Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI)
Volume 12, Issue 9, August 2021: 3937-3952

We are more than just what we eat: Educational values derived from food consumption

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Abstract

Research on food consumption often highlights the influences of socio-economic and cultural factors on people's eating habits that can produce educational values. This study creates a conceptual model based on Vygotsky's social constructivism to explore the educational values derived from students' food eating practices and examines these values through in-depth conversations with 22 students (aged 19 – 23) studying at universities in Can Tho City, Vietnam. It is argued in this article that food consumption is a personal-social construct itself. This construct is made of co-influences of external, in-between, and internal factors on the absorbing, justifying, assimilating, and accommodating new knowledge of food consumption. These interrelated influences concurrently enable individuals to associate the materialistic, moral, intellectual, and spiritual values with their eating habits. In this sense, food consumption and eating habits do not simply exist as separate, subjective entities. Instead, they are embedded in individuals' actual existence in their surrounding world, which can be both physical and virtual.

Keywords: Eating practices, food consumption, Vygotsky's social constructivism, educational values, ontology

1. Introduction

Research on food consumption has captured socio-economic, cultural, and geographical factors that influence what types of food are consumed. For example, Worsley, Blaschea, Ball, and Crawford (2004) (see also van Bussel, van Rossum, Temme, Boon, & Ocké, 2020) revealed that individuals' educational background influences their intake of nutritional values. Ha, Shakur, and Do (2020) (see also Nguyen, 2011) verified the differences in types of food consumed among ethnicities in various regions in Vietnam. Blom-Hoffman, Kelleher, Power, and Leff (2004) pointed out children's geographical living conditions affect the types of food they choose and/or are asked to eat. Social lifestyles are found to affect the eating habits of old Chinese people with dementia (Yuan *et al.*, 2018).

These short notes show that the way certain types of food are consumed is often shaped by individuals' encounters with social milieu. We are more than just what we eat! The food we eat can mean something educational to us that we sometimes take for granted. The meaning of food consumption is derived ontologically from who we are and what we want to become. Our eating manners are formed and reformed by our diverse interactions with others in the social world. In other words, the educational values of food consumption are both personally and socially constructed. This understanding allows

the researcher to frame this study Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism. This study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What do socio-cultural factors influence students' food consumption?
2. What educational values do students absorb from their food consumption?
3. How do the socio-cultural factors influence the way students form the educational values of food consumption?

The findings of this research are aimed to add more nuance to the studies by Ha *et al.* (2020), Nguyen (2011), Nguyen, Thi, Do, Thuy, Huu, Do, Deurenberg, and Khouw (2013), Nguyen, Dong, Phung, Vo, Chu, Pham, Duong, Lee, and Binns (2018) and many other researchers looking into Vietnamese contexts. While these researchers have explored the socio-economic and cultural factors that shape people's eating habits, the main focus of this study is on the educational values of food intake. Further, most extant studies have focused on children, pregnant women, and the elderly. Little is known about students' eating practices and the meaning of their food consumption. This is the space where this research is expected to contribute new understandings to food consumption among young educated people.

2. Literature review

This section analyzes factors that influence food consumption. It argues that one's eating practices are personally-socially constructed. The next part discusses educational values that are emerged from individuals' learning processes that are similarly produced from their social engagement. This understanding allows the author to create a conceptual model used to examine educational values derived from food consumption.

2.1 Factors that influence the personal-social construct of food consumption

There are several trends among the plethora of research on food consumption. Most of them focus on a specific set of participants with certain socio-economic backgrounds and biological features in a specific geographical location. These current studies have pointed out that food consumption is not solely affected by individuals' perception of health benefits and personal enjoyment. It is also constructed under the effects of individuals' engagement with others in the surrounding environments and unidentified places such as the virtual world and government policy discourse. Food consumption is a personal-social construct. This argument is proven through the examples that are described below.

For example, Fraser *et al.* (2000) conducted a sociological study and analyzed the causal relations of food consumption and risks of chronic diseases among 25,000 men and women in East Anglia in England according to age, gender, and education. The study revealed that the less well-educated older men group consume significantly foods that are unhealthier than the other groups. Similarly, Worsley *et al.* (2004) examined the link between education and food intake and the effect of different ways of aggregating food intake among Australian men and women of different ages. They conducted a survey of 2,501 men and 2,739 women aged 18 years and over. The result of their study showed that education plays a vital role in food choice. In a similar vein, van Bussel *et al.* (2020) explored educational variations in healthy, ecologically sustainable, and food safety consumption. They surveyed 2,106 Dutch individuals aged 19–69 years. Their study showed that unsafe and unhealthy food cause bad

health effects and cancer-related diseases. Low-educated groups tend to consume more red meat that is harmful to the environment. Well-educated people eat healthy foods such as fruit and vegetables and less meat.

By situating their study in both education and nutrition, Blom-Hoffman *et al.* (2004) assessed the impacts of a multi-component nutrition education program run among African American kindergarten and first-grade students at an under-resourced urban school in the US. These researchers found that fruit and vegetable consumption is low among these students, and school psychologists are reported to bring a positive contribution to health promotion. Bontrager *et al.* (2014) examined the efficacy of the Wisconsin Farm to School program in improving students' fruit and vegetable consumption. They surveyed one urban and eight rural schools with the participation of children in grades 3–5 in the state of Wisconsin in the US. This program showed that the willingness, knowledge, as well as fruit and vegetable consumption among the students reach a remarkable enhancement.

Parents are found to influence children's eating behaviors and how much food they can consume per day. Blake *et al.* (2015) examined parents' understanding of portion sizes and strategies they use to portion snacks. These researchers interviewed 60 low-income parents living in Philadelphia and Boston in the US. The study illustrated a link between snack portion sizes and risk of obesity among children. Children who consume many snacks are mostly from families with parents with low education and income, and parents who are overweight or obese. Parents play a crucial role in shaping children's dietary behaviors.

Lifestyle is believed to influence eating habits and produce various consequences. For instance, Yuan *et al.* (2018) examined the associations of modifiable lifestyle factors (substance abuse and leisure activity) with multidimensional cognitive health among the elderly in three education-specific groups. They conducted a survey of 3,230 adults over the age of 60 years in Xiamen, China. The study found that the effects of substance abuse with multi-domain cognition are not considerable. While TV watching, smartphone use, and reading improved nutritional intakes among the less-educated elderly, reading meaningfully enhanced the awareness of nutrition among the moderately educated. Likewise, Edwards *et al.* (2015) looked at the ways healthcare practitioners in a state in Australia might use brief motivational interviewing techniques to modify individuals' eating habits. Their experiment of 163 healthcare providers showed that the model contributed positively to lifestyle concerns.

In the field of demography, Schösler, de Boer, Boersema, & Aiking (2015) explored the relationship between meat consumption and particular framings of masculinity among young second-generation Chinese Dutch, Turkish Dutch, and native Dutch adults (aged 18–35) in the Netherlands. The study found that the Turkish group is the most traditional framings of masculinity – the idea of being "real men" (p. 152) – with the highest rate of meat consumption in comparison with the others. This suggests that the ethnic groups with a higher level of traditional framings of masculinity tend to consume more meat than the others. In this sense, cultural factors such as tradition, gender, and ethnic diversity are identified as having significant influences on eating practices.

With regards to Vietnam-based studies, Ha *et al.* (2020) clarified the concern that vegetables may be poisonous or transmit disease and the impact of risk perception on vegetable consumption in Hanoi, Vietnam. By analyzing the results from a survey of 498 consumers, the study revealed that age and educational backgrounds influence the risk assessment in rural areas, while personal experience with

vegetable poisonings, self-provision of vegetables, and perceived control over hazards are the rest factors in urban places.

In the field of nutrition, Nguyen (2011) compared the relationships between health consciousness, beliefs about food values, subjective norms, and attitudes toward organic food and the intention to purchase food among Vietnamese customers in Northern and Southern Vietnam. The study showed that these selected factors affect customers' buying decisions. Those who have high health consciousness and environmental awareness tend to buy organic food. Regional lifestyles and cultures are found to have impacts on food consumption. Geographical locations are also found to influence eating habits.

Nguyen *et al.* (2018) determined the consumption level of food, macronutrients, and micronutrients among Vietnamese pregnant women. The survey result among 1,944 Vietnamese pregnant women's intake showed that the recommended nutrient intakes (RNI) for total calorie consumption was met by half of the women, but the RNI for several key micronutrients, such as folate, calcium, iron, and zinc, was not met. The low dietary intake is linked to socio-economic status, educational, regional, cultural, and seasonal factors.

The review of these above articles allows the researcher to categorize the numerous factors found to influence food consumption and eating habits. These categories are: internal factors (specific issues to an individual), outside factors (influences from the environment and society in which an individual dwells), and in-between factors (choices made based on the culture and lifestyle in which an individual resides). Internal factors comprise educational levels, age of schooling, types of food, food portions, personal knowledge and experiences of food consumption, and self-awareness of health risks associated with food intake. Outside factors include professionals' consultancy, instructions of food consumption provided by healthcare staff, government policies, parents' decisions over children's food consumption, influences of socio-economic development. In-between factors are examined through the effects of personal and social lifestyles and food fashions, as well as such culture-based factors as tradition, gender, and ethnicity.

2.2 Educational values

According to Abraham and Robinson (2018), education is considered a process of acquiring knowledge from learning in which learners are likely to grasp the absorption of the new knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits. Education frequently takes place under the guidance of more knowledgeable persons (grandparents, parents, educators, and so forth). This view accords to Vygotsky's thesis on the process of learning as a social construct. Yet, we can also educate ourselves. For example, by having studied the effects of Vitamin C in fruits, we can learn that sour fruits such as citruses or tamarind can offer a great source of this vitamin and that we need to have a larger intake of sour fruit when we are getting a flu. Hence, an individual's comprehension of the world is personally and socially constructed through a teaching and learning system that happens from both the social and personal levels.

In addition, learning may occur in both formal and informal forms of education. Any experience that has a formative influence on one's thoughts, feelings, or actions can be deemed to include educational values. Values are defined as inherent beliefs that inspire our behaviors and actions and form our

worldview. There are many types of educational values. For example, they can be mentality challenge, interpersonal skill development, knowledge enhancement skill, and spatial ability development that learners can learn through playing digital games (Hong, Cheng, Hawng, Lee, & Chang, 2009). Motivation in learning can also be classified as an educational value that language learners can find by immersing themselves in acquiring the target language to use English technology and tools outside school (Brevik, 2019). The body of literature on the 21st century thinking skills also points out necessary values in education that educators need to pay attention to. These values encompass critical thinking and problem-solving skills, numeracy, literacy, intercultural understanding and communication skills, and knowledge (Ananiadou & Claro, 2019; Rotherham & Willingham, 2010).

In general, educational values are likely to (re)determine who we are and who we want to be, as well as our perceptions of what is right, wrong, fair, unfair, good, and evil. These values reflect who we are and what we learn from others so that what we do accords with our perceptions of what is right or wrong for us. These are the outcomes of the personal-social learning process that enable us to learn social skills, beliefs, and attitudes in an effort to achieve personal enrichment. Educational values are considered as the core values we can gain through the educational learning process. These values are categorized into four main sets:

- Materialistic values: we can use our experiences at work or in competition to gain our wanted outcomes related to wealth, possessions, and rewards.
- Intellectual values: we approach education with the main purpose of achieving social and academic knowledge for improving our civic participation.
- Moral values: we learn how to be recognized in society. We can distinguish what is right from wrong. We learn how to respect tradition and religion based on certain social norms.
- Spiritual values: Through education and learning, we know how to find a zest for life. This is the value of understanding, appreciating, and being understood.

Obtaining these outcomes requires an individual to experience through education. Here, this article concludes that education is the procedure of gathering knowledge inside each individual under influences of various social factors.

2.3 Theoretical framework: A combination of educational values, influencers and social constructivism

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a collaborative process that includes both social contexts and individuals' social interactions. This developmental learning process occurs when individuals absorb, justify, assimilate and accommodate new knowledge produced by the knowledge community, which may include social practices, common knowledge created by traditions, or even knowledge passed down from previous generations.

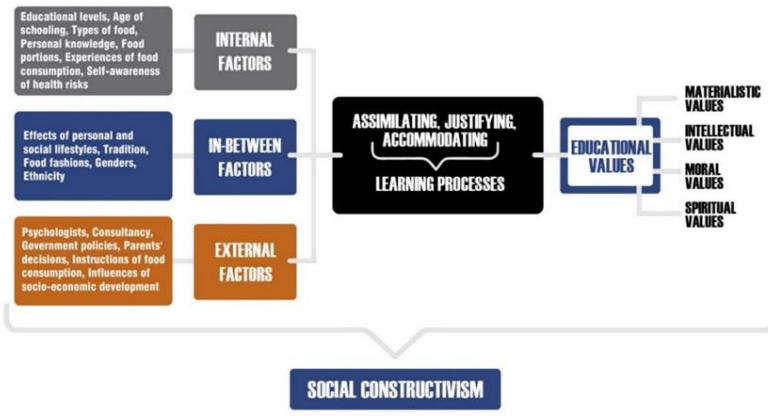
Vygotsky (1978) referred to the continuous process of learning. This process first happens at a social level where individuals interact with others. Their social interactions allow them to learn knowledge produced by the community. This social learning can happen among individuals with others and/or then come inside individuals. Then they assimilate, accommodate and justify this type of knowledge by themselves, and this process happens at the individual level. Individuals can sometimes learn new

things without help from others, and at other times, they need guidance and encouragement from others. This is where their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is formed, broken, and transformed. ZPD is the gap between their "actual developmental level" defined by their own problem-solving skills and knowledge and their "potential development" developed under guidance from the "more knowledgeable others" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). These processes do not happen separately, but they are integrated into a holistic development. Instead of seeing knowledge as constructed by individual learners' responses to their encounters with the social world, Vygotsky (1978) considered the mutual effects of individuals' interactions with the surrounding world and at the same time, influences of social factors on their learning processes. New knowledge is formed through this two-way process.

The factors that Vygotsky (1978) primarily emphasized are language and culture as he viewed these two factors as "framework through which humans experience, communicate and understand reality" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 39). Public norms and socially accepted practices tend to play key roles in shaping individuals' formation of concepts and ideas. The author takes the issues of language and culture on board as well. This article even goes further by adding other socio-economic, biological, and geographical factors as being outlined before.

Further, one may wonder why biological and personal experience factors are taken on board as possible influencers on food consumption. There are two reasons for this assumption. First, as the literature review suggests, there can be different practices of food consumption among genders and ages. Second, as Vygotsky (1978) argued, learning may easily happen when learners have reached the level of their actual physical development. They are capable of solving problems and ready to learn new things. A condition that facilitates their learning of new things is the guidance or teaching of others who are more capable than they or in collaboration with others. Another condition that allows for their self-learning is through their actual ability to learn. This ability can result from their own experiences and biological features. For example, some female individuals in Vietnam do not like to eat a lot of sugary food to avoid gaining unexpected weight. Their understanding of the effect produced by their consumption of sugar may stem from their own experience and/or be shaped by knowledge by the community. Therefore, exploring the influences of the "more knowledgeable others" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) and one's own personal features does not disaccord with a Vygotskian perspective, as he later confirmed that one's knowledge is not simply constructed, but it is co-constructed.

Figure 1: A conceptual model exploring educational values produced through food consumption



This conceptual model is comprised of three aspects: factors, learning processes, and educational values. The influences of factors can be explored through individuals' personal characteristics (these include their level of education, age, and gender) and experiences of food consumption and eating habits. These internal factors can be examined in relation to the effects of in-between and external factors that include social lifestyle, tradition, ethnicity, government campaigns, parents' choices and decisions over food consumption, as well as family and community's socio-economic conditions.

3. Research methodology

This has been argued so far that individuals' food consumption and experiences are complex and inconsistent. Their inconsistent and multi-faceted experiences may not be reduced to numbers and figures solely. In this way, the researcher followed a qualitative research approach. A questionnaire was designed and included the following items:

- Participants' demographic information (age, hometown, ethnicity, institutional affiliation, and family backgrounds)
- Influences of their personal/biological background on their food consumption
- Types of food that they like/dislike to eat and the quantities
- Knowledge and experiences of food in general and particular types of food
- Influences of other people and socio-cultural norms on their eating practices
- Influences of food consumption on personal enrichment
- The ways personal enrichment is initiated, maintained, developed, or hindered in relation to materialistic, intellectual, moral, and spiritual values
- The meaning of food consumption in relation to personal enrichment

This questionnaire consisted of 23 questions, most of which were open-ended and information questions. The questionnaire was written in both English and Vietnamese that suited the participants' preference. However, all of them preferred to speak Vietnamese. Two pilot conversations were conducted as trials. Then the researcher fixed some Vietnamese language to ensure that the actual participants clearly understood the questions. By understanding that knowledge is co-constructed, the researcher participated in the conversations with flexibility.

The participants recruited were students studying at universities in Can Tho City, Vietnam. There are three public universities (Can Tho University, Can Tho University of Technology, and Can Tho University of Medicine and Pharmacy) and three private ones (Tay Do University, Nam Can Tho University, and FPT University) in this city. A purposive snowballing was chosen for participant recruitment. Snowball sampling or chain referral sampling is a research method that is used to recruit a study sample through referrals among initial participants who know of other participants meeting the study criteria (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). The researcher asked the key participants to refer to other students of various backgrounds in terms of hometowns, fields of study, universities, and family's socio-economic status. This sampling technique helped the researcher identify 14 referral participants through the existing relationships with 8 initial participants.

Because of social distancing caused by the Covid-19 pandemic during the research process, the researcher used Google Meet to conduct the conversations with the participants (with their consent for having the conversations recorded and stored on Google Drive with a password). The conversations with each participant were conducted only once because it was difficult to meet them outside, and they were busy with their study commitments. All participants were assigned pseudonyms during the data analysis and report.

4. Results and discussion

This section begins by analyzing the themes, subthemes, and variations withdrawn from the 22 conversations. This analysis is then discussed against the backdrop of the literature and conceptual model presented in the literature review section.

4.1 The factors that influence individuals' food consumption

This part discusses a set of the internal, in-between, and external factors that influenced the participants' food intake.

4.1.1. Internal factors

The studies by Fraser *et al.* (2000) and Worsley *et al.* (2004) have shown the link between types of food consumed and the consequences that come from this consumption under the influences of age, gender, and education. These factors are reported to have proportionate relationships with high awareness of the right food consumption. In this study, the participants' ages were almost the same, and the researcher did not intend to compare differences of food consumption based on age variations. The same holds true for their education because all of the participants were studying at universities. This means individual levels of education did not create any differences among the participants' eating habits.

Instead of examining these factors as independent variables that influence the dependent variable of food choice, the researcher found that some internal factors such as appearance and gender are embedded in the participants' beings. Who they were and wanted to become mattered to them and their eating habits when they were conscious of the way they look in accordance with their genders. As a third-year student at a public university, Hanh Phi (a female participant) spoke to one of the researcher that she wanted to look *"nice and beautiful"* after she had eaten *"too much"* of the food she enjoyed. Similarly, the other female students like Bach Tuyet, Thanh Hue, and Thu Ky expressed the same concern over the influences of food consumption on their body shape and skin. For example, Hanh Phi said:

> *I gained a lot of weight because of eating in freedom before. After realizing how important physical appearance is, I have consumed mainly boiled and steamed food.*

They believed that food of little oil and rich in fiber could improve the shininess of their skin, making them look nice and young. The idea of staying in good shape was not limited to girls. Their ontological beings affected the way they chose the *"right food"* (Tuan Dat's words). For example, Tuan Dat (a male student) said:

> *I realized that vegetable consumption is good for health and skin. Thus, I like to eat vegetables.*

Similarly, since he was aware of his *"oversized"* body due to his past large consumption of meat, Quang Minh became critical of his eating habits by trying to reduce such consumption and changed to a *"healthier"* one by eating more vegetables. His objective was to reduce weight so that he could *"look slimmer"* and best dress in the clothes he wanted to wear. In this sense, individual personal awareness of the relationships between eating habits and influences on their appearance was extended to the embeddedness of the body in the total world of related things and objects.

Their awareness of these relationships is also intensified by their awareness of health issues associated with food consumption. For example, as she had been hospitalized for having a severe stomachache by eating *"something wrong [and] something unsuitable for [her] digestion",* Minh Hanh recalled:

> *Suffering from [the] stomachache teaches me some experiences and knowledge about what to do and what to eat to ensure my health.*
>
> Tuan Dat encountered a similar problem. He said:
>
> *I got a stomachache after having eaten a bowl of noodles in a food stall. Since that day, I have been more cautious when thinking of this kind of food.*

Hedonism is another theme found from the conversations with the participants. 10 of the 22 participants showed enthusiasm in *"eating whatever I like"* (Van Minh's words) or *"liv[ing] my full life by eating what I like"* (Manh Nam's words). Their preference for eating "whatever" they liked stemmed from the more open choices of food they ate when they lived far from home. Some said they could *"freely"* (Minh Luc's word) eat what they wanted to without their parents' control over food choices. But they sounded contradictory at the same time. For example, Minh Luc missed the food that his mother cooked, and some of the food he ate in Can Tho City seemed to be *"odd and bland"* to him. Their interpretation of hedonism seemed to be linked to other people and geographical locations. The space where they experienced hedonism in eating was experienced in relation to their being in a specific location with specific people that they had feelings towards. In this sense, hedonism is a place-based specific construct rather than simply a feeling of enjoyment.

Some of the findings in this study are both similar to and different from what Fraser *et al.* (2000), Blom-Hoffman *et al.* (2004), Bontrager *et al.* (2014), and van Bussel *et al.* (2020) discussed in relation to the significance of self-awareness of health and nutrition. These researchers have highlighted the knowledge that people can gain and develop through their daily social interactions with friends, colleagues, and school psychologists. Likewise, personal knowledge and experiences of food consumption were found to affect individuals' eating habits. However, hedonism and pragmatism are novel lexical in this study, as the participants tended to eat whatever they liked without any concern about health, nutrition, or even appearance (e.g. *I do not know how long I can live. I eat whatever I like without a second thought*. – Duy Quang). This can be a new finding in this study when issues of ontological being matter to those who consume food for health reasons.

4.1.2. In-between factors

Following a particular lifestyle can affect eating habits and create certain impacts on one's eating habits. For example, Duy Tan told the researcher that he changed his way of living from eating *"whatever"* to *"eating more selectively"* because he wanted to look like a Korean pop star he admired.

His idol looked *"perfectly slim and fit, and [was] probably a popular lifestyle"* (Duy Tan's words). The reason for his change came from his desire to improve his past *"thin, unhealthy"* body. The other participants (Kim Chi, Kim Hue, Tai Hoa, Man Mi, Kieu Nguyet, Anh Si, Tuan Dat, and Manh Nam) expressed their attention to the way they ate under the impacts of following and *"imitat[ing]"* (Kim Hue's words) their friends and idols.

Most of these participants showed a *"positive"* (Man Mi's words) change, from eating *"unhealthy food"* to *"healthier one"* (Kieu Nguyet's experience). Tuan Dat said that he admired one of his college friends who *"[knew] how to stay extremely healthy and [I thought that person was] very educated."* These participants realized that following a healthy lifestyle that other people have adopted can mean an expression of being well-educated and trendy. This finding is similarly shown in the studies by Nguyen (2011) and Yuan *et al.* (2018). These researchers collectively argue that people tend to consider social lifestyle as having impacts on health consciousness which is seen as guidelines inspiring their behaviors and actions in choosing what to eat. In the same vein, these participants changed their lifestyles by watching and imitating their role models. The way they followed their role models can be read as both rational (realizing specific reasons for staying healthy) and irrational (following a social fashion) choices of their beings.

Regarding cultural factors, the research results showed that ethnic-cultural practices impact one's eating practices as well. For example, Manh Nam said that his family is Chinese Vietnamese, and his family preferred to use soy sauce in dishes to fish sauce. He admitted that the smell of soy sauce made him feel more like *"Chinese"* even though his perception of ethnicity was blurring. He confessed that he was Vietnamese purely, but the way he consumed soy sauce showed an attachment to his family and origin. This finding suggests that demographic, traditional, and regional factors make a significant contribution to one's food consumption. Hong Dao, Giang Tien, and Thinh Vuong said that they were Vietnamese, and they preferred to eat Vietnamese food *"cooked in the way that the Vietnamese often do"* (Giang Tien's expression). Their understanding of their ethnicity enabled them to select the types of food that could meet their desire to become whom they wanted to be. This finding is similar to the ones found in the studies by Schösler *et al.* (2015) and Nguyen *et al.* (2018), who discussed the relationships between ethnicity and food choices. However, while these authors explicated the relationships between these two variables, this study pointed out that the participants' ontological being in their ethnicity mattered to their food choices.

Some themes in the empirical data also suggested the co-influences of geographical locations, traditions, and religious beliefs. For example:

> *I don't like seafood […] My hometown is near the sea. I love the excellent quality of seafood in my place.* – Minh Luc
>
> *I found that religions and beliefs influence my eating habits. […] My family has faith in Buddhism. We often eat vegetarian food on full moon days. It has become part of my eating habits.* - Quang Minh
>
> *I have a poor appetite for braised pork in coconut juice with eggs, but it is a traditional dish on Tet holidays. I have to eat this kind of food to make my parents happy. – Manh Nam*

This finding reflected some similarities with the conclusions made by Ha *et al.* (2020), Blom-Hoffman *et al.* (2004), Worsley *et al.* (2004), and van Bussel *et al.* (2020). These researchers discovered that there are variations in food consumption among people living in different geographical locations. These studies are important in pointing out that geographical features can be experienced in relation to socio-economic conditions. Some of the participants in this study referred to how their locations/hometowns could shape the various choices of their preferred food. What can be found different from the previous studies is that these participants encountered places as not merely physical places but rather a space where they made sense of their food choices in relation to traditions, religious beliefs, and those around them. Manh Nam said he wanted to make his parents *"happy"* by forcing himself to eat a traditional dish on Vietnamese New Year's holiday. Similarly, Quang Minh, Minh Luc, Man Mi, and Tuan Dat seemed to embed their experiences of geographical spaces in interrelation to traditions and religious practices. Tuan Dat said that part of his *"hometown"* was *"inside"* himself, making him think that *"whatever food"* he ate was accorded with the common norms that people in his place practiced. Quang Minh referred Buddhist practices (though he was not a Buddhism follower) to being *"in harmony"* with his family members and community. They were, in other words, part of the whole socio-cultural world. Who they were and desired to be allowed them to choose the food consumed. Food choices, in this sense, are not entities that exist separately from individuals' beings.

Moreover, six of the participants' eating habits are feminism-oriented. Some typical examples include:

> *Although my father cooks for the whole family, the family's dishes are up to my mother's decision.* – Manh Nam

> *I just want to learn the ways my mother cooks […]. I believe that she is the best cook ever. The food she cooks… I just want to eat the dishes she makes […] She can make very good vegetable soup and sour soup* – Thinh Vuong

This finding is slightly different from the one by Schösler *et al.* (2015), who investigated the relationship between meat consumption and masculinity among several European ethnicities. These researchers concluded that there is a high influence of masculine cultures on meat consumption. While Schösler *et al.* (2015) focused on meat consumption, this current study examined the relationship between a masculine culture (which is manifest in Vietnamese culture) and food choices. The themes that emerged in the conversations showed that there is a contradiction between the framing of masculinity in Vietnamese culture and food consumption.

4.1.3. External factors

The participants in this study showed that their parents' decisions over food choices, friends' eating habits, and social media were influential to their eating practices. For instance:

> *My mother has influenced my eating habits. Since I was young, she has cooked for me and taught me everything about food.* – Anh Si

> *Among the dishes that I like to eat the most is braised shrimp, which is made by my mom with my grandmother's recipe.* – Minh Hanh

> *My eating habits are influenced by some friends in college, and I often get more knowledge about a healthy diet on the Internet as well.* – Duy Tan

> *Regarding the kinds of food that I like, I often choose affordable and reasonable dishes.* – Thinh Vuong

These results are similar to what Blake *et al.* (2015), Bontrager *et al.* (2014), Blom-Hoffman *et al.* (2004), and Fraser *et al.* (2000) pointed out about the impacts of parents, friends, colleagues, and socio-economic factors on food consumption. These researchers emphasized the influential roles of individuals' interactions with friends, colleagues, and professionals in shaping their food choices and consumption. These influences are either enhanced or impeded by individuals' socio-economic conditions. In this study, the author considered socio-economic conditions as a combination of social norms and economic factors. The participants were almost the same age ranging from 19-22, and they were financially dependent upon their family's financial support for their living expenses. In some cases, economic factors did not influence some participants' eating practices, but social norms were found to be influential. For example, they often ate vegetarian food on full moon days by expecting to be *"in harmony"* (Tuan Dat's words) with their family members and community. The research results showed that psychologists' consultancy, instructions on food choices provided by healthcare staff, and government policies did not create significant influences on the participants' food consumption.

However, institutional regulations influenced the participants' eating habits (e.g. *"With a 'no food' banner at FPT University, I think that the university does not encourage snacking in class"* – Thu Ky). Social media also played an influential role in changing their eating practices. Kim Chi, Kim Hue, Man Mi, Kieu Nguyet, Anh Si, Tuan Dat, and Manh Nam referred to watching food programs and performances of their idols on Youtube that increased their tastes for Korean food. Korean pop culture was experienced in relation to the participants' uses of the Internet. This idea helps extend the notion of external factors from including policy impacts and real people to unknown people in the virtual world. In some sense, food choices can become mobile and imaginable.

4.2 Educational values produced through learning processes of food consumption

This study aims to explore the materialistic, intellectual, moral, and spiritual values possibly produced through the learning process during food consumption. Learning is a collaborative and developmental process in which individuals absorb, justify, assimilate, and accommodate new knowledge produced by the knowledge community.

The study results showed that these four processes went in tandem: absorbing new knowledge, justifying this piece of new knowledge, assimilating this new knowledge to previous knowledge, and accommodating this new knowledge in actual use. Some participants described like this:

> *I have watched a lot of Master Chef's programs [and] thought, wow, the food looks delicious! [Then] It may be a bit foreign [American], but it looks so tempting. [Then] I have been always looking for something new to eat to quench my appetite* – Quang Minh

> *Apart from doing physical exercise, if you eat healthily, it is good for your health. Your body is more likely to develop better, and I obtain this piece of knowledge mostly through social networks like Facebook. My family used to eat few vegetables. Now I have changed it myself [to eating more vegetables]* – Tuan Dat

In this case, we can see that Tuan Dat was aware of accommodating new knowledge under the influences of the social media factor. His self-awareness of food nutrition and the possible consequence of good appearance included both intellectual and materialistic values. Quang Minh, Minh Hanh, Giang Tien, and Thu Hoa similarly experienced the absorbing process through social media and friends before they compared their old eating habits with this new type of knowledge. Thu Hoa complained that she had eaten *"too much sugary food"* before she learned about the possible effects of gaining weight out of her overconsumption of this ingredient. She gradually tried to reduce eating sugary food by *"look[ing] more often at supermodels and Korean singers"* and discovered their personal daily habits. She wanted to train herself a new habit of eating *"more properly".*

However, not every participant went through these four learning processes to gain educational values. For example, Manh Nam said:

> *I paid less attention to my health before, but I have recently known some people who live and eat healthily. I found that the better my health is, the more interesting my life will be, and I can stay in good shape.* – Manh Nam
>
> *I was really weak, though I might look good outside. Then my friend told me to keep healthy by cooking at home. Food at home is good. I eat in between: sometimes outside when I don't have time but at other times, I eat at home. I think he is right.* – Quang Trung
>
> *My boyfriend probably likes to have a slim girlfriend* [laughter]. *I choose to eat less food and refrain myself from snacks [as a result]. Also, my mother says that girls need to be thin. She is always correct!* – Hong Dao

These participants seemed to move from absorbing new knowledge about food values to fixing and accommodating processes without justifying or assimilating. The disorder of these learning processes can be explained in terms of the external factors on their self-perception of food values that co-influenced the internal factors (their awareness of their gender and appearance) and in-between factors (their perceptions and understandings of social norms and cultural practices of religions and ethnicity). For example, Thu Ky learned that the community's Buddhist practice of eating vegetarian food on full moon days could help her *"lose weight ideally and adhering to the social rules at the same time".* These participants took this socio-cultural practice for granted without judging its fits with their circumstances. By skipping the stages of justifying and assimilating, these participants interpreted a change in food choices as a moral value of being part of the community and *"[being] in harmony with the [Buddhist] belief"* (Thu Ky's expression).

In general, materialistic values of health benefits, intellectual values of nutritional values, moral values of following traditions, religious beliefs and social norms, as well as spiritual values of aspiring to follow a hedonistic lifestyle were associated with the participants' food consumption. These values were formed as personal-social constructs.

5. Conclusion

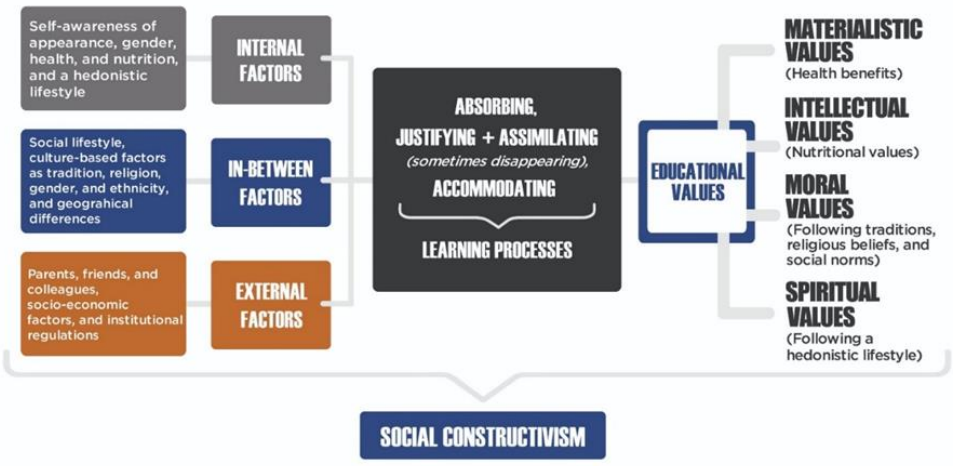
This study sought to explore the influences of various factors on the production of educational values of food consumed. Food consumption is a personal-social construct. By this, the author means there are co-influences of external, in-between, and internal factors on the way the participants absorbed,

justified, assimilated, and accommodated their new knowledge of food values. These processes allowed them to experience, appreciate, and nurture materialistic, moral, intellectual, and spiritual values. These findings are summarized below:

- Internal factors are self-awareness of appearance, gender, health, and nutrition, and a hedonistic lifestyle.
- In-between factors include social lifestyle, culture-based factors as tradition, religion, gender, and ethnicity, and geographical locations.
- External factors are impacts of parents, friends, and colleagues, socio-economic factors, social media, and institutional regulations.
- Learning processes include absorbing new knowledge, justifying this piece of new knowledge, assimilating this new knowledge to previous knowledge, and accommodating this new knowledge in use. Sometimes, justifying and assimilating seem to disappear under the co-influences of external factors.
- Educational values of food consumption include materialistic values of health benefits, intellectual values of nutritional values, moral values of following traditions, religious beliefs and social norms, and spiritual values of aspiring to follow a hedonistic lifestyle.

The summary of these findings is shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: The educational values of food consumption



By linking the factors at the three interrelated domains (internal, in-between, and social) to these values, the author created this conceptual model that comprises three variables: factors, learning processes, and educational values. Accordingly, food does not entirely show who we are, but the way it is consumed reflects who we are and what we want to be and become. Food is not merely a personal choice of taste. But it is a social-personal construct whose meanings we embed in our lives.

Compliance of research and publication ethics

I, as the Corresponding Author, declare and undertake that in the study titled as “We are more than just what we eat: Educational values derived from food consumption”, scientific, ethical and citation

rules were followed; Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry Journal Editorial Board has no responsibility for all ethical violations to be encountered, that all responsibility belongs to the author/s and that this study has not been sent to any other academic publication platform for evaluation.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express his sincere gratitude to Le Huu Thien Chi, Huynh Ngoc Hay, Pham Thuy Linh,, and Tran Quoc Toan for their assistance with data collection and revising some parts of this article.

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