

MOTIVATIONS AND UNDERLYING FACTORS SHAPING FOOD CHOICES AMONG CULTURALLY DIVERSE YOUTH IN PAKISTAN: INSIGHTS FROM A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Javeria Saleem^{*1}, Dr. Masood Nadeem²

^{*1}PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur

²Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur

¹javeria.saleem@iub.edu.pk, ²masood.nadeem@iub.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: *
Javeria Saleem

Abstract

Food choices among young people reflect more than hunger or nutritional need; they are shaped by cultural meanings, social relationships, personal preferences, mood and the environmental settings. This study explored the motivations and underlying factors influencing food choices among culturally diverse youth in Pakistan. A phenomenologically informed exploratory qualitative design was used within an interpretivist and constructivist framework. Thirty-three young adults aged 18–29 years from Punjabi, Saraiki, Muhajir/Urdu-speaking, Pashtun, Sindhi, Balochi, and Gilgit-Baltistani communities were recruited through purposive sampling strategy. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted using an interview protocol that was developed through external expert evaluation and a pilot study. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated into English and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated themes were emerged: cultural identity and food heritage; social and environmental influences; motivations underlying food choices; and lifestyle adaptation and health behavior. Traditional foods conveyed belonging, hospitality, religious observance, family care, and continuity across generations. Choices were also negotiated through family routines, peer relationships, digital media, price, availability, institutional settings, and access to cooking. Although taste was prominent, its importance shifted alongside health, hunger, familiarity, emotions, bodily experience, convenience, season, timing, and past experience. Moving beyond the home and urban settings required pragmatic adaptation, while attachment to familiar foods and health aims often remained. The findings revealed food choice as a context-dependent intercession among identity, relationships, embodied preferences, and feasible options. Overall the findings add to the growing body of literature by providing culturally-based insights that have

implications for nutrition and health promotion psychologists, nutrition educators, healthcare practitioners, public health practitioners, and policy makers on how to design culturally responsive nutrition and health promotion interventions. Future research should consider younger adolescents and longitudinal/ mix method studies to examine how changes occur across major life transitions.

Introduction

The food choice is a multifaceted process by which individuals select what, when, where and with whom to eat. Hunger and nutritional requirements are important but everyday food choices also include taste, familiarity, identity, social norms, cost, convenience, and foods which are actually available. These choices have been included in a food-choice process model proposed by Furst et al. (1996), which places such choices in the context of life-course experiences, ideals, individual factors, resources, and social contexts, and life courses scholarship has highlighted the process of food choices over time, social location, and historical circumstances (Devine, 2005). Conceptual developments that followed have likewise conceptualized food choice as a result of the interaction of multiple food-related, individual, and societal influences instead of a rational calculation (Chen & Antonelli, 2020). This more extensive perspective is especially significant when applied to youth, who experience greater independence alongside other existing forms of dependency, such as that of families, education systems, peer groups, and neighborhoods with respect to access to food (Neufeld et al., 2022).

Culture provides an important context within which these motivations and influences are understood. Traditional foods and eating habits can express collective history, religious affiliation, family bonds and social identity. One way people may be able to identify themselves is from consumption of familiar foods, the symbolism associated with familiar foods, and the distinction made between familiar and non-familiar foods that are valued by the culture (Bisogni et al., 2002; Fischler, 1988). Food also becomes a social practice when eating together is a sign of inclusion, hospitality, reciprocity and family bonding

(Fischler, 2011). A culturally responsive analysis must therefore attend not only to the nutritional properties of foods but also to the relationships and identities sustained through their preparation, exchange, and consumption. Recent scholarship continues to emphasize that traditions, religion, socioeconomic position, social networks, globalization, and modernization jointly shape dietary practices (Jayasinghe et al., 2025). Youth food choices are also made within rapidly changing social and material environments. Peers can normalize particular foods, stimulate experimentation, and shape intake during shared meals (Stok et al., 2016). Digital media strengthens this social environment by disseminating restaurant reviews, videos of food and recipes, and commercial messages that render foods visible and desirable away from the restaurant. There is evidence showing that the involvement in food brands and in the digital marketing of food has an impact on young people's food-related attitudes and behavior (Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020; Qutteina et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the budget, food price, time, transport, institutional schedules and opportunities for cooking facilities are all factors that influence whether or not a preferred choice can be implemented. The price of more healthy eating patterns can exacerbate socio-economic differences in diet quality (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2015), and the move to institutional environments often leads to a loss of routine and greater emphasis on convenience and availability (Deliens et al., 2014; Sogari et al., 2018).

These processes are especially important in the context of Pakistan, characterized by its regional, linguistic and ethnic diversity, as well as its robust family systems, religious food habits, urbanization, migration and inequitable food access. Existing qualitative evidence demonstrates the importance of culturally specific explanations. In the context

of Pakistani university students with obesity, food culture, social eating, attitudes towards student-life and stressors were found to play a crucial role of an emerging model of eating behaviors (Sadia et al., 2021). Financial constraints were also shown to interact with cultural, familial and religious behavior to enable or restrict dietary changes when surveyed with low-income adults in Pakistan who had cardiovascular disease (Barolia et al., 2019). In the more recent qualitative work in Rawalpindi schools, taste, choices of parents, peer pressure, socioeconomic constraints, time, social media, and school food environments were found to be inter-locking determinants of adolescents' eating habits (Mahmood et al., 2025). These studies demonstrate the importance of culturally-informed inquiry but they are specific to a clinical, institutional population, age group or urban population.

Qualitative evidence remains limited on how youth from different cultural communities in Pakistan understand and explain the motivations behind their food choices. Viewing Pakistani youth as a single population may overlook the importance of regional foods, hospitality practices, family authority, seasonal traditions, and experiences of living away from home. At the same time, members of a cultural community should not be assumed to have identical preferences or experiences. A cross-cultural qualitative inquiry can address this complexity by identifying shared patterns across participants while interpreting cultural and individual differences within their relevant social contexts.

The present paper reports the food-choice component of a qualitative study on food choices motivations and underlying factors among culturally diverse youth of Pakistan. The objective was to explore how cultural traditions, family and peer relationships, digital exposure, personal preferences, health beliefs, economic circumstances, and changing environments shaped food choices among youth from seven cultural communities in Pakistan. The article addresses four questions: (1) How did cultural traditions, values, and beliefs influence decisions about food? (2) How did social environments and interpersonal relationships influence food

choices? (3) What personal reasons and culturally situated influences motivated particular choices? and (4) How did youth adapt their food choices in new cultural, educational, or institutional environments?

Method

Design and methodological orientation

The study used an exploratory qualitative design to investigate food choices as subjective, culturally situated experiences rather than as predefined variables. It was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm and constructivist epistemology and was phenomenologically informed in its attention to participants' lived experience and meaning-making. The design was not a formal phenomenological analysis; rather, phenomenological sensibilities informed the open-ended interviews and the effort to understand how participants experienced food in everyday life. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected because it supports theoretically flexible, interpretive engagement with patterned meaning while recognizing the active role of the researcher in knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021).

Participants and sampling

The eligibility youth age range was 18–29 years. The final sample comprised 33 participants. Participants self-identified with one of seven cultural communities: Punjabi (n = 7), Saraiki (n = 3), Muhajir/Urdu-speaking (n = 3), Pashtun (n = 7), Sindhi (n = 5), Balochi (n = 4), and Gilgit-Baltistani (n = 4). Twenty-two participants were women and 11 were men. The sample included urban and rural residents, varied educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, joint and nuclear family arrangements, and participants living both within and away from their home regions.

Purposive sampling with a maximum-variation strategy was used to recruit information-rich participants who could reflect on their food choices and cultural food practices. Recruitment occurred through professional, social, and community networks. Some participants knew the researcher before the interview, whereas others were referred and had no prior relationship with

her. The researcher attended reflexively to the possible influence of familiarity and positionality (Berger, 2015), maintained professional boundaries, and used the same flexible interview protocol across participants. Sample adequacy was

considered in relation to the specificity of the research aim, the diversity and relevance of the sample, the richness of the interviews, and the analytic strategy, consistent with the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016).

Table 1

Participant Characteristics by Cultural Community/Group

Cultural community/group	n	Age range	Women	Men
Punjabi	7	19–25	6	1
Saraiki	3	21–29	3	0
Muhajir/Urdu-speaking	3	21–28	2	1
Pashtun	7	20–25	4	3
Sindhi	5	21–27	4	1
Balochi	4	22–23	1	3
Gilgit-Baltistani	4	20–23	2	2
Total	33	19–29	22	11

Note. Eligibility was 18–29 years; final participants were aged 19–29 years.

Participant identifiers were assigned by cultural group to protect anonymity and to make quotations traceable. PN denotes Punjabi, SR Saraiki, MH Muhajir, PK Pashtun, SD Sindhi, BL Balochi, and GB Gilgit-Baltistani.

The interview protocol and data collection process

The semi-structured interview protocol was derived from the study aims and literature reviewing on food choice, culture, social relations, eating behavior and psychological experience. The protocol was reviewed by an experienced professor of applied psychology with a qualitative background for conceptual alignment, clarity, sequencing, duplication and cultural appropriateness. Four pilot interviews were then conducted to test feasibility and further develop wording and probes. Pilot participants meet the eligibility criteria, but they were not included in the main study sample. All individual interviews were conducted in private and comfortable settings by the researcher who possessed a master's qualification in applied psychology and had training and experience in qualitative research. Interviews were conducted for about 45-60 minutes and most of the time in Urdu, but when

specific terms or expressions in Urdu were not used or understood by the respondent, English was used. The guide asked the participants to share cultural practices, family routines and traditions, emotional and social factors, personal reasons, meal planning, health issues, food access and cost, digital media exposure, and adapting to new environments. Information was clarified with probes and culturally specific accounts were sought. All the interviews were audio-recorded, and short reflexive and contextual notes were taken. Written informed consent was achieved for all participants, both with regards to participation and audio recording. The participation was voluntary, there were no questions with mandatory answers and the identification of the participants was eliminated from the transcripts as well as from the reporting.

Thematic analysis, Transcription, Translation

The researcher recorded the interviews and translated the Urdu content to English. Translation was not done as a simple substitution of words, but as a familiarization. Intended meaning, culturally-bound expressions, and the nuances of context were taken into account, and the English transcripts were checked with the original recordings many times. The obtained clean analytic transcripts were entered into NVivo 15 for organization, coding, retrieval, and comparison. Data analysis was conducted in six recursive phases suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021, 2022): familiarization with data, initial coding, searching for themes, review and refining, defining and naming themes, and the analytic narrative. The coding was mostly inductive and was seen as interpretative meaning making rather than as a reliability exercise. Codes were revised, merged, separated, and renamed throughout the analysis. The researcher moved repeatedly between data extracts, full transcripts, the cultural-group data, the research questions, and emerging interpretations.

This cross-cultural analysis was done at two levels. First, culturally situated meanings were preserved by interpreting the transcripts within each cultural group. Second, the patterns were compared within the groups to find any convergence, variation and contextual distinctiveness. There were analytical notes and reflexive memos recording decisions and questions. The researcher and an experienced qualitative researcher interacted periodically to develop interpretations to test assumptions and for reflexivity, rather than for inter-coder validation or independent substantiations. The interpretation, coding, and theme development were still done by the researcher, following reflexive thematic analysis.

Methodological rigor

Rigor was maintained by the alignment of the themes and interpretivist assumptions, purposive sampling, and semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. The interview protocol was developed through literature, pilot testing, external experts review and supervisory review. Transparency was facilitated by prolonged interaction with recordings, translation checks, recursive analysis, and within-group interpretation prior to cross-cultural interpretation, and reflexive documentation. Quality was considered in the context of Yardley's (2000) principles of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Reporting was also developed against the qualitative journal-article standards (Levitt et al., 2018).

Findings

The study findings were revealed in four themes that emerged from the participants' insights: cultural identity and food heritage; social and environmental influences; motives for food choices; and lifestyle adaptation and health behavior. Themes are analytically different from each other but interlinked. Foods acquired meaning through culture and social life had significance in relation to family and community; social relationships determined what was desirable and acceptable; personal motivations were negotiated with the price and access; and transition between home, university, hostel and urban settings altered the choices available to the participants. The thematic framework is presented in Table 2, the interdependence of the four themes is shown in Figure 1 and Table 3 shows the mapping of the culture-situated patterns across the seven cultural groups of participants.

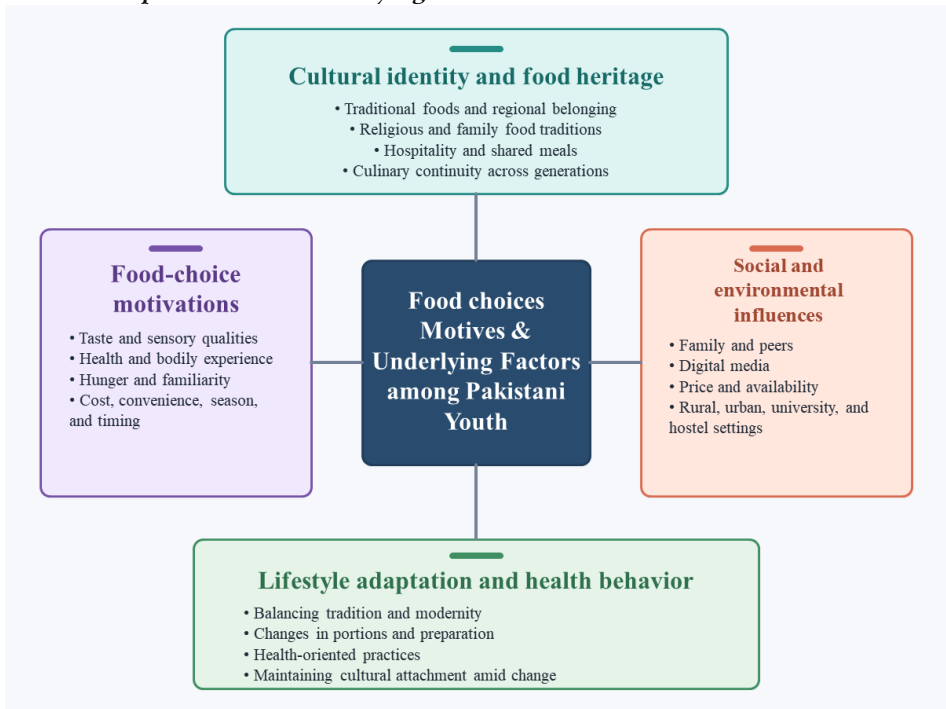
Table 2

Thematic Framework for Food-Choice Motivations and Underlying Factors

Theme	Subthemes	Analytic focus	Illustrative participant evidence
Cultural identity and food heritage	Traditional foods as cultural identity; religious and family food traditions; preservation of culinary heritage	Foods and practices expressed belonging, continuity, hospitality, obligation, and intergenerational care.	PN-01; SR-01; MH-01; PK-01; SD-01; BL-01; GB-01
Social and environmental influences	Family and peer influence; digital food environment; social context of eating; material and economic constraints	Choices were negotiated with household authority, companionship, media exposure, price, infrastructure, and available options.	PN-05; SR-03; BL-01
Motivations underlying food choices	Taste and sensory preferences; health and bodily considerations; practical and environmental motivations; past experience, season, and timing	Motives shifted with context rather than forming a fixed hierarchy; variation remained visible within cultural groups.	SR-02; PK-03; BL-01-BL-04
Lifestyle adaptation and health behavior	Balancing tradition and modernity; healthy lifestyle practices; maintaining identity amid change; university and hostel transitions	Youth adapted pragmatically to institutional and urban settings while retaining cultural attachment and health aims.	SD-01; BL-03; GB-03

Note. Participant identifiers are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Themes are analytically distinct but interdependent and summarize only the findings reported in this article.

Figure 1
Integrated Thematic Map of Factors Underlying Food Choices



Note. The map synthesizes the four themes retained for this article from the thesis's cross-case findings. Connecting lines indicate analytic interdependence rather than causal direction.

Table 3
Culture-Situated Patterns in Food-Choice Motivations and Influences

Cultural community/Group	Cultural and heritage context	Salient food-choice motivations	Social, environmental, and adaptive influences
Punjabi	Sarson ka saag (mustard greens), makki ki roti (maize flatbread), lassi (buttermilk), pinniyan (sweet, nutritious flour balls), seasonal foods, hospitality, and family meals	Taste and familiarity; health awareness; hunger and season; convenience, time, and price	Family routines and elders; peer and digital restaurant discovery; university or hostel demands; continued preference for home-cooked food

Cultural community/Group	Cultural and heritage context	Salient food-choice motivations	Social, environmental, and adaptive influences
Saraiki	Sobat (meat stew with soaked flatbread), seasonal vegetables, Choori (crushed sweet wheat bread), handmade seviyan (vermicelli), elders' meal routines, and communal preparation	Taste, cravings, hunger, season, budget, convenience, and changing routines	Family authority and peer relationships; social-media exposure; adaptation that combined cultural pride with healthier practices
Muhajir/Urdu-speaking	Sheer khurma (milk vermicelli pudding), korma (chicken in gravy), biryani (spiced layered rice), family recipes, religious festivals, and urban food culture	Taste and craving; convenience and time; budget and inflation; health, calorie, and body-related monitoring	Family expectations; friends and restaurant exploration; digital recipes and promotions; negotiation between personal health aims and traditional norms
Pashtun/Pakhtoon	Rosh (salted mutton broth), Dampukht (slow-cooked steamed meat), traditional breads, kehwa (herbal tea), mildly seasoned meat, hospitality, and communal meals	Taste, meat quality, texture, hygiene, health, familiarity, time, and work schedule	Elders and learned preference; peer and digital food exploration; migration and exposure to Punjabi foods; continued preference for Pashtun foods
Sindhi	White rice, Sindhi pulao (spiced rice cooked in vegetable or chicken stock), meat dishes, daal chawal(Plain white boiled rice with lentils gravy) halwa (semolina pudding), kheer (rice pudding), religious sharing, and customary collective dining	Taste, comfort, routine, cultural familiarity, and convenience	Family and peer commensality; growing availability of fast food; coexistence of traditional meals and modern ordering practices

Cultural community/Group	Cultural and heritage context	Salient food-choice motivations	Social, environmental, and adaptive influences
Balochi	Sajji (whole spit-roasted meat), Dampukht (slow-cooked steamed meat), Threeth (flatbread mixed with milk, yogurt, and onions), other meat or dairy foods, open-fire cooking, livestock, hospitality, and shared meals	Traditional familiarity and local availability; taste; health or bodily benefit; cost; season; prior experience; preparation demands and timing	Digital cravings filtered by rural access; electricity and connectivity limits; collaborative preparation; hostel menus, student budget, and lack of familiar foods
Gilgit-Baltistani	Local meat and vegetables, wheat-and-ghee preparations, herbal beverages, seasonal foods, and communal distribution	Health and naturalness; taste and familiarity; previous experience; religious routine; cost and access	Family and community sharing; peer influence and digital exposure; university or hostel adaptation; balancing commercial foods with health and cultural attachment

Note. The above insights summarize patterns reported by participants in this sample; they are not comprehensive descriptions of the cultural communities. The matrix is interpretive and does not rank groups or imply that all members share identical motivations.

Cultural identity and food heritage

Traditional foods were not described simply as preferred flavors. They represented family history, cultural belongingness, religious observance, hospitality, and continuity across generations. The foods through which these meanings were expressed differed: Punjabi participants discussed sarson ka saag (mustard greens), makki ki roti (maize flatbread), lassi (buttermilk), pinniyan (sweet, nutritious flour balls), and other seasonal preparations; Saraiki accounts included Sohbat (meat stew with soaked flatbread), seasonal vegetables, Choori (crushed sweet wheat bread), handmade seviyan (vermicelli), and communal preparation; Muhajir participants described meat dishes, sheer khurma (milk vermicelli pudding), korma (chicken in gravy), and family-specific recipes; Pashtun participants emphasized mildly seasoned meat, rosh (salted mutton broth), Dampukht (slow-cooked steamed meat), traditional breads, and kehwa (herbal tea); Sindhi participants referred to biryani (spiced layered rice), Sindhi pulao (spiced rice cooked in vegetable

or chicken stock), sweets, and collective serving; Balochi accounts included Sajji (whole spit-roasted meat), Dampukht (slow-cooked steamed meat), Threeth (flatbread mixed with milk, yogurt, and onions), locally sourced meat, dairy, and open-fire cooking; and Gilgit-Baltistani participants described locally raised meat, homegrown vegetables, wheat-and-ghee preparations, herbal beverages, and seasonal community foods. These examples are presented as participants' accounts and not as comprehensive definitions of each of the cultures.

Food heritage was passed on by means of a common repetition. A Punjabi participant explained: "When we are having saag, we always have lassi with it; this is a desi style in our culture". (PN-01). These kinds of pairings turned cultural identity and a part of routine eating, and not just something provoked for events that were meant to be public. Similarly, one Saraiki participant said that "family traditions structurally define our everyday eating habits" (SR-01), reflecting how the usual

meals of the elders structured family life. Food was even more symbolic when it came to religious and festive occasions, as the next section will explain. Participants linked Eid, Ramadhan, Muharram, Shab-e-Barat, and marriages to specific dishes and practices of distribution, as did associations with childbirth and mourning, and seasonal events. In the Muhajir narration, *"Certain foods are strictly connected to our religious festivals"* (MH-01). Biryani was seen as *"highly symbolic or special"* by a Sindhi cultural group participant (SD-01), and would be required for events. All these participants' insights were not intended to indicate that families used the same menus. Instead, special foods served as a universally familiar meaning for celebrating, obligating, remembering, and caring for one another.

Hospitality and communal eating practices were prominent in all accounts. During the period of serving guests with traditional food, slaughtering or preparing meat for guests, sending food to neighbors and sharing around a Dastarkhawan (floor dining cloth) were forms of generosity and social belonging. In the Balochi community, sharing of meals is very important, especially sharing of meat (BL-01). A participant from Gilgit-Baltistan reported that there is a spring festival where everyone in the community makes wheat chapatti (flatbread) and fresh desi ghee (clarified butter) and it is shared with the rest of the community (GB-01). The cultural context of the specific ritual was different, but the shared ritual of sharing was repeated across the groups. Four mechanisms through which family influence was exerted were learning, authority, availability and affection. Cooking, meal times, and eating together were decided by parents and elders. Exposure in the same manner resulted in familiarity and preference, and there was some variation among individuals in the house. Social learning was succinctly summarized by one Pashtun participant: *"The selection of food is mostly a learned process in which you watch your elders and follow the way they go"* (PK-01). Participants might refuse specific food; resistance was typically within a relational system, in which refusal of food could

be refusal of care, hospitality, and/or respect of elders.

Social and environmental influences

There was frequent negotiation of food choice with others. Not only long-term socialization, but also immediate suggestions and shared decision-making, had an impact on choice. This is an interpersonal mechanism that occurred repeatedly throughout the day, as one participant revealed that: *"My sister is a big motivator of me, she will say to me that we should eat this or that, and then I'll just eat what she eats"* (PN-05). In joint families, a common meal limited the feasibility of individualized diets; in other households, several dishes were prepared to accommodate preferences. Family influence was thus not entirely restrictive or supportive. It set up the circumstances of personal decision-making, both practical and moral.

Peers broadened the spectrum of foods and set expectations for their own involvement. Participants used to endorse recommendations to friends for restaurants to try and eat together, order food according to their group's preferences, and at times eat what they didn't necessarily enjoy but what was considered socially appropriate. Outings were also memorable, remember the shared eating. All these insights imply that it was not always conformity as subjugation. It could be a valued exchange in which experimentation, belonging, and compromise occurred together. This is in line with previous studies indicating a greater influence of peers when they belong to a socially meaningful reference group and when the food is usually eaten together (Stok et al., 2016).

A second social context was formed by digital media. Food videos, images, recipes, food ads, online reviews and local food groups motivated appetites, stimulated tastes, sparked interest in cuisines, and led to specific outlets. This is all very real, as SR-03 revealing: *"What we see on the screen is automatically triggering our feelings and we immediately want to try and eat the same thing"*. The effects of digital exposure was not consistent. Digital exposure did not have uniform effects. For some, it produced an intention that could be acted upon through ordering or visiting a restaurant.

For others, especially those in areas where access to the Internet or commercial foods is less common, desire was created by online content that was not immediately available. However, BL-01, who grew up in a rural Balochi environment, revealed that *"digital posts of different foods create a great craving for modern foods such as pizza and burgers, but it is not easy to get them"*.

All of these influences were influenced by material environments. The choices made by the participants were dependent on the availability of what was stocked locally, transport and delivery, electricity and internet services, the availability of a kitchen, and the schedules of the institutions allowing participants to leave a hostel. Rural participants may have had some access to livestock or dairy products or local products, but little to commercial food products. Cultural foods were less available to urban and university participants due to budget constraints, inconsistent quality, or limited access to familiar foods. So, the availability was never one continuum between limited and abundant; different environments provided different kinds of abundance and constraint. There were also differences in the economic aspects, depending on the setting. Household livestock and family financial assistance dampened the immediate impact of food prices for some participants. Some of them made comparisons with the food bills they had listed on their menus, others decreased their food consumption outside the home at the end of the month, or replaced meat with vegetables and staples. Inflation was said to be constraining the ability to make preferred or healthier choices. Cost was thus not an independent motivation, rather, it was a factor that played a role in conjunction with the other motivations.

Motivations underlying food choices

The participants explained that there is a negotiation between the sensory desire, health, hunger, familiarity, and cost, convenience, season, time of day, mood and past experience when it comes to food choice. Taste was always a salient factor but was not a universal or isolated factor. Hunger sometimes turned into a specific desire as

said by SR-02: *"The honest answer is that the decision is driven by taste, cost I do check sometimes, because there's a budget there"*. The same person said that during the rains, they get hungry for pakoras (fried vegetable fritters) and during school days they get hungry more than at home. Taste became therefore closely intertwined with memory, the weather, and the state of the body, and the context. Other participants took sensory preference more explicitly to consider health; *"aversion to visible fat and oily smells, and preferences for crunchy textures and not too salty or spicy foods, were the motivating forces behind food selection, as PK-03 reported"*. Health motivation was typically experiential and practical, rather than on formal nutritional calculation. The foods selected by participants were related to energy, digestion, physical comfort, hair or skin health, or avoiding illness.

A history of discomfort might be associated with avoidance, and a rewarding previous intake of food might be associated with repeated food selection. The Balochi accounts also show the possibility of other motivations which were not cultural pride. Motivation patterns were different and varied in the four Balochi transcripts. In the village, BL-01 noted that the family owned livestock had lowered the cost constraints as it noted that families had *"traditional familiarity, wellbeing, and natural availability"* as they were the ones who owned these livestock. BL-02 made a comparison between food within a hotel menu and described a trade-off: *"If I talk about cost and price, I will see that too ... In taste, then obviously I will go towards Karahi [wok-cooked meat curry], towards meat"*. This participant also thought about how *"uncomfortable"* food was and how much time and effort was needed to prepare it, like in the case of Sajji. BL-03 participant say *"the main motivation for selecting any food is its taste, along with health benefits"*.

The selection of energy-dense foods, lighter foods and easy-to-access foods (fruits) was also influenced by the season, previous experience and the time of day, as well as a busy student timetable. Bodily benefit was more important to BL-04: *"For me, health is really the main reason I select certain foods,*

along with physical benefits". While taste and affordability were important factors for this participant, the nutritional information about fish helped to overcome a long-time aversion. In addition to cultural context, Balochi food choice seemed to be culturally embedded and culturally varied, as seen across the four accounts, with traditional familiarity and local sourcing being important, as well as sensory preference, health goals, economic factors, convenience, availability, season and meal timing. Ideals were often short-circuited by practical considerations. For traditional, labor-intensive dishes, preparation time was important. When participants were studying, working or living without cooking facilities, convenience was important. Participants described how the motives guiding their food choices shifted according to the circumstances. Health considerations were more prominent at home, taste became important during outings, affordability carried greater weight toward the end of the month, and maintaining social harmony influenced choices at gatherings. Rather than indicating inconsistency, these shifts showed that food-choice motivations were context-dependent. When faced with competing considerations, participants selected options that seemed most practical at that particular time.

Lifestyle adaptation and health behavior

Feasibility of choice was particularly apparent in movement from home to other places. Change in meal timing, cooking, familiar food access and availability due to University, hostel residence, marriage, work, and migration. When away from home, participants frequently reported that food in the home was more reliable, good and clean, even as they adjusted to institutional food, café food, convenience food, and their peers' preferences. An adaptation was not always an expression of rejection of heritage.

Many participants continued to experience cultural attachment via preferences, memories, food items brought from home, and recreating traditional food items when ingredients and time permitted. The condition of hostel life brought together a number of restrictions: *"meals were limited, there was no private kitchen, fixed gate or meal*

hours, peer-ordering and a limited student budget. I have to adapt to what I have in the hostel," SD-01 explained, "the food is limited and so are the number of meal options. The same participant adjusted portions and selections to accommodate companions, showing how environmental and social adaptation occurred simultaneously.

Balochi participant BL-03 also reported on the absence of culturally familiar dishes: *"When people don't make dishes that are in line with my cultural identity, I'm forced to put down my particular taste for Balochi food, cook what is available and go with it in order to feed my body and to sustain my academic routine"*. Peer support was valuable for adjusting to the new environment, but other food choices that may be available and/or cost-effective may also be considered. For this account, adaptation was not an elective choice for the modern food; it was a way of coping with institutional and work pressures to continue to function on a daily basis. GB-03, participant from Gilgit-Baltistan culture, spoke of a more complex transition. Many of the foods formerly consumed were the standard foods in the university hostel or commercially available foods from the area, and *"peer influence matters immensely."* *Pizzas, burgers or chicken wings facilitated social integration but may have an impact on health goals.* This balancing act of belongingness and health was also felt in other groups, youth wanted to be part of the peer life but still have home cooking, religion and growing health awareness. Adaptations participants reported to improve their health status included decreasing visible oil consumption, decreasing fast food, decreasing portion sizes, eating more fruits or vegetables, increasing physical activity, and eating more home-cooked meals if available. Many of these changes were influenced by the physical, educational, body image, or social factors of family and friends. But it was hard to stay healthy when healthy foods cost too much, weren't available, were socially awkward to access or didn't fit with the family dinner. The findings thus place health behavior not just in the realm of knowledge or will, but in that of relations and environments which support or hinder its achievement.

Discussion

This study revealed that for Pakistani youth from seven cultural communities' food choice was culturally meaningful, socially negotiated, personally motivated and environmentally constrained. The contribution is not entirely one of recognition of new determinant but one of the organization of familiar determinant in a specific cultural relationship and setting (Chen & Antonelli, 2020; Furst et al., 1996). The most apparent cultural variation was in the named foods, how they were prepared, religious times, and hospitality practices, while the most apparent convergence was in the functions of food, with belongingness, care, celebration, and adaptation being the most common. Culture was operated as a living practice rather than a fixed menu. Continuity was created by seasonal cooking, religious meals, common hospitality, reverence for elders, alongside education, migration, and urban life, while modification was fostered by education, migration, urban life, and digital exposure. This understanding aligns with the previous studies of food, identity, and communal eating (Bisogni et al., 2002; Fischler, 1988, 2011). It also makes it more difficult to argue that tradition represents an obstacle to good health and healthy eating; participants tended to connect home-made and local foods with trust, freshness, well-being, and feeling good. The distinction between the cultural form of a practice and its relational function helps preserve specificity without assuming that all members of a community eat or think alike.

There was a structural and relational family influence. Food provision, teaching preferences, meal time organization and caring for the family were provided by the family unit; however, sharing meals may limit individual choice. Recommendations, outings and group ordering expanded food repertoires, and digital media invented cravings and focused on recipes, restaurants and marketed foods. The findings are consistent with Pakistani studies highlighting familial, social, economic and institutional factors (Barolia et al., 2019; Mahmood et al., 2025; Sadia et al., 2021), and broader research on peer norms and digital food marketing (Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020; Qutteina et al., 2019; Stok et al., 2016). The current accounts also indicate that

digital desire was shaped by environmental factors, as it could be transformative in some cities, but not in others where access to connectivity or commerce was decreased.

Taste was most often significant, and not always accompanied by other factors. The factors considered were sensory pleasure, the need for nourishment, familiarity, cost, convenience, hygiene, season, and previous bodily experiences. Within-group heterogeneity was illustrated by the different accounts, in which traditional familiarity and local sourcing were factors, along with various focus points on taste, health, costs, effort, season and hostel conditions. This helps to provide a motivational context, rather than a simple hierarchy of determinants. It also illustrates the importance of participant identification in culture-specific interpretation and the need to avoid assuming identification based on a single salient feature of a culture. The individual intention was found to be restricted in University and Hostel transitions. Limited menus, student budgets, regular meal times and the absence of cooking facilities were all limiting factors to access preferred cultural and health foods. These results are consistent with the literature on food cost and university food environments (Darmon & Drewnowski, 2015; Deliens et al., 2014; Sogari et al., 2018). Adaptation thus meant continuity, as participants accepted what they had available to them in terms of food, and also opted into peer practices, but while doing so maintaining connections to their home food, religious boundaries and familiar tastes. While their agency grew beyond the boundaries of home, it was also interwoven with social and material settings (Neufeld et al., 2022).

Theoretical implications

The findings corroborate a relational and ecological theory of food choice. Motivations were not ordered and fixed in a hierarchy where taste, health, or cost would always be first. They varied in relevance according to location, company, time and resources. Consider, then, food choice as a negotiation of valued identities, embodied preferences, relational obligations and feasible options, as a negotiation that happens in a certain

context. This interpretation fine-tunes the motivational individualism by revealing that what may be perceived as individual choice is created and performed as a result of social learning, social meaning, and social opportunity. The cross-cultural comparison also implies a difference between the form and function of food practices. There were variations in dishes, ingredients, preparations and customs among the cultural groups. But at the group level, food frequently was used to communicate a sense of belonging, hospitality, caring, respect, celebration, and adaptation. This distinction helps to prevent homogenization and essentialism, since it does not obscure differences in functions and it does not impede differences in motives among members of a group that are reflected in their different foods.

Practical implications

The findings of the current study have important implications for both psychological practice, nutrition education and health promotion, as well as, policy development and qualitative research methodology within culturally diverse contexts. In Pakistan, culturally relevant nutrition programs must start by understanding the context and worth participants give to familiar foods and familiar meals. Advice can now work with, not against, valued practices, such as adjusting preparation methods, or amounts of ingredients, or balances, without compromising culturally important dishes and occasions. Family involvement will likely be significant because the family decision maker, shared menus and hospitality norms impact what young people are able to sustain. Food environments that can be acted on are universities and hostels. Making culturally diverse meals that are affordable, having a reliable supply of fruits and vegetables, knowing what's being used for hygiene, and having access to simple ways to prepare the food may narrow the health intentions and feasible options. Services should be designed taking into account student budget and gate or meal schedules. Peer-led programs may also be useful, but they should bear in mind that social eating involves a sense of belonging and should not view companionship as a risk. Persuasive commercial content and constructive uses of

media should be included in digital food literacy. Participants have received the knowledge about restaurants, recipes and regional cuisine through online platforms. Interventions can thus be designed to foster critical awareness of marketing, culturally-relevant healthy recipes, affordable local healthy foods, and credible advice in youth-targeted languages and formats.

Strengths and limitations

A central strength of this study is its indigenous and culturally grounded investigation of food-choice motivations among young adults from seven Pakistani cultural communities and the maximum variation in gender, living place, social-economic status, education and family structure. Two-level analysis retained the within-group context and then analyzed the cross-cultural patterns. All interviews, transcription, translation, coding and theme development were performed by the same researcher, favoring a constant familiarity, and reflexive memoing and methodological discussion allowed for critical examination. All transcripts and participant coding gave them the ability to report quotations with traceable identifiers and culture-specific interpretations with the grounding in individual accounts. The findings are context-specific qualitative interpretations and should not be treated as statistically representative of Pakistani youth. Although seven communities were included, Pakistan contains other cultural and ethnic groups that were outside the scope of the study. The accounts were also shaped by the educational, family, social, and regional circumstances represented in the sample; experiences in other settings may differ. The study was designed around an eligibility range of 18–29 years and therefore does not address the food-choice motivations of younger adolescents or older age groups. Because participants described their experiences at a single point in time, the analysis cannot establish how their motivations may change with age or shifting social circumstances. The findings also rely on participants' own descriptions and interpretations of their everyday eating, which may not encompass every aspect of their food practices.

Recommendations and suggestions

Future studies should involve younger adolescents, youth who are not enrolled in higher education, and communities other than those represented here. Qualitative or mixed methods programs may explore the intersections of gender, social class, rurality, migration, religion and intra-household authority across and within cultural groups. A longitudinal study might be done to examine food choice adaptation after transition to university, employment, marriage or migration. Interventions could be co-designed with students, families, hostel administrators, food vendors and community leaders through participatory research and are likely to be culturally acceptable and economically viable. Food diaries, observation and photo-elicitation, and/or mapping of local food access, could be integrated, if resources allow, with the interpretive depth that participants bring to their accounts.

Conclusion

Food choice among culturally diverse Pakistani youth was neither an entirely personal act nor the consequence of a stable part of taste, health, cost, and convenience. Instead, participants made choices through an ongoing negotiation among cultural identity, family obligations, peer belonging, bodily experience, economic resources, and the opportunities available in particular settings. Regional foods and customs differed across communities, yet food frequently served shared relational purposes by expressing care, hospitality, religious participation, celebration, and belonging. Participants adapted to university, hostel, urban, and changing lifestyle conditions, but adaptation did not necessarily involve abandoning their cultural food practices. Many retained familiar tastes, home-based meanings, and health intentions while working within practical constraints. These findings focus consideration against treating Pakistani youth as culturally uniform or viewing cultural traditions as fixed barriers to healthier eating. More appropriate initiatives would build on valued foods and relationships while improving affordability, availability, preparation options, and institutional support. By showing how shared

functions coexist with culturally specific practices and individual variation, the study provides an indigenous account of food choice that remains attentive to both cultural meaning and the everyday circumstances within which choices become possible.

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