

Designing a General Framework of Sustainable Diet Guideline for Romanian Population Based on Young Consumers' Insights. A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Even though the high progress has been made in agriculture and food industry lately, it has become obvious that most of the contemporary diets are unsustainable. Intensive production of agri-food raw materials and their industrial processing, together with the exponential growth of world population and its increased urbanization rate have led to an alarming level of environmental pollution, dramatically limiting the possibility of preserving natural resources, with negative consequences on the "legacy" passed on to future generations. This paper aims to identify some of the key-elements that should be used in designing a general framework for a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population. Given the willingness of young consumers to embrace the principles of sustainable diet, the framework we put forward was conceived by incorporating their views, fact that support the originality of our study. The research undertaken is based on qualitative data collected from a sample of 26 Romanian students, through the method of narrative inquiry based on participant produced narratives. Data analysis highlighted respondents' standpoints regarding the key-messages that should be included in a sustainable diet guideline for Romanian population, showing a clear focus on flexitarianism, locally grown and less processed foods and healthy and environmentally friendly food habits. Based on respondents' insights, we build the framework for a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population around the core ideas on traditionality, sustainability and health, organizing its key-messages on the following three pillars: tips targeting foods and cooking methods; directions for reinforcing the traditionality; guiding principles addressing health and sustainability.

Keywords

Sustainable diet, health, environment, food consumption behaviour, traditionality, consumer education, qualitative research

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Introduction

There is clear evidence in the previous literature that the current food consumption behaviour of most consumers poses great negative impacts for their own health and the environment. Research has shown that the "Western/North American diet", which, generally based on both energy-dense and nutrient-poor processed foods, determined the "double burden of malnutrition" (Popkin, Corvalan and Grummer-Strawn, 2020), fueling the most common NCDs (non-communicable diet-related diseases) (Maillot et al., 2007; Alleyne et al., 2013; Pieniak et al., 2016; WHO-UN, 2018). The big issue of this diet lies in the overconsumption of meat and processed meat, especially the red one, which is considered the most harmful form of food consumption of all foods of animal origin, both from environment and consumers' health (Hallström, Carlsson-Kanyama and Börjesson, 2015; Dettling et al., 2016; Ranganathan et al., 2016). Thus, considering the general framework of contemporary food, the transition towards a sustainable diet has become a priority all over the world lately. Obviously, this goal requested strategies and programs for consumer education. The starting point was to provide the public with a consistent vision about what should be understood through sustainable diet. After many attempts to find the most comprehensive definition, in 2010, FAO

came up with a consensus definition, according to which "sustainable diets are those diets with low environmental impacts that contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy lives for present and future generations; sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable, are nutritionally adequate, safe, and healthy, and optimize natural and human resources" (FAO UN, 2010). Then, the emphasis was on understanding consumers' perception on sustainable diet and their willingness to change their behavior to align with sustainable diet principles. The rise of consumer's interest for this topic has emerged as a common finding for many recent pieces of research (Werle, Trendel and Ardito, 2013; Johnston, Fanzo and Cogill, 2014; Aktas et al., 2018; Austgulen et al., 2018; Rejman et al., 2019; Żakowska-Biemans et al., 2019). In Romania as well, previous research has highlighted the consumers' desire, especially those of the younger generation, to make the shift to a more healthy and sustainable diet (Voinea et al., 2019; Bumbac et al., 2020).

A step forward in the demarche of consumer education could be considered the attempts to incorporate sustainability into dietary guidelines, to provide consumers with the conceptual framework needed to make the switch to a sustainable diet. The first countries that explicitly introduced sustainability in their national eating patterns, launching sustainable diet guidelines were Germany (2014), Brazil (2014), Sweden (2015), Qatar (2015), Norway (2015), Canada (2019). As for Romania, even though the dietary guidelines in force, developed in 2006 by The Ministry of Health in collaboration with some universities and nutrition institutes, have different impacts on health and environment through some of its key messages (such as eat plenty of cereals, fruits and vegetables, choose foods that contain small amounts of fat, eat highly processed foods rich in sugar sparingly) (Graur, 2006), however they do not have a direct focus on sustainability. To fill this gap, *the main purpose of the undertaken study is to put forward a general framework for a further development of a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population.*

Taking as a starting point the fact that the traditional elements of food preferences are still important for Romanian people (Purcărea et al., 2013; Voinea et al., 2020) and that sustainable diet should be not only healthy and environmentally friendly, but folded on the cultural pattern of food consumption as well (Johnston, Fanzo and Cogill, 2014), the framework for a sustainable diet guidelines was designed to have a clear focus on the relationship between traditionality, sustainability and health. Because previous research has shown young consumers' willingness to embrace the principles of sustainable diet, the proposed framework was conceived by incorporating their views, fact that support the originality of present study.

To do this, the following research question was addressed: *What are the key-elements that should be included in a sustainable diet guidelines for Romanian population, from young consumers' standpoint?*

In order to provide a comprehensive answer to this question, a qualitative research was carried out on a sample of Romanian students, using the method of narrative inquiry, to elicit research participants' standpoints regarding the key-messages that should be included in a sustainable diet guideline for Romanian population. To reach its aim, the study, divided into several sections, starts with an introduction which underlies consumers' responsibility for the sustainability of food system. Next sections present the methodology of the research carried out and the discussion of its results. The paper ends with a section comprising authors' recommendations and another one dedicated to conclusions.

2. Research methodology

The present qualitative study, aiming at designing a general framework for a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population, used narrative data collected from a sample of students from The Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Taking into account the main aim of our research, we considered the narrative inquiry based on participant produced narratives the most suitable methodological approach, because it allows to emphasize the naturally emerged points of views and interpretations of research participants and further develop theoretical explanations (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; McAdams, 2012; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). For the purpose of our study, we collected narratives from our informants, which include their points of view on the defining aspects of a sustainable diet for Romanian population.

Research questions

Having as a starting point the young generation willingness to make the switch to a sustainable diet, our study addresses the following question: *What are the key-elements that should be included in a sustainable diet guideline for Romanian population, from young consumers' standpoint?*

Research participants' profile

The research was carried out between October-December 2021 and data were collected from a sample of 26 respondents (10 men and 16 women), grouped in 13 teams of two members. Respondents were aged from 19 to 24 years and all of them were undergraduates at The Bucharest University of Economic Studies,

Faculty of Business and Tourism. The respondents' teams were alphanumeric encoded, from T1 to T13, and for students' names an alphabetic code was used, representing the initials of their first and last name (s), as follows: T1 (PAL, PLA), T2 (BRG, BE), T3 (NIA, HT), T4 (IA, CIR), T5 (VV, TI), T6 (MIM, TG), T7 (BIA, GAA), T8 (II, DI), T9 (IAJ, CB), T10 (BB, APC), T11 (IT, MA), T12 (SRM, HE), T13 (PI, SM).

Data collection and analysis

To elicit research participants' standpoint regarding the elements that define a sustainable diet for Romanian population, they were asked to provide a short narrative in which to highlight the following aspects: the food groups that should be included in a sustainable diet and their frequency in consumption, the types of foods that should be avoided, behavioral guiding principles for consumers concerning health and environmental sustainability. Given the aim of our study, to the corpus of narratives provided by participants we applied the narrative analysis approach, described by Saunders et al. (2019). In this process, we worked across all the narratives at the same time, providing codes (with the support of Microsoft Word and Excel), building-up categories and developing themes (Drisko, 2013). Further, we relied on sustainable diet theoretical framework as it reflected in the previous scientific literature (Johnston, Fanzo and Cogill, 2014; Fischer and Garnett, 2016), to interpret the data collected from informants and thus to contribute to the building of a general framework for a new model of sustainable diet adapted to Romanian population.

3. Results and discussion

Data analysis was organized by the following three themes which were established and interpreted by taking into account the categories identified in the whole corpus of data.

3.1. Flexitarianism comes to the fore: plenty of plant-based foods and handful of animal-based foods

In line with Grunert (2011) and Austgulen et al. (2018), data show that young consumers are taking the responsibility for food sustainability as they expressed the support for flexitarian eating style, pleading for the transition towards a plant-based and low-meat diet. Respondents' key messages regarding the basic food groups (Table no. 1) primarily recommend a predominant plant-based food consumption concomitant with a low-meat consumption. Although nowadays vegetarian or raw-vegan diets tends to become a fashion (Cohen, Leroy and Karpagam, 2019), Romanian young consumers do not advocate for the definitive elimination of meat, but only for the significant reduction of its consumption, which denotes an understanding of the fact that flexitarian eating style could be the right choice for both individual and environmental health, as it was pointed out by Morrison (2019). This finding comes to reinforce the claim of de Boer and Aiking (2017), according to which meat can be part of a sustainable diet if eaten in moderation and produced sustainably. As research subjects' narratives show, key-messages related to dairy products and fish are built around the concept of moderation (Fischer and Garnett, 2016) revealing their deep understanding not only of the nutritional advantages, but also of the disadvantages of these food groups. The key-messages related to fat and oil are developed on saturated-unsaturated antagonism, favoring the consumption of vegetable oils to the detriment of animal fat. Overall, key-messages proposed by respondents reveal young generation awareness of both the main health benefits and potential risks of the basic food groups.

Table no. 1. Respondents' key-messages related to plant and animal-based foods

Food groups	Respondents' quotes
Fruits, vegetables and cereals	<p>"Each meal should contain fruits or vegetables or cereals." (T3)</p> <p>"Half of your plate should be fruits and vegetables. Whole grains are better than powders." (T10)</p> <p>"Fruits and vegetables are a great source of vitamins and minerals, lots of fibers they are low calorie and low fat. Cereal and cereal products are an important source of energy." (T13)</p>
Meat	<p>"Consume meat occasionally; balance the meat consumption with plant-based alternatives." (T2)</p> <p>"Choose lean meat, preferably not imported. Have meat free meals a couple of times per week." (T7)</p>
Dairy	<p>"Consume moderately and try to focus on lower fat versions." (T4)</p> <p>"Dairy products are vital for our daily meal plan, providing with the necessary intake of calcium and many other good elements, but we should choose low-fat products." (T6)</p> <p>"Reduce the amount of cheese consumed." (T10)</p>
Fish	<p>"Fish and seafood are important sources of iron and should be consumed twice a week." (T6)</p> <p>"Eat small quantities of fish and aquatic products sourced from certified fisheries." (T8)</p> <p>"Try to eat fish twice a week and vary the type of fish you consume." (T11)</p> <p>"Some sort of seafood like shellfish can be an environmentally responsible choice." (T13)</p>
Fat and oils	<p>"Choose healthy vegetable oils and avoid saturated fats." (T3)</p> <p>"Go for healthy fats and oils: avocado, coconut, grapeseed, walnuts." (T7)</p> <p>"Try to avoid the products full of fat and use healthy oils like coconut or olive." (T10)</p>

3.2. Focus on locally grown and less processed foods

Data show Romanian young people are characterized by the same proactive attitude towards eating habits to which Rützler and Reiter (2018) refer in their study, as they are interested in checking different aspects of food quality more rigorously.

One aspect concerns the nutritional quality, as a multitude of key- messages proposed by respondents urges consumers to avoid overprocessed foods, because the high content of added sugars, saturated fats, sodium or food additives that they might contain (Table no. 2). Similar findings related to consumers' awareness about side-effects of processed food can be found in the studies of Heerman et al. (2017) and Bobe, Procopie and Bucur (2019).

Another issue is related to the origin of foods. The key-messages meant to draw consumers' attention to locally sourced foods (Table no. 2) prove respondents' deep understanding of the fact that healthy eating is an issue of ethics too and strengthen the findings of previous research related to consumers' increased interest for local producers and short food supply chains, perceived as opposed to mass production and also as necessary conditions for providing high food quality and economic sustainable growth (Butu et al., 2019; Brumă et al., 2021).

Table no. 2. Respondents' key-messages related to processed foods and locally grown foods

Consumers' attitude	Respondents' quotes
Limit the processed food intake	"Avoid frequent consumption of processed foods rich in added sugars, saturated fats and sodium." (T2) "Processed foods are not healthy and should be avoided as much as possible." (T6) "Avoid processed foods full of additives." (T10)
Support for locally grown foods	"Eat fish caught locally." (T1) "Look into buying fruits and vegetables from trustworthy sources and farms. Preferably choose meat from local farms rather than mass production ones." (T4) "The dairy products must be from locals, in order to be natural." (T5) "Encourage local productions and small local entrepreneurs through buying from them before considering any other source." (T6)

3.3. Embracing healthy and environmentally friendly food-related habits

A deep awareness that what is good for human health is good for the planet too (Morrison, 2019), and that consumers' food choices and food-related habits can have an impact on environmental sustainability and our food supply emerged from the data. The analysis of the whole corpus of data revealed respondents' awareness of the central role played by consumers in the transition to a sustainable diet and the multitude of behavioral changes needed in all phases of the food consumption cycle (Table no. 3). This resonates with the findings of prior research of Johnston, Fanzo and Cogill (2014), Rööös et al. (2020) and Bajželj, Laguzzi and Rööös (2021). Based on the key-messages provided by respondents, we outlined the following three directions for changing consumers' food-related habits: adopting healthy cooking methods, preventing food waste and loss and reducing the environmental impact.

Table no. 3. Respondents' key-messages related to sustainable food habits

Food-related habits	Respondents' quotes
Healthy cooking methods	"Avoid frying, use baking, steaming and boiling." (T1) "Remove excess fat from meat products." (T7) "Prepare food at the right temperature needed for every product." (T11)
Prevention of food waste and loss	"Buy just what you need, use the leftovers that are still edible." (T1) "Buy and cook rational quantities of food to avoid food waste and loss." (T2) "When you go shopping do a list, prepack your food for a whole week." (T9)
Reduction of the environmental impact	"All our actions should be more nature friendly." (T3) "Eat less meat, use less plastic, collect food waste separately." (T8) "Avoid food waste, try to find products that are environmentally friendly and fair trade." (T13)

4. Recommendation

The research team's initiative to design a framework for the further development of a sustainable diet guidelines for Romanian population aligns to the conclusions of the report of The World Resources Institute (WRI) (Ranganathan et al., 2016) which warned that "it becomes very urgent to profoundly change our food strategy and to promote fair, culturally-appropriated, biodiversity-based, sustainable diets".

Based on the emerged themes in the process of data analysis and interpretation of results, research team drew up the sustainable diet general framework as a set of key-messages with a more direct target on the relationship between traditionality, sustainability and health. In this regard, there were considered the key-components of sustainable diet proposed by Lairon (2012): well-being and health; equity and fair trade; cultural heritage and skills; food and nutrient needs; food security and accessibility; biodiversity, environment, climate; eco-friendly, local, seasonal foods.

The set of key-messages put forward by the research team to underpin the further development of a sustainable diet guidelines for Romanian population is organized on the following three pillars: tips targeting foods and cooking methods; directions for reinforcing the traditionality; guiding principles addressing health and sustainability.

I. Tips targeting foods and cooking methods

Focus to:

- Eat plenty of seasonal and locally grown fruits and vegetables (5 servings daily)
- Eat at least half of cereals and derived products (bread, pasta etc.) whole
- Eat local nuts and seeds (sunflower, pumpkin, flax, nuts, hazelnuts) as snacks
- Eat eggs from hens ecologically raised
- Eat lean proteins sources (poultry, turkey, fish, pulses)
- Eat low-fat dairy products
- Use cold pressed vegetable oils from local sources (sunflowers, colza)
- Use local aromatic herbs for seasoning the dishes

Try to avoid:

- Saturated fats and trans forms
- Sugar and sweets
- Strong alcoholic beverages
- Sweetened dairy products

Cooking methods:

- Prefers boiling, baking, steaming instead of frying
- Remove the skin and the visible fat from meat before cooking
- Use small amounts of vegetable oil instead of animal fat when cooking
- Prepare food without additional high-fat sauces

II. Directions for reinforcing the traditionality

Make eating important in your life:

- enjoy meals with family and friends
- eat regularly and respect the time-table for the main meals of the day
- share cooking skills

Consider seasonal and locally grown food

- focus on seasonal and locally grown foods

- eat canned local vegetables and fruits in the off-season
- eat light meals during the warm season
- eat pork and charcuterie moderately during the cold season

III. Guiding principles addressing health and sustainability

- Be active, do more exercise
- Constantly check your weight
- Stay hydrated, drink at least 2 liters of water daily
- Drink alcohol in moderation (for women no more than 14 alcohol units a week and for men no more than 21 alcohol units, where 1 unit is equivalent to 10 ml of 100% pure alcohol)
- Eat small servings
- Limit the consumption of processed foods and avoid ultra-processed foods
- Reduce at least 1/3 of added sugar from pastry recipes
- Be flexitarian:
 - eat mainly foods of vegetal origin
 - eat less red and processed meat
 - replace at least 1/3 of meat from recipes with plant origin food (cereals, pulses or root vegetables)
 - have at least 3 meat-free days weekly
- When go shopping, get used to making a shopping list and buy just as much as you need
- Check food label and pay attention to:
 - nutritional information (choose processed foods with no more 15 g/sugars, 20 g of fat, 5 g of saturated fat, 1.5 g of salt or 350 kcal in 100 g)
 - ingredients list (try to avoid high-processed foods with high fructose syrup, hydrogenated fats and many food additives)
 - sustainability-related packaging symbols (look for "eco", "fresh", "natural",

- "clean", "STG", "DOP", "IGP", "recycled", "biodegradable")
- Try to reduce your household's food waste and loss:
 - use fresh ingredients whenever possible to reduce packaging waste
 - freeze food leftovers
- donate food leftovers if they are suitable for consumption
- smell or taste food before throwing it out and consider that some of them are often good after the expiry date
- Use environmentally friendly cleaning products (bags, gloves, dishwashing etc.)
- Collect (food) waste separately

If Romanian consumers would embrace a new eating behavior model based on a flexitarian food style with emphasis on seasonal and locally sourced vegetables and fruits, low meat consumption, and sustainable methods of food processing, it may result in increasing consumers' health protection and environment preservation.

Conclusions

Recent research (Pieniak et al., 2016; WHO-UN, 2018; Popkin, Corvalan and Grummer-Strawn, 2020) demonstrates that the diet adopted predominantly by Western/North American consumers is based on excessive consumption of highly processed, energy-dense products that are poor in essential nutrients. The obvious consequences of such a dietary style, in which processed meat and especially the red one predominate, are linked to the so-called "double burden of malnutrition", which translates into major health risks for consumers and a strong negative impact on the environment. As consequence, apart from recycling, reducing food waste and supporting the consumption of local products, there is an urgent need to move towards sustainable diets (Voinea et al., 2019), based mainly on plant origin food products, which should be supported by both food producers and consumers.

Take into account the willingness of young generation to gradually adopt the principles of sustainable diet, the objective of our study was to offer insights on Romanian young consumers' view on sustainable diet, in order to propose a general framework of recommendations for the further development of a new dietary model for Romanian population, based on the relationship between sustainability, traditionality and health.

The methodology used in our qualitative research was based on narrative inquiry, through which we collected narratives from a sample of 26 undergraduates, grouped in 13 teams, from The Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

As a result of data analysis process, three main themes emerged, reflecting young people's stance toward the principles of sustainable diet: the willingness to adopt a flexitarian dietary style, based on preponderant plant origin food consumption and a low meat consumption, the concern for supporting local, traditional products while reducing the consumption of highly industrially processed foods, and the call for adopting healthy and environmentally friendly food-related habits. These themes were used by the research team as a basis for designing a general framework that can support the further development of a sustainable diet guideline for Romanian consumers, in the form of a set of key-messages organized under the following three pillars: recommendations targeting food and cooking methods, directions for strengthening tradition and guiding principles approaching sustainability and health.

Considering dominant characteristics of contemporary food, the transition to sustainable diets has become a priority worldwide lately. We believe that the achievement of this goal requires a synergic action by academia, research institutes and both governmental and non-governmental organizations.

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