more attention to dietary recommendations, which may lead to more sustainable diets among consumers. The role of future CAP is substantial for promoting healthy diets through a strong network of food-system actors [22].

Analysing if there is any difference between female and male respondents, it was found that more female students adopt a vegetarian diet than male students ( $\chi^2=17.73$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Similar results were found in a study carried out in Germany on college students [13].

[24] also reported a significantly greater proportion of vegetarianism among women than men at university level, but also a constant evolution towards this type of diet among young female adults. According to [25], vegetarian pattern is more frequent among British female students than male students, who are more oriented to "convenience, red meat and alcohol patterns.

To understand the eating habits, respondents were asked to evaluate a set of practices associated with eating in terms of their frequency of occurrence (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). The use of technology during meals (phone, TV, laptop) and the choice of eating at unfixed hours were found to be the main motives associated to an unhealthy consumption lifestyle. Differences were noticed among gender groups, with prevalence for female students who seem to be behaving in unhealthier way than male students. Female choose to talk on the phone or text messaging during meals ( $\chi^2=14.25$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and also skip daily meals more often ( $\chi^2=11.92$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Skipping meals due to body weight tracking

seems to be a rare practice for both gender groups with no significant difference between them ( $\chi^2=1.86$ ,  $p>0.05$ ), as well as saving money for other purchases ( $\chi^2=7.10$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

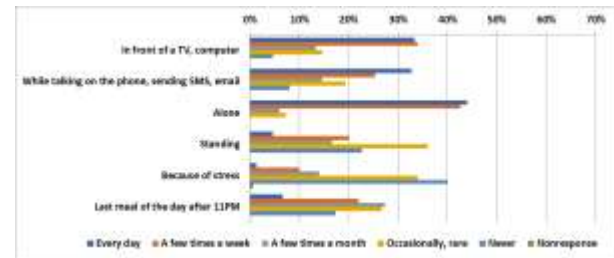


Fig. 2. Eating habits  
 Source: Own calculation.

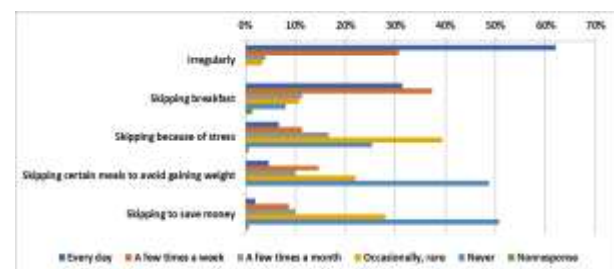


Fig. 3. Habits of skipping meals  
 Source: Own calculation.

The perception on having a healthy diet is similar among gender groups ( $\chi^2=3.91$ ,  $p>0.05$ ), registering a relatively low percentage (33.00%). [16] found a positive self-perception of diet among Brazilian population and a strong association with age: old people have a better self-perception of diet than young people, due to the preventive behaviour against chronic diseases. The same study reported a lower positive perception of healthy diet among females. Preventing various diseases (74.00%) and controlling the weight (18.00%) are the main reasons for a healthy diet (Fig. 4), whereas lack of time (57.58%) and the higher food expenses (14.14%) are the main reasons for adopting a less healthy diet (Fig. 5). Moreover, fast-food is considered convenient time wise and less expensive than healthier food products. Lack of time is reported in several studies as one of the main barriers to healthy eating [9, 7, 13]. Motives such as health, weight control and food prices were assessed as significant factors of food choices in a cross-sectional study conducted among four countries, one of them being Romania [14].

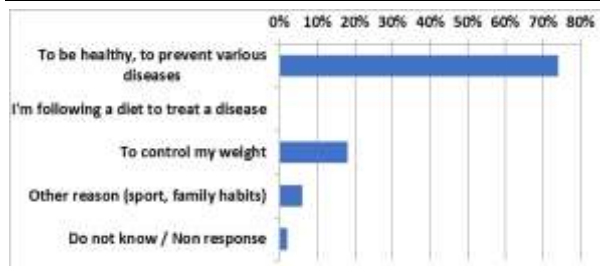


Fig. 4. Reason for adopting a healthy food diet  
 Source: Own calculation.

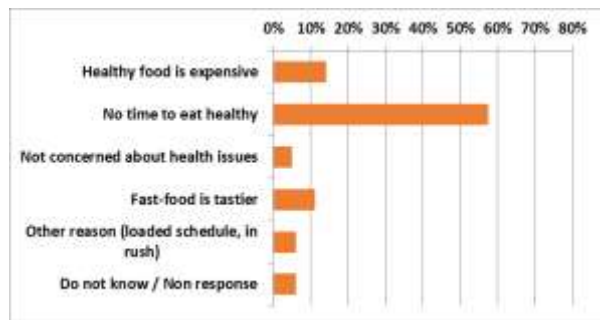


Fig. 5. Reasons for adopting a less healthy food diet  
 Source: Source: Own calculation.

The majority of respondents (96%) grew up with a rather healthier diet as they were used to consume healthy foods such as fruit and vegetable. Regardless the current type of diet, this habit learned from parents in their childhood period (8-14 years) is still adopted. Daily consumption of fruit and vegetables was reported by about half of respondents. Large percentages (43.33% fruit consumption, 38.00% vegetable consumption) were found also for respondents who are used to eat at least once per week. However, no statistically significant differences were noted among gender ( $\chi^2=0.89, p>0.05$ ).

[22] brings up a discussion about the role of CAP in sustaining healthy food systems and analysed the past and proposed future CAP regulations. If in the past, the production and consumption of fruit and vegetables was not a priority for CAP support measures, the proposed regulations (EC, 2018) pay more attention to fruit and vegetable and apicultural sectors.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study show that most students have a mixed diet, which contains both animal and plant-based products. At first sight, this behaviour does not necessarily

illustrate an unhealthy food habit, because generally the best way to have a well-balanced diet is to consume a variety of foods. But, it depends a lot on the equilibrated choice of foods belonging to the following groups: fruits and vegetables, lean meat, fish, eggs, fibres, dairy products reduced in fat. The Romanian traditional diet is mostly based on meat (especially pork) and other animal-based products rich in saturated fat. Improvement in the food choices among students (eating less animal and more plant proteins, reducing red and processed meat consumption) combined with a healthy lifestyle (having regular meals and a normal sleep schedule, allowing enough time to physical activity) can contribute to their personal wellbeing. In the same time, their food choices will influence a lot the social and environmental sustainability.

The reasons reported by students for adopting a healthy life style are mostly connected to their own health: preventing various diseases or controlling weight. Their concerns do not include aspects related to environment or social aspects, e.g: eating local products could reduce pollution and support local economy, consuming food products obtained through intensive agricultural practices based on excessive use of pesticides could damage the environment and indirectly affect the population' health.

Daily consumption of fruits and vegetables reported by about half of respondents is a positive habit, their production having a low environmentally impact comparing with the animal production.

The contribution of CAP should be more present by building instruments that contribute to the sustainability of an environment that sustains healthy consumption practices. First attempts are in the proposal of CAP 2021-2027, one of the specific objectives being: "improve the response of EU agriculture to societal demands on food and health, including safe, nutritious and sustainable food, as well as animal welfare" (EC, 2018). In this context, special attention should be focused on promoting sustainable diets for consumers, especially for young generations. On the other hand, producers' role is undoubtedly important, their contribution being possible by

adopting processes that are more sensitive to the health aspects. The role of universities is crucial in providing education for a healthy lifestyle [27]. More than that, a life science university should create a healthy environment for its students based on the self-production of healthy foods. This was already done by the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca which produces healthy food stuffs (vegetables, fruits, dairy products, eggs, meat products) available for students but also for the large public of the city. This is a model of entrepreneurship university which encourage the consumption of local food produced in the didactic farms and internal laboratories. This orientation is in line with other research findings [27], which emphasize “the importance of university microenvironments on creating behaviours in university student populations”.

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