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A healthy social life and, where possible, a healthy and sustainable diet: how the social and material environments shape eating practices

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Abstract

Purpose – Grounded in social practice theory, this study aims to describe the coordination of the eating practices of a socially diverse sample of individuals, half of whom have shifted toward healthier and more sustainable diets, while the other half have not.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 individuals. Through reflexive thematic analysis, the authors examine informants' eating practices to understand how social and material environments facilitate or hinder the adoption of healthier diets.

Findings – The authors' findings indicate that changes in eating practices are shaped by coordination, asymmetric negotiation and a sense of belonging. The fragility of plant-based practices does not primarily stem from weak commitment but from a lack of infrastructural support. Individuals revert to dominant eating practices not because they lack knowledge, awareness or moral concern, but because the social and material environment privileges asymmetric coordination. Eating is fundamentally a practice of social integration. Consequently, maintaining a healthy social life frequently takes precedence over maintaining dietary consistency. Sustainable transitions will therefore succeed only when environmentally aligned practices become socially effortless, when they allow individuals to preserve belonging without friction.

Practical implications – Political interventions play a pivotal role in reshaping the "rules of the eating practice" by transforming the environments in which people perform it. Thus, the authors' findings could help governments aiming to transform current eating practices.

Originality/value – This research advances social practice theory while simultaneously offering a framework for the systemic transformation of food systems. The authors' key theoretical contribution lies in identifying asymmetric negotiation as the mechanism through which multiple eating practices coexist.

Keywords Social practice theory, Healthier diets, Social environments, Material environments, Coordination of eating, Transforming practices

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Food production and consumption account for one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa *et al.*, 2021) through land use (including deforestation), energy and water use, food waste and pollution (Tubiello *et al.*, 2021). Producing protein-rich foods such as red meat, cheese and pork consumes more resources and generates more pollution than poultry, legumes and eggs, outweighing fruits and vegetables (Poore and Nemecek, 2018).

Fortunately, people worldwide are changing their diets to become more sustainable eaters. These new healthier and more sustainable eating practices include reducing meat intake, downsizing portions and adopting healthier diets with more fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds and eggs (Rockström *et al.*, 2025). While much research has focused on the nutritional benefits of dietary changes (Macdiarmid *et al.*, 2012), less attention has been given to the social practices surrounding eating (Spaargaren, 2003; Warde, 2014).

To understand the deeply embedded social nature of food consumption, we need to go beyond traditional models that view eating as a series of separate, individual choices. A practice-theory perspective reinterprets the issue, suggesting that our food-related activities are not primarily driven by deliberate decision-making but are performances of complex, routine and shared social practices (Gonzalez-Arcos *et al.*, 2021; Shove *et al.*, 2012; Welch, 2017). This approach is strategically important because it shifts the focus away from individuals' attitudes and values toward the collective organization of eating itself (Shove *et al.*, 2012; Warde, 2005). By viewing eating as a social practice, we gain a more detailed understanding of why food consumption patterns are so persistent and what it truly takes to change them.

Previous empirical research on eating practices has found that young vegan women actively embrace a vegan lifestyle, which seems to positively shape a healthier lifestyle and a sense of control and agency (Aboelenien and Arsel, 2025; Costa *et al.*, 2019). Other researchers have studied consumers' motivations, strategies and experiences of eating less meat (Costa *et al.*, 2019; De Groeve and Bleys, 2017; Halkier and Lund, 2023; Kemper *et al.*, 2023; Mylan, 2018; Pimentel and Pimentel, 2003; Twine, 2018) or the support for public initiatives to reduce meat consumption (De Groeve and Bleys, 2017; Halkier and Lund, 2023), finding that health and not necessarily caring for the environment, is the main driver of change. Other researchers have emphasized the transition toward more plant-based diets, showing that material substitution, food exploration and the development of new competencies are key to making this shift (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2022; Malek *et al.*, 2019; Sundet *et al.*, 2023; Twine, 2018). Studies have also examined heterogeneity in consumers' willingness to change their protein sources, distinguishing among reducing meat consumption, following a meat-free diet most of the time, avoiding meat altogether and adopting a strict plant-based diet. These studies found that only 39% of consumers are willing to reduce or avoid meat proteins (Malek *et al.*, 2019). Still, other scholars have examined how eating out has become progressively normalized in everyday life in the UK (Paddock *et al.*, 2017) and the USA (Plessz and Étilé, 2018). In parallel, research has explored how food-related public policies might be redesigned through a social practice lens, highlighting the importance of intervening in routines, material arrangements and shared meanings rather than focusing solely on individual behavior change (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2014; Scheurenbrand *et al.*, 2018).

However, less research has been devoted to the social coordination required when people eat together and negotiate what counts as an appropriate meal in different social and material environments (Halkier, 2020; Wendler, 2023, 2024). This dimension is highly prevalent in everyday life, as most meals are embedded in shared routines, family arrangements, workplace settings and social gatherings, making it a particularly consequential yet

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underexplored site of inquiry. Consequently, if we are interested in transforming the practice of eating into a healthier, more sustainable one, as the EAT-Lancet Commission defines it: "a balanced dietary pattern that is predominantly plant-based, with moderate inclusion of animal-sourced foods and minimal consumption of added sugars, saturated fats, and salt" (Rockström *et al.*, 2025, p. 1625), we need to understand how these social practices are enacted in everyday social interactions, when eating together.

This research aims to describe and understand how material and social environments shape eating practices and their meanings in situations of shared eating. Accordingly, our main research question is:

RQ1. How do different eating environments, such as restaurants, home and workplace, shape the ways people negotiate and coordinate eating together?

RQ2. Building on this, a secondary question explored in light of the findings is: What implications do these dynamics have for the transformation of eating practices toward greater sustainability?

Theoretical background

The social practice of eating

Human behavior is a vibrant tapestry intricately woven by the threads of social institutions, cultural norms, values and the dynamic interactions between individuals and these institutions (Haslanger, 2018; Warde, 2005). Within this complex weave, social practices emerge as distinct patterns shaped by the environments in which they unfold (Spotswood *et al.*, 2015). Practices are not just random acts; they are the choreography of daily life, orchestrated by the interplay between individual initiative and the societal frameworks that either empower or restrict these actions (Fielding-Singh and Oleschuk, 2023). Then, individuals are just actors enacting social practices; they are the practitioners who perform, reproduce and may alter shared, routinized practices.

A social practice is therefore best understood not as a single action, but as a dynamic nexus of interconnected elements that, when linked together, form a recognizable composed entity such as "buying food, cooking dinner, eating together and the experience of eating" (Warde, 2014). According to key theorists, a social practice comprises three fundamental components: the meanings of actions, the performing skills and the materials used to enact the practice (Molander and Hartmann, 2018; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove *et al.*, 2012; Welch, 2017). "Meanings" encompass the social and symbolic significance, cultural understandings, and normative rules associated with activities (buying, cooking, eating and feelings). "Skills" refer to the competences, embodied know-how (in people and tools) and practical consciousness required to perform the practice. Finally, "materials" include objects, technologies, infrastructures and even our own bodies, essential to the practice's execution. However, how are these elements linked and unlinked to the social and material environments in which they are produced and reproduced?

From a practice theory perspective, one's social identity is actively and continuously performed, shaped and understood through an individual's engagement with social practices. In this view, individuals are "carriers" (performers) of practices; they are recruited into them and, through ongoing participation, cultivate a coherent sense of self (Hargreaves, 2011; Hochstein *et al.*, 2025; Welch, 2017). Our identities are thus constituted by the practices we perform through interactions with family, social groups or colleagues in the workplace.

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There are several instances in everyday life where practices are socially enacted. Family identity, as described by Epp and Price (2008), is the result of a dynamic interplay among individual identities, relational identities (as particular family members) and a collective family identity (in relation to other families). These different levels of "we-ness" are enacted through active performances, including shared consumption activities like family meals, where identities are managed and made real (Epp and Price, 2008; Haslanger, 2018). The workplace provides another social and material environment where identities are negotiated through the performance of practices, including those related to food and sustainability (Hargreaves, 2011). Relationships with friends and peers are powerful forces in the recruitment to and maintenance of, specific eating practices and their associated social identities. Interactions with friends occur in various social and material environments. Living with housemates who are vegan, for instance, can lead to a temporary adoption of veganism, as the social and material environment facilitates the adoption of those practices (Paddock, 2017).

Despite the recognition that eating is a fundamentally compound practice involving deep social dependencies, empirical research focused on the specific coordination, social interaction and negotiation of shared meals remains significantly under-investigated (Plessz *et al.*, 2022; Plessz and Étilé, 2018; Wendler, 2023). While practice-theoretical approaches have gained influence, they have traditionally prioritized material arrangements, infrastructures or individual life-course trajectories, often underplaying social interaction or reducing it to a simple matter of functional coordination (Halkier, 2020; Wendler, 2023). Scholars have explicitly argued that social interaction is relatively under-analyzed in practice-based consumption research, partly because the decentering of the individual has inadvertently elided the intersubjective contexts and "action chains" in which everyday life is actually performed (Halkier, 2020; Welch, 2017). Furthermore, existing methodologies in sustainable consumption have been criticized for being excessively individual-oriented, neglecting the subtle social negotiations and "practice relationality" (the social and material environments) that enable or hinder shared performances (Aboelenien and Arsel, 2025; Weckroth and Närvänen, 2024).

Social interaction is a critical, dynamic force in the performance and reproduction of food practices, as eating is done "together with others, in front of others, and in relation to others" (Halkier, 2020, p. 402). However, social interaction requires constant, often tacit, coordination and negotiation among participants with different practices when eating together (Haslanger, 2018). This makes social interaction a key site where the routines and rules of food practices are made visible, and where social careers within these practices are developed, upheld and sometimes challenged (Aboelenien and Arsel, 2025; Wendler, 2023). According to Halkier (2020), analyzing social interactions allows us to grasp both the tacit and reflexive dimensions of consumption through four key analytical dynamics:

(1) the *coordination* needed to perform the social practice of eating, including the ingredients needed to cook a meal and the people we share the meal with;

(2) the social interaction that makes visible the *negotiations* and conflicts that arise at the *intersection* of different practices;

(3) the relationship between routine and tacit moments with reflective and explicit moments of *negotiation* of shared conventions; and

(4) the individuals' *justification* of their actions and holding others accountable for shared norms.

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The transformation of social practices of eating

The challenge of fostering more sustainable consumption patterns is often framed as an individual attitude-behavioral gap, a failure to act in accordance with one's pro-environmental beliefs (Guyader *et al.*, 2017; Joshi and Rahman, 2015; Zaremohzzabieh *et al.*, 2021). A practice theory perspective reframes this problem entirely, as the adoption of healthier, more sustainable eating practices might be less dependent on individual actions and more closely related to the robust, interlocking nature of dominant existing practices. These "entrenched systems" (Wendler, 2024) pose powerful structural barriers to the competition and survival of alternative, sustainable practices (Hargreaves, 2011; Scheurenbrand *et al.*, 2018). For instance, the differences between the US and French eating practices, documented by Plessz and Étilé (2018), illustrate how structures in the USA have constrained the spread of healthier, more sustainable eating practices.

Sustainable eating practices often falter because they must compete with dominant, unsustainable practices for the meanings they carry, the material arrangements they depend on and the competence required to enact them, and therefore struggle to become anchored in people's everyday routines and habits. Dominant practices can be seen to "colonize" these elements, effectively starving emergent alternatives of the resources they need to survive and grow (Scheurenbrand *et al.*, 2018). In the food domain, the "meat-based" eating practice is a prime example of this phenomenon. The infrastructures behind food retail, the cultural meaning of a "proper meal" and the culinary skills common in many households are all configured to support meat-based consumption, making it extremely difficult for plant-based practices to gain a foothold (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2022).

These structural blockages are reproduced and maintained not only at a macro level but also through constant, micro-level social interactions that shape our daily lives. This research aims to explore how individuals following different eating practices negotiate and agree on a shared practice when eating together, while also examining how social and material environments shape the transformation of eating into more sustainable practices.

Methods

We assert that the existence of a reality (the practice of eating) is shaped by people's social and material contexts, which frame their experience of social reality (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Houston, 2001). That means people may interpret and experience eating differently depending on the social and material environments in which they co-perform the practice. To describe and understand the social practice of eating, people's eating experiences need to be interpreted across social gatherings, at home, at the office and in different material environments. Thus, our main research question is:

RQ3. How do individuals following different eating practices agree on a common practice when eating together?

Selecting informants

To address the main research question, we strategically sampled 32 adult informants (Miles *et al.*, 2014) at food markets and supermarkets. Potential informants were approached and, after the purpose of the study was explained, were asked whether they had changed their eating habits within the past year or earlier. Based on their responses, they were invited to participate in an interview. We interviewed 16 individuals who had changed their eating to a healthier (i.e. less meat) and more sustainable diet (i.e. more vegetables and legumes),

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Table 1. Informants' description

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Changed diet	Citizenship	Living with family
Pablo	Male	Adult	Secondary	No	Spain	No
Adrià	Male	Adult	Secondary	Yes	Spain	No
Elias	Male	Adult	Secondary	Yes	Spain	No
Blaise	Male	Adult	Tertiary	No	Republic of Benin	Yes
Fernando	Male	Adult	Tertiary	No	Spain	Yes
Pedro	Male	Adult	Tertiary	No	Ecuador	No
Ian	Male	Adult	Tertiary	Yes	Ireland	Yes
Julio	Male	Adult	Tertiary	Yes	China	Yes
Ignacio	Male	Young	Secondary	No	Argentina	No
Jaime	Male	Young	Secondary	No	Spain	Yes
Alberto	Male	Young	Secondary	Yes	Argentina	Yes
Rafel	Male	Young	Secondary	No	Spain	No
Jordi	Male	Young	Tertiary	No	Spain	Yes
Alejandro	Male	Young	Tertiary	No	Spain	Yes
Felipe	Male	Young	Tertiary	Yes	Colombia	No
Juan	Male	Young	Tertiary	Yes	Spain	Yes
Francisca	Woman	Adult	Secondary	No	Peru	Yes
Samira	Woman	Adult	Secondary	No	Spain	Yes
Amy	Woman	Adult	Secondary	Yes	Venezuela	No
Ana	Woman	Adult	Secondary	Yes	Spain	Yes
Pîlar	Woman	Adult	Tertiary	No	Cuba	No
Bowen	Woman	Adult	Tertiary	Yes	China	Yes
Constanza	Woman	Adult	Tertiary	Yes	Argentina	No
Cristina	Woman	Adult	Tertiary	Yes	Spain	Yes
Laura	Woman	Young	Secondary	No	Spain	No
Elisa	Woman	Young	Secondary	No	Colombia	Yes
Ariadna	Woman	Young	Secondary	Yes	Spain	No
Elena	Woman	Young	Secondary	Yes	Spain	No
Maite	Woman	Young	Tertiary	No	Spain	No
Núria	Woman	Young	Tertiary	No	Spain	Yes
Delia	Woman	Young	Tertiary	Yes	Spain	Yes
Emma	Woman	Young	Tertiary	Yes	Colombia	No

Source(s): Authors' own work

marked as "Yes", and 16 who had not, marked as "No" in Table 1 [1]. In contrast to previous research on eating practices (Aboelenien and Arsel, 2025; Wendler, 2023, 2024), this sampling criterion enables us to examine how individuals who follow more sustainable diets differ in their accounts of how food practices are negotiated when eating together. Within each group, participants were selected to reflect different genders, age groups (≤34 years = young; >34 years = adult) and educational levels (secondary, tertiary). The composition of the two eating practice groups was highly diverse, with at least four informants in each of the three-category combinations (e.g. men, young, secondary-school education) and eight informants in each of the two-category combinations. This is what researchers have suggested for intersectional analysis (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007). Conditional searchers enable researchers to explore intersectional interpretations, for instance, how the negotiation of what to eat varies across different social and material environments or across social categories (Kelle and Laurie, 1995). Table 1 provides informant characteristics; names have been anonymized.

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Data collection instrument and process

We conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions on eating practices (Belina, 2023). The interviews began with icebreaker questions about the informants' social environments, followed by transitional questions explaining the study's goals (healthier diets, sustainable consumption) and obtaining consent to be recorded. Informants then described their weekly eating practices, after which we explored the components of these practices (buying, cooking, eating, feelings, diet changes and food environments) to address our research question (Mylan, 2018). We aim to describe and understand how the components of the practice are negotiated in three social and material environments: eating out, eating at home and eating at work. Interviews were conducted in the Barcelona metropolitan area (November–December 2022). Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed *verbatim* and analyzed using MAXQDA software (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2019).

In this study, fieldwork and data analysis were conducted by different members of the research team. While separating these phases in qualitative research entails both advantages and limitations, it can enhance analytical rigor by creating distance between data collection and interpretation, thereby reducing confirmation bias and enabling analysts to approach transcripts with fresh eyes (Miles *et al.*, 2014). This separation can also promote consistency in multi-researcher teams and support a more systematic and transparent coding process (Silverman, 2013).

However, this separation also has drawbacks, as analysts who were not present during the interviews may miss out on contextual nuances (such as setting and interpersonal dynamics) that shape meaning (Finlay, 2002). It can also slow down the iterative process of refining interview guides, weaken reflexivity and increase the risk of misinterpretation (Berger, 2013). To address these issues and leverage the benefits of team-based research (Bernard *et al.*, 2016), we have adopted balanced strategies to preserve contextual understanding by using recordings alongside transcripts and maintaining reflexive engagement through team discussions about the interpretation of transcripts.

Data analysis

To interpret cross-case categories and themes (Nazir *et al.*, 2024), we followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). We first familiarized ourselves with the transcripts, then coded incidents based on meaning (second step). Then, we began searching for themes (third step), reviewing (fourth step), interpreting and naming them (fifth step) (Braun and Clarke, 2016). Finally, we began writing the manuscript (the sixth step). Thus, we followed a cyclical process, moving back and forth between searching, refining, interpreting and naming themes that captured how individuals accommodate shared eating practices across different environments (*social adaptation to peers*, *caring for family members* and *building social ties with coworkers: practical, time-saving meals at work*). This process culminated in the development of the core theme: *enjoying a healthy social life and, where possible, a healthy and sustainable diet*. Initially, the topics were named according to the social and material environments in which the meal took place, but they were ultimately labeled according to the meaning attributed to the type of meal shared. Using the MAXQDA program facilitated data management, enabled us to locate the context of interpretive chunks and allowed us to identify patterns in dietary change, social influences on eating and the coordination of eating practices while retaining informant-specific details (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2019).

Findings

Our interpretation suggests that the material and social environments shape social interaction and the meaning of a healthier, more sustainable diet. After all, eating at home, at work, or

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out is a social practice involving coordination with others and shared meanings. The core theme centers on the idea that *the social practice of eating is a means of enjoying a healthy social life and, where possible, a healthy and sustainable diet.* The subthemes that help build it are described below: *social adaptation to peers, caring for family members and building social ties with coworkers*. That is, the subthemes capture how people following different eating practices coordinate and negotiate common practices to secure belonging within social groups (friends, family and colleagues).

Social adaptation to peers

Accommodating different dietary practices. Coordination becomes challenging when people with different practices negotiate where and what to eat. When going out with a person who follows a plant-based diet, finding a restaurant that accommodates everyone's dietary preferences can be challenging, according to our informants. Pilar, a university-educated adult woman, illustrated the view of a regular meat-eater. She just highlights the need to negotiate a group agreement and how easily they coordinate the decisions:

> Yes, because you have to agree a bit, what do we eat? where do we go? So, one day we go where one person likes, another day where someone else likes. But normally we agree on the kind of places we like to go.

This is a dominant asymmetric negotiation rather than a symmetric one. Jordi, another meat-eater, university-educated young man, offers a different view and notes the difficulty of finding plant-based options in some ethnic cuisines. However, he notes that many Asian restaurants offer tofu or plant-based dishes, so "it's not difficult to eat out with these friends."

When going out with friends, Rafel, a regular meat-eater university student, adapts his eating habits to the prevailing social environment, arguing that "if you are going to eat with people, diet and principles take a backseat", meaning that belonging to the social group is the main purpose of eating together. Although he rarely eats alone, he does not care what to order because his diet is neither vegetarian nor vegan; it depends on the social environment. However, he says that he values having alternatives to meat when eating with friends at restaurants and respects others' dietary preferences when eating with them: "if I eat out with vegetarian or vegan friends, with my girlfriend, who is vegetarian, then it [a plant-based diet] is always something to take into account". Once exposed to plant-based diets, people are more likely to change their habits in the appropriate environment.

Social pressure to adapt to a meat-based practice. By contrast, plant-based eaters frequently frame the negotiation as a setup. Felipe, a university-educated young man who follows a plant-based diet, highlights the asymmetry of dining out with friends who eat meat, especially when choosing a restaurant. He explains that:

> when you go out with friends, for example, they do eat meat […] a lot of it, right? So […] although many restaurants already have vegetarian or meat-free options, many places don't, and you suffer a bit, you know?

He sometimes feels pressured by questions like "why don't you eat meat?", And notices that restaurants with limited menus can make him feel like a burden for his peers:

> […] you start going around with your friends, and you become like an obstacle for them, a nuisance, like 'ugh, we can't eat here, we love this place, but they don't have anything for Felipe'. So, it becomes a problem, right?

But is that usually the case? Rafel, already exposed to plant-based diets when eating at his parents' home, shares a similar experience of asymmetric negotiation, noting that his

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classmates often ignore those following plant-based practices when choosing restaurants. He remembers that on a recent outing, they ate at a hotdog place with no vegetarian options:

> No, it didn't offer any, we checked it because we have just a classmate who is vegetarian, and the poor girl always has to order something separately if we go there, since we usually go to that place a lot.

Informants emphasize that this is neither a neutral nor a symmetrical agreement. Rather, it represents a form of "imposed" agreement shaped by social and structural constraints, where the available options are already biased (a meat-based restaurant landscape), one practice is institutionally and materially supported, and the alternative remains marginal and costly to accommodate. The primary purpose of social coordination appears to be group cohesion and relational continuity (belonging to the social group), which reproduce normative hierarchies of practices.

The social pressure to eat more meat. Limiting intake when eating at a restaurant is, therefore, difficult for those mindful of what they eat. As Bowen, a university-educated adult woman who has reduced her meat consumption, explains:

> I don't go out very often anymore, but when I do go out to eat, it's not that easy to choose the restaurant I'd like to go to. You know I don't go out alone either, I go with my partner, my friends, even business partners and clients.

She further reflects, "We go to the restaurants we're supposed to go to", pointing to the powerful social meanings and expectations that shape eating out with others. She explains that it is harder to follow the desired diet when eating out, even within one's diet preference, as when you go out:

> […] it's the restaurants that do the cooking, and they prepare food in ways that make it taste better. And this makes things more complicated when you're on a diet, you know, because they add everything, sauces, a lot of oil, a lot of salt. So even when I go out to eat, I must restrain myself, so I don't go overboard.

The same situation is reported by Jordi, a regular meat-eater, who explains that "when I eat at home, the amount of meat I eat is smaller than when I'm with my friends. When I'm with my friends, well, they're my classmates, we usually order several dishes to share, so whether you want it or not, there's more meat on the table". At home, he says, he will "have a burger with a bit of salad, or simply a small piece of beef sirloin, nothing much, really". Adrià, a secondary-school-educated, adult man that has reduced eating meat, says that when eating with friends, he prioritizes the social experience over dietary restrictions: "I think when I eat with my friends, it's difficult to limit the amount of meat". It seems that meat is the glue that keeps peers together during social gatherings.

Spontaneous coordination. For young people, the social practice of eating out often involves spontaneous coordination. Pablo, another meat-eater, secondary-school-educated, adult man, describes how social plans can come out of the blue often, with a friend suggesting going to the gym or going for a walk, which:

> […] completely changes my plans […] and then maybe we end up having dinner out. So, what I had planned to eat that day, I don't eat it, and I may not eat it the next day either.

He continues explaining that he does not want to limit anyone in the group, so "if that day people eat oysters, you eat oysters; if that day they eat roast suckling pig, then we eat roast suckling pig". The same seems to be true for Pedro, a meat-eater, university-educated, adult man:

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> "When I go out, I don't really think about whether something is very fatty or not, I eat whatever comes up. If they say, 'let's have a poke,' we have a poke; if they say, 'let's have a burger,' then a burger; or grilled meat, or a shawarma, or Mexican food, whatever."

Taking care of family members

Adapting cooking to family members' needs. When Samira, a regular meat-eater, adult and secondary-school-educated mother of two sons, is home alone on weekdays (her children are at university), she says that for lunch she usually cooks a single dish, such as pasta, and has fruit or a yoghurt as dessert. She explains that "when I eat meat or fish, it's the same, either a broth or a salad, and then as a second course, fish or meat. When I say meat, it's almost always grilled chicken, rabbit, or lamb." Dinner is lighter, she says, "it's almost always an omelet, I combine omelets, sometimes I make a burger, but I mostly have omelets." When her children are at home back from university, she tries to compensate for their university's poor diet, according to her: "on Friday nights, when my children come home, since I already assume they haven't eaten any fish all week, I always make fish. I already have the broth prepared, which is also something I know they don't eat during the week, and I always make them fish. But by fish, I mean monkfish, salmon, hake, or sole. We don't go beyond that". Extended family gatherings tend to revolve around more meat-heavy meals. Samira recalls her grandmother's last birthday as a vivid example of how these occasions often center on traditional dishes in which meat plays a prominent role: "Well, for example, at my grandmother's birthday, a roast lamb in the oven and, you know, the typical roast. And yes, I always try to serve it with vegetables." Such occasions can lead to increased meat consumption, even for those who typically do not eat meat.

Rafel illustrates asymmetric negotiation again, but in the opposite direction, with the same social output: social accommodation. His vegetarian brother and vegan girlfriend spend summers with him at their parents' home, often cooking together. As a result, Rafel follows a plant-based diet during that time to adapt to the social environment. Back at university in Barcelona, his plant-based eating fades "when you're no longer around people who influence you in that way, you don't keep it up regularly in your diet. But they've already influenced you, you've seen a little beyond meat consumption as the main element, and you no longer feel under the influence of 'let's eat meat 3–4 times a week'." It seems, therefore, that when our informants are in the proper plant-based social and material environment, they are more likely to temporarily adapt to this dietary preference, but they do not necessarily adopt it.

Ian, a university-educated adult, explains that his wife, whom he describes as a vegetarian, proposed, and he agreed, that the family should avoid meat to make family life easier and to follow a healthy, sustainable diet. "More or less we eat the same, right?" He said and reflected on the meanings of eating sustainably:

> Yes, but there was already an awareness of consuming little meat. Yes, I understand it more as a necessity […] it's not for ethical reasons, but also […] because it's […] well, it's a way of eating that is more sustainable with respect to the environment.

He goes on reflecting on the fact that producing meat is not the best way to use the resources of Earth, as "animals require a lot of feed, and land is devoted to growing products solely for animal consumption, which we then consume in the form of meat. This is not an efficient way to use land." Samira, a regular meat-eater, and Ian's family, who avoid meat, hold different views on what constitutes a healthy diet. On the one hand, Samira tries to compensate for her children's poor university diet, even though this means she eats more

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than she usually does. Ian, by contrast, follows a diet now considered healthy and sustainable, avoiding red meat and emphasizing vegetables, legumes, nuts and fish.

Seasonal and market cuisine. Both practices share the components of an eating practice but differ in their meaning. Samira buys based on market availability. She says:

> I vary depending on what's available. Maybe the day I go to the butcher's, I see an entrecôte that, well, catches my eye, and I know it's good, so I buy that. Another day, if I see that Duroc pork loin, which has become fashionable lately, sort of halfway between Iberian and regular pork. I'll buy that, or free-range chicken.

> In contrast, Ian and his vegetarian partner's follow a seasonal pattern in their food consumption: there are times of the year when we go out more, like spring and summer. Then, in winter, we tend to eat more at home […] Invite friends over for dinner. From time to time, we do go to a restaurant, but not very often […].

Ian has access to the right ingredients and cooking abilities to quickly cook sustainable, healthier dishes. He uses a food processor (Thermomix) with embedded competencies to simplify cooking, describing it as ideal for quick, healthy dishes such as soups, vegetables, legumes and *gazpacho* [2]. He explains that they:

> […] use it, not every day, and it's really a great machine because it lets you prepare very healthy dishes […] that taste good, and it's also a quick way to cook […] we use it for those kinds of dishes, and it makes life much easier, because we both work, we both have jobs, and we don't have much time during the day.

Ian and his partner plan their meals and shop for ingredients on Saturday mornings, prioritizing quality and production methods. They use certain cues to assess ingredient quality. When asked whether he knew anything about how the ingredients were produced, Ian said that "just what it says on the label and […] you can also see it in the color. For example, I look for chicken that has a more yellowish color, because supposedly it has been fed in a certain way […] more naturally, with corn or something like that, right? Something that's reflected in the color of the meat, right? The label also indicates how it was raised. That's the only information I have when buying". Even Samira, when she buys precooked food on Sundays, she also looks for quality cues: "Even something as typical as rotisserie chicken, I buy it with misgivings because I know they're not using top-quality chickens for it."

The meanings of eating healthy food. Ian describes a predominantly Mediterranean-style diet, with legumes eaten two to three times a week alongside vegetables, salads and fruit. Bluefish, such as sardines [3] and tuna, are also on their menu 2–3 times a week. Bread is limited to breakfast, and snacks consist of nuts, such as hazelnuts and almonds. Dinners include light dishes, soups, salads and fruit. Dairy is minimal, with occasionally good cheese on weekends, he says. When asked how they prepare the fish, he explains that:

> […] usually grilled. Baked, grilled […] sardines and anchovies, I prefer to grill them with little oil, but sometimes we fry anchovies in olive oil; we only use extra virgin olive oil, for everything, even for cooking […] Well, we add a little salt, parsley, garlic, this mixture, which is very typical here, and then a salad or something like that, we eat very light, to be honest […].

Carbohydrates such as pasta and rice are eaten once a week, and he avoids overeating them: "I eat very little, maybe my wife a bit more, but I eat little pasta; potatoes are the carbohydrate we have most often." Overall, his eating pattern is moderate, minimally processed and oriented toward light, home-cooked meals. In contrast, meat-eaters describe an omnivorous Mediterranean-style diet.

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Ian's family's eating patterns contrast with those of Jaime and Samira, who are regular meat eaters. Jaime, a secondary-school-educated young man, says that for lunch (their main meal of the day): "I eat quite a lot of breaded stuff, breaded meat. Let's say I don't eat much grilled or boiled food"; but at night, he describes, the supper is much lighter: "I usually have a salad. And I also eat a lot, a lot of fish at night. Fruit and fish. And some vegetables." Samira, who compensates at home for her children's poor university diet, understands a healthy diet as an omnivorous one (with fish, meat, eggs and vegetables as its main ingredients).

Enriching cooking competences. Interestingly, those who move to Barcelona from abroad, often enrich their culinary competencies and adapt themselves to the local cuisine while preserving their culinary traditions. Pedro, enjoys making ceviche: [4] "In summer, I love to make ceviche, so, you know, I buy fish, I mix it with lemon, and then I prepare all the other things for ceviche, and it lasts, so I eat ceviche for three days, at lunchtime". Similarly, Francisca, a regular meat-eater, secondary-school educated adult woman, also prepares ceviche and seafood dishes on weekends: "We've made fish ceviche, and we've made seafood rice [a Spanish paella-like dish], because on Sundays, we mostly do that, fish and seafood." A cultural fusion takes place when cooking, as Francisca explains: "I mostly prepare most of the food myself. It's about 60% Peruvian and 40% Spanish, between […] meat, poultry, and fish". When possible, agreement on a shared practice is reduced to cookies, chocolate biscuits, and coffee, while the main aim of the gathering remains belonging to the group.

Building social ties with coworkers

At work, people often eat homemade or readymade meals. The setting shapes social interaction: people typically eat their precooked food with coworkers, if possible, or alone at the office or workshop. Amy, a meat-reducer secondary-school-educated adult woman, says: "Sometimes I eat with my coworkers, other times alone, because we take turns, but each of us brings our own food." Cristina, a meat-reducer secondary-school-educated adult woman, said, "I usually get up early because of my schedule. At home, I don't really have breakfast, just a latte or something like that, and then I have breakfast when I get to work, since I also eat at work." She continues: "I bring my lunch from home, and it's usually something like a light meal, maybe a salad with rice, vegetables, and a bit of meat, not too much. I don't usually eat too much meat". She often eats alone but occasionally shares a treat: "If we have breakfast together at the table, that day might be the moment when you say, well, let's have a coffee and also a couple of cookies, or a couple of chocolate biscuits, or a piece of sponge cake that someone has cooked."

Many informants, such as Delia (a meat-reducer, university-educated young woman), Samira, Cristina (meat-reducer), Felipe (meat-reducer) and Pablo, also bring their meals to work, either prepared at home or bought nearby, due to time constraints, but usually eat alone. Working at a restaurant, Felipe, a university-educated young man, usually eats in 15 min at his workplace, just before his shift starts. Pablo, who is a manager, describes a busy workload, with only 20–30 min for lunch, "so normally I bring, you know, a prepared salad from home and I eat it there on the spot".

Discussion

Theoretical contribution

This study advances literature looking at the social practice of eating by deepening the understanding of how practices are coordinated, stabilized and transformed through social interaction. Building on Warde's (Warde, 2005, 2014) view of eating as a socially organized

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practice made up of meanings, skills and materials, and Halkier (2020, 2022) focus on coordinating practices across different social settings, we demonstrate that interaction is not just related to the environment where eating happens, but a fundamental mechanism through which eating practices are negotiated, performed and reproduced.

Previous research has shown that eating is part of shared routines and infrastructures (Plessz *et al.*, 2022; Sundet *et al.*, 2023). Our findings emphasize how coordination occurs through ongoing, often implicit, negotiations among individuals with different eating habits. Whether eating out, at home or at work, each involves specific arrangements of materials, time patterns and expectations. In these contexts, choices about what and where to eat are collectively made through discussions of restaurant selection, menu planning, shopping duties and cooking roles. Thus, eating aligns with Shove and Pantzar (2007) view of practices as socially negotiated achievements and with Weinberger's (2015) idea that consumption practices are co-performed rather than individually owned.

Our analysis introduces the concept of *asymmetric negotiation* to explain how different eating practices coexist within shared settings. When meat-based and plant-based practices meet, coordination is rarely equal. In line with Shove (2003) view that practices are stabilized by durable socio-material infrastructures, we see that meat-based eating is typically more supported by institutions, more materially available and more culturally normalized in restaurants, workplaces and family environments, commonly scripted social sites (Epp and Price, 2008; Sundet *et al.*, 2023). This structural dominance influences negotiation outcomes: plant-based eaters often adjust to existing arrangements to keep *social harmony*. Even when plant-based practices temporarily predominate in certain micro-environments, meat-eaters' *adaptation tends to be situational*: they adjust in response to the environment but do not adopt the practice. As Aboelenien and Arsel (2025) note in their work on practice coexistence, temporary alignment does not necessarily lead to lasting practice change if the broader environment remains unchanged.

In line with Wendler (2023, 2024), who highlights the moral and relational aspects of shared meals (social and spatiotemporal entrenchment), our results indicate that coordination is more influenced by the desire to *feel connected* than by nutritional or environmental considerations. Social bonds often take priority over strict dietary rules. Participants "go with the flow" not out of a lack of commitment, but because eating serves as a crucial means of maintaining relationships. This aligns with Aboelenien and Arsel's (2025) view that sustainable consumption is rooted in social relationships and moral negotiations, and Halkier (2022) focuses on how everyday sustainability is shaped by common concerns and social duties.

Our results challenge individualistic views of dietary change by framing perceived difficulty as a characteristic of practice configurations rather than personal failure. Building on Shove (2003) idea that practices persist when their elements are aligned, we demonstrate that adopting healthier, more sustainable diets depends on having suitable materials (e.g. available dishes and food-processing infrastructure), competencies (e.g. culinary skills and knowledge) and shared meanings. When these components are out of sync across different social and material contexts, individuals often revert to dominant practices as they navigate different environments. Therefore, dietary change appears fragile, not because individuals lack motivation, but because the environments that support daily eating still favor established routines.

By integrating insights from practice-oriented scholars, this study advances the social practice theory of eating in three ways. First, it conceptualizes *social interaction as a core part of eating practices* rather than as an external influence. Second, it introduces *asymmetric negotiation* as a mechanism that explains how practices coexist and why minority practices

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struggle to become stable. Third, it highlights *belonging* and *social cohesion* as key principles in reproducing eating practices. Consumers appear to prioritize maintaining a healthy social life and, when possible, a healthy, sustainable diet.

Overall, these contributions indicate that meaningful dietary change cannot depend only on attitudes or moral appeals. It requires reshaping the social and material structures that organize daily interactions. Sustainable eating becomes achievable when new configurations of materials, skills and meanings are collectively established, when the social environments where people seek connection make sustainable practices easier, rather than more difficult, to adopt. But what implications do these dynamics have for the transformation of eating practices toward greater sustainability?

Policy and practical implications: changing the practice of eating

This research advances social practice theory while simultaneously offering a framework for the systemic transformation of food systems. Our key theoretical contribution is identifying *asymmetric negotiation* as the mechanism by which multiple eating practices coexist. When plant-based and meat-based practices intersect, coordination occurs within environments that already privilege one practice over the other. The dominant practice prevails not because of superior arguments or stronger moral commitments, but because it is more deeply institutionalized in infrastructures: restaurant menus, workplace catering norms, retail availability, family routines and public imaginaries (Fuentes and Fuentes, 2022; Scheurenbrand *et al.*, 2018). These infrastructures script everyday coordination in ways that reproduce practice dominance.

By integrating these findings with Shove and Pantzar (2007) view of practices as dynamic and collectively negotiated, and with Aboelenien and Arsel's (2025) conceptualization of practice coexistence and *decoupling*, we propose that eating practices operate within dynamic ecosystems. Within these ecosystems, practices compete, overlap, adapt and stabilize unevenly across contexts. Change does not occur when individuals simply "decide differently," but when ecosystems are reconfigured so that sustainable practices become easier to coordinate collectively. In other words, transformation depends on altering the relational and environmental conditions that structure interaction.

The core transformative insight of this research is that dietary change hinges on a sense of *belonging*. Individuals revert to dominant eating practices not because they lack knowledge, awareness or moral concern, but because the social and material environment privileges certain forms of coordination over others. Eating is fundamentally a practice of social integration. Maintaining a healthy social life frequently takes precedence over maintaining dietary consistency. Sustainable transitions will therefore succeed only when environmentally aligned practices become socially effortless, when they allow individuals to preserve a sense of belonging without friction.

This reframing shifts the central policy question. Rather than asking how to persuade individuals to eat differently, the relevant question becomes: How must social and material environments be redesigned so that sustainable eating becomes the easiest way to maintain social belonging? Answering this question redirects attention toward structural conditions rather than attitudinal change, opening pathways toward the systemic transformation of food systems aligned with long-term environmental and public health objectives.

Our findings further demonstrate that environments, material, institutional and normative, are not external backdrops but constitutive elements of eating practices (Plessz and Étilé, 2018, 2018; Sundet *et al.*, 2023). Tightly scripted routines in restaurants, workplace canteens, school meal systems, retail product placement and family cooking arrangements shape the asymmetries observed in everyday negotiation. If sustainable eating practices are

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to stabilize, these scripts must change. Decoupling eating practices, as reported when eating together at work, allows for the preservation of a healthy social life, even when individuals follow different dietary practices. As suggested by Aboelenien and Arsel (2025), this requires redesigning coordination mechanisms rather than relying on moral appeals.

Sustainable dietary transitions become viable when plant-based practices are no longer exceptional but normalized within social and material environments. When menus default to plant-based options, when shared meals are organized differently, when procurement standards shift, and when public discourse redefines what is legitimate and desirable, the asymmetry of negotiation changes. In such contexts, temporary adaptation can evolve into durable adoption because the ecosystem itself supports the practice.

This perspective directly informs multi-level intervention strategies (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2016; Mont *et al.*, 2022):

- Institutional level: public procurement policies, school and workplace catering standards and urban food planning can shift default arrangements;
- Organizational level: restaurants and food service providers can redesign menus and social dining formats to reduce negotiation asymmetry;
- Community level: collective cooking initiatives and family-oriented interventions can reshape competences and shared meanings; and
- Cultural level: media and public discourse can redefine what counts as socially legitimate and desirable eating.

Taken together, this research reframes sustainable dietary change as a question of ecosystem redesign. It demonstrates that meaningful transformation requires altering the conditions of coordination embedded in infrastructures, institutions and cultural norms. When sustainable practices are structurally supported and socially normalized, they cease to be acts of resistance and become routine ways of maintaining belonging. Only under these conditions can dietary change scale beyond isolated individual efforts toward systemic transformation of the food system.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

As with all research, this study also has its limitations. The separation between fieldwork and analysis may miss out on contextual nuances that shape meaning, such as setting and interpersonal dynamics. It also misses the opportunity of getting feedback from informants to refine the interview guide, weakening reflexivity and increasing the risk of misinterpretation. However, the availability of recordings alongside transcripts may help reduce this risk. Future studies could explore a comparison between followers of meat and plant-based diets based on their interpretation of the same reality, how they rationalize their choice and the meaning of a healthy and sustainable diet.

Conclusions

Building on social practice theory, we show that eating is a co-performed activity structured through meanings, skills and materials. By identifying asymmetric negotiation as the mechanism through which multiple eating practices coexist, we show that the dominance of meat-based eating reflects its deeper institutionalization in infrastructures (restaurants, workplaces, retail environments and family routines) rather than superior moral or rational justification. The fragility of plant-based practices does not primarily stem from weak commitment but from a lack of infrastructural support. When environments favor certain forms of coordination, those practices become stable; when they do not, adaptation remains

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temporary. By emphasizing coordination, asymmetry and belonging, this study contributes to social practice literature and provides a framework for understanding dietary change as a relational and infrastructural process. Sustainable eating becomes enduring not simply through persuasion, but when social and material environments are configured in ways that make it the most accessible means to maintaining a sense of belonging in everyday life.

Ethics statement

This study followed our university's ethical committee guidelines for qualitative research and obtained its clearance. Participants provided their informed consent prior to participation and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity (www.uab.cat/en/research-ethics/human-research). All identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms are used to report the findings.

Data availability

Anonymized transcripts will be available upon request two years after the funded research project ends.

Notes

[1.] When using participants' direct quotations, we specify whether the informant follows a meat-eating practice and its social properties. If we do not mention it, then the informant is in the group of those that changed recently to a healthier and more sustainable practice.

[2.] Gazpacho is a cold, blended and raw vegetable soup originating from the Andalusian region of southern Spain. It is primarily made from tomatoes, green bell peppers, cucumbers, garlic, onions, olive oil, vinegar, and stale bread, served chilled and typically enjoyed in warm weather, like Summer (Raichlen, 1989).

[3.] Fish is often differentiated from meat in both nutritional and symbolic terms. In particular, small oily fish such as sardines and anchovies are frequently described as "superfoods" due to their high nutrient density. Despite their small size, they provide substantial amounts of omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, calcium and other essential vitamins and minerals (Corliss, 2023).

[4.] Ceviche is a traditional dish from Latin America, particularly popular in Peru. It is typically made with raw fish or seafood that is marinated in citrus juices, such as lime or lemon, which effectively "cooks" the fish by denaturing the proteins. The dish is often mixed with onions, chili peppers and other seasonings, and is usually served cold. Ceviche is known for its fresh and tangy flavor, and it is often enjoyed as a refreshing appetizer or light meal.

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