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Commensality practices among university students

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Abstract

The Food Guide for the Brazilian Population addresses guidelines for an adequate and healthy diet, including recommendations on the act of eating and commensality. When entering university life, students tend to change their routine, which contributes to having quick, irregularly scheduled, and nutritionally inadequate meals. The aim of the present study was to investigate commensality practices and associated factors in newcomers to a public university in Rio Grande do Sul. This is a cross-sectional study carried out in 2019. The outcome consisted of the Guide's direction on eating in with others and participation in activities involving food. The exposure variables investigated were sex, age, housing composition, paid work, economic class, and university study period. Of the 207 participants, 83.9% and 62.4% reported that they usually have lunch and dinner together, respectively. Most students participate "sometimes" in planning (49.8%) and preparing meals (50.5%), and "always" participate in buying food (51.2%) and cleaning utensils and environment (62.8%). In addition, most students aged 30 years or older reported that they usually have breakfast together (p=0.010), while students who live with family members are the ones who most eat the three meals together (p<0.05). There was a higher frequency of women participating in planning (p=0.012) and meal preparation (p=0.002). It is concluded that, in general, students practice commensality, with a higher occurrence among those who live with family members.

Keywords: Diet. Eating Behavior. Students. Food Guides. Meals.

INTRODUCTION

The Food Guide for the Brazilian Population (FGBP) is an instrument to support food and nutrition education actions, in an attempt to counteract the current epidemiological scenario[1]. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the consumption of ultra-processed products, a reduction in the consumption of *in natura* foods, and, consequently, an increase in the prevalence of chronic non-communicable diseases[2]. The FGBP presents nutritional guidelines that range from the choice, combination, preparation, consumption of food and meals to factors that can be obstacles to adhering to an adequate and healthy diet. Among its recommendations, three basic guidelines on commensality stand out: eating regularly and carefully; eat in appropriate environments; and eat with company[1].

The act of eating is directly related to the maintenance of life, as the physiological supply of nutrient needs is essential to guarantee an organism's functioning. On the other hand, when eating, an individual creates practices

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and attributes meaning to what they are ingesting. Therefore, a symbolic value is applied to meals, going beyond the use of food by the body as well as assuming a cultural behavior[3,4]. This is the moment when culture and human food come together: eating is a condition for human survival and what, how, when, and with whom to eat are aspects of commensality that contribute to the development of social relationships[5]. Thus, the dimensions of this act go beyond biological needs, involving feelings and pleasures that can influence the quality of food.

Commensality derives from the Latin "*mensa*" which means to live at the table, and this involves not only what you eat, but mainly how you eat it. The sharing of food is a practice that has accompanied society for years, since the time of hunting and gathering, characteristic of *Homo sapiens sapiens*[6]. "Eating together" reinforces the unity of the family or group, as in addition to sharing food, the sensations provided by food are shared[4]. According to the FGBP, eating with company, in addition to promoting greater social interaction, can provide a better use of food, as it favors attention when eating and the use of more suitable environments to have meals[1].

University students often end up modifying their routine due to the heavy workload, little time to rest/sleep, skipping meals, stress, lack of time to eat, and distance from the family[7-11]. These factors contribute to the realization of quick meals, without regular and inadequate times from a nutritional point of view, influencing the lifestyle and eating habits of university students[9]. On the other hand, there are university students who recognize the importance of commensality practices in the quality of food. More than 40% of students from a university in Campinas, SP reported that eating with others positively altered their diet[7]. Given the scarcity of studies that investigate the act of eating and commensality and the poor promotion of their practices among university students, the investigation of this subject is necessary to support educational strategies for better quality food and health. Therefore, the objective of the present study was to investigate commensality practices and associated factors in freshmen from a public university in Rio Grande do Sul.

METHODOLOGY

This work is part of a larger study entitled "Food consumption, commensality, and obstacles to an adequate and healthy diet in students at the Federal University of Pampa (UNIPAMPA), Itaqui, RS campus", which possesses an observational cross-sectional design. To participate in the study, students had to be new to the campus in 2019, be regularly enrolled, and present on the day of data collection. According to information from the Pedagogical Projects of the Courses, 400 vacancies are offered annually, distributed in five courses with 50 vacancies each and one course with 150 vacancies. However, throughout the semester there are partial and/or total withdrawals, dropouts, and other situations that can lead to a reduction in the initial number.

To collect information from the larger study, a self-administered questionnaire was used, prepared by the authors of the study based on the FGBP[1]. The outcome of the present study consists of the following guidance on the act of eating and commensality: "*eat with company – whenever possible, prefer to eat with company, with family, friends or col-*

leagues from work or school. Also try to share the domestic activities that precede or follow the consumption of meals" (BRASIL, 2014). To verify the occurrence of this recommendation, three questions were used about meals, with the answer options "*yes*" or "*no*", namely: 1 - "*Do you usually have BREAKFAST accompanied by colleagues, friends or family?*"; 2 - "*Do you usually have LUNCH accompanied by colleagues, friends or family?*"; and 3 - "*Do you usually have DINNER with colleagues, friends or family?*"; in addition to four other questions with the answer options "*never*", "*sometimes*" or "*always*", namely: "*In general, how is your participation in activities that involve:* 4 - "*Planning a meal*"; 5 - "*Purchase of food*"; 6 - "*Meal preparation*"; 7 - *Cleaning of utensils and/or environments*". As characteristics, *demographic variables* were investigated: sex and age (in complete years, obtained from the date of birth); *socioeconomic factors*: housing composition (degree of kinship of the residents with the interviewee), paid work (yes/no), and economic class - definition based on the Brazilian Economic Classification Criteria developed by the Brazilian Association of Research Companies (BARC), which classifies individuals according to the score generated from the possession of goods and the education of the head of the family. The economic classes are: A (higher purchasing power); B (B1+B2); C(C1+C2); and D+E (lower purchasing power)[12]; and *university-related*: shift or study period (daytime/full-time or night time).

In order to organize the fieldwork, lists of new students were generated in the year 2019, through the university's internal management system. In addition, prior contact was made with the professors responsible for the 1st semester curriculum's components to arrange data collection. The research team was trained, thus, standardizing the way to approach and assist the participants.

Data collection took place in April and May 2019, was carried out in the classroom, and conducted by six students under the supervision of the professor coordinating the research project. Upon arriving in the classroom, the team introduced themselves, gave a brief explanation about the study and invited everyone to participate. Then, the inclusion criteria were verified and the Informed Consent Form – ICF was delivered for individual reading. Students who agreed to participate in the study signed the informed consent form, returned it to the team and received the printed questionnaire. At that moment, the team explained how to fill in the questions and was available for any questions. As the students signaled that they had finished filling out the questionnaire, the team checked for possible filling errors, thanked the student for participating in the study, and delivered, as a form of immediate feedback, a folder[13] with the "Ten steps to adequate and healthy nutrition".

Data processing was performed by two team members trained for this function. After reviewing the questionnaires, double typing was performed in the EpiData 3.1 program, the typing was validated, and data was exported to the Stata 12.1 program, where the statistical analyses were carried out. Initially, all variables were explored, calculating absolute and relative frequencies. Then, for the bivariate analyses, the outcome variables "*planning a meal*"; "*food purchase*"; "*meal preparation*"; "*environment cleaning*" had their answer options grouped into: no (never) and yes (sometimes + always). In addition, 95% confidence intervals (95%CI) were obtained for all categories. Pearson's chi-square (p^h) and/or linear trend (p^t) tests were used, depending on the nature of the variables, considering a significance level of 5%.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UNIPAMPA - approval number 3.058.365 and respondents were asked to sign the informed consent prior to the interview. At all stages of the study, compliance with the requirements set out in Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council, which regulates the development of research involving human beings, was assured.

RESULTS

Of the 400 vacancies offered by UNIPAMPA, Itaqui, RS campus, 353 were filled in the first half of 2019. During the data collection period, there were 29 course cancellations/closures; 03 students did not enroll; 28 students were dismissed; and 58 failed due to absenteeism, in addition to 25 absences and 03 refusals. Thus, 207 students participated in the study.

Table 1 presents the description of those evaluated according to demographic, socioeconomic, and university-related characteristics. It is observed that about two thirds of the students were female, almost half were under 20 years old and more than 60% reported living with family members. In addition, about 20% reported having a job and the majority (73.9%) were classified in economic classes B2, C1, and C2. With regards to the university, 65.2% of respondents reported studying during the daytime/fulltime period.

Regarding meals, more than a third (36.2%) of the students reported not having "breakfast", while "lunch" and "dinner" are usually eaten by 99.5% and 80.1%, respectively (data not shown). It is possible to observe, in Table 2, that most students who have "breakfast" do so without company, while "lunch" and "dinner" meals are usually carried out in the presence of colleagues, family, and/or friends.

Table 3 describes the participation of students in activities involving food. It is observed that the category "never" was the least frequent for the four activities investigated. Most students participate "sometimes" in planning and preparing meals, and most participate "always" in buying food and cleaning utensils and the meal environment.

Eating meals in the company of colleagues, family, and/or friends was associated with age and housing composition. Most students aged 30 years or older (p=0.010) reported that they usually have breakfast with others. On the other hand, students who live with family members are the ones who most have three meals with company (Table 4).

Regarding participation in activities involving food, an association was observed only with sex, with a higher frequency of female students who participate "sometimes" or "always" in planning (p=0.012) and preparing meals (p=0.002). Buying food and cleaning utensils did not show statistically significant differences according to exposure variables (Table 5).

Table 1 - Description of the evaluated students, according to demographic, socioeconomic and university-related characteristics. Itaqui, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019. (n = 207)

Characteristics	n	%	95%CI
Sex			
Male	68	32.9	(26.4 - 39.3)
Female	139	67.1	(60.7 - 73.6)
Age (Years completed)			
< 20	100	48.3	(41.4 - 55.2)
20-29	79	38.2	(31.5 - 44.8)
≥ 30	28	13.5	(8.8 - 18.2)
Living situation			
Alone	43	20.8	(15.2 - 26.3)
Friends	37	17.9	(12.6 - 23.1)
Relatives	127	61.3	(54.7 - 68.0)
Currently works			
No	162	79.0	(73.4 - 84.6)
Yes	43	21.0	(15.4 - 26.6)
Economic Class (BARC)			
A	15	7.7	(3.9 - 11.5)
B1	22	11.3	(6.8 - 15.8)
B2	51	26.2	(19.9 - 32.4)
C1	44	22.6	(16.6 - 28.5)
C2	49	25.1	(19.0 - 31.3)
D-E	14	7.2	(3.5 - 10.8)
University period			
Daytime / Fulltime	135	65.2	(58.7 - 71.8)
Nighttime	72	34.8	(28.2 - 41.3)

95%CI: 95% Confidence Interval.

*The maximum number of missing information was 12 (5.8%) in the economic class variable.

Table 2 - Description of variables about eating with company. Itaqui, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019. (n = 207)

Variables	n	%	(95%CI)
Do you have BREAKFAST accompanied?			
No	83	63.4	(55.0 - 71.7)
Yes	48	36.6	(28.3 - 45.0)
Do you have LUNCH accompanied?			
No	33	16.1	(11.0 - 21.2)
Yes	172	83.9	(78.8 - 89.0)
Do you have DINNER accompanied?			
No	62	37.6	(30.1 - 45.0)
Yes	103	62.4	(55.0 - 69.9)

95%CI: 95% Confidence Interval.

Table 3 - Description of variables on participation in activities involving food. Itaqui, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019. (n = 207)

Variables	Participation					
	Never		Sometimes		Always	
	n	(95%CI)	n	(95%CI)	n	(95%CI)
Planning a meal	28	13.5 (8.8 – 18.2)	103	49.8 (42.9 – 56.6)	76	36.7 (30.1 – 43.3)
Purchasing food	28	13.5 (8.8 – 18.2)	73	35.3 (28.7 – 41.8)	106	51.2 (44.3 – 58.1)
Meal preparation	32	15.5 (10.5 – 20.5)	104	50.5 (43.6 – 57.4)	70	34.0 (27.5 – 40.5)
Cleaning of utensils and environment	16	7.7 (4.1 – 11.4)	61	29.5 (23.2 – 35.7)	130	62.8 (56.2 – 69.4)

95%CI: 95% Confidence Interval.

Table 4 - Description of eating together, according to exposure variables. Itaqui, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019. (n = 207)

Variables	BREAKFAST accompanied		LUNCH accompanied		DINNER accompanied	
	%	(95%CI)	%	(95%CI)	%	(95%CI)
Sex		**p^h = 0.514**		**p^h = 0.102**		**p^h = 0.080**
Male	32.5	(17.7 - 47.3)	77.9	(68.0 - 87.9)	53.4	(40.4 - 66.5)
Female	38.5	(28.3 - 48.6)	86.9	(81.1 - 92.6)	67.3	(58.3 - 76.3)
Age (Years completed)		**p^h = 0.010**		**p^h = 0.562**		**p^t = 0.344**
< 20	35.5	(23.4 - 47.6)	85.0	(77.9 - 92.1)	60.5	(49.7 - 71.3)
20-29	26.5	(13.9 - 39.1)	80.8	(71.9 - 89.6)	60.7	(48.2 - 73.1)
≥ 30	65.0	(43.4 - 86.6)	88.9	(76.7 - 99.9)	73.9	(55.4 - 92.4)
Living situation		**p^h = 0.015**		**p^h = 0.004**		**p^h = 0.002**
Alone	14.8	(1.0 - 28.6)	67.4	(53.2 - 81.7)	40.0	(23.4 - 56.6)
Friends	29.4	(6.9 - 51.9)	86.5	(75.3 - 97.7)	53.6	(34.6 - 72.5)
Relatives	44.8	(34.2 - 55.4)	88.9	(83.2 - 94.4)	72.5	(63.8 - 81.3)
Currently works		**p^h = 0.530**		**p^h = 0.935**		**p^h = 0.320**
No	35.0	(25.5 - 44.5)	83.9	(78.1 - 89.6)	60.3	(51.8 - 68.8)
Yes	41.4	(23.0 - 59.8)	83.3	(71.9 - 94.8)	69.7	(53.7 - 85.7)
Economic Class (BARC)		**p^t = 0.071**		**p^h = 0.054**		**p^h = 0.970**
A+B	41.4	(28.5 - 54.3)	90.9	(84.8 - 97.0)	63.2	(52.2 - 74.2)
C	33.3	(20.9 - 45.8)	78.0	(69.4 - 86.6)	61.2	(49.3 - 73.0)
D+E	10.0	(00.0 - 29.8)	78.6	(56.1 - 99.9)	61.5	(33.8 - 89.3)
University period		**p^h = 0.210**		**p^h = 0.769**		**p^h = 0.632**
Daytime / Fulltime	33.0	(23.0 - 42.9)	84.4	(78.3 - 90.6)	61.1	(51.8 - 70.4)
Nighttime	44.2	(29.0 - 59.3)	82.9	(73.9 - 91.8)	64.9	(52.3 - 77.5)

95%CI: 95% confidence interval; p^h = Chi-square of heterogeneity; p^t = linear trend test.

Table 5 - Description of participation in activities involving food, according to exposure variables. Itaqui, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, 2019. (n = 207)

Variables	Plans a meal		Purchases food		Meal preparation		Cleans utensils and environment	
	%	(95%CI)	%	(95%CI)	%	(95%CI)	%	(95%CI)
Sex		$p^h = 0.012$		$p^h = 0.225$		$p^h = 0.002$		$p^h = 0.128$
Male	77.9	(68.0 - 87.9)	82.4	(73.2 - 91.5)	73.5	(62.9 - 84.2)	88.2	(80.5 - 96.0)
Female	90.6	(85.8 - 95.5)	88.5	(83.1 - 93.8)	89.9	(84.8 - 94.9)	94.2	(90.3 - 98.2)
Age (Years completed)		$p^h = 0.819$		$p^t = 0.130$		$p^t = 0.202$		$p^h = 0.891$
< 20	87.0	(80.3 - 93.7)	83.0	(75.6 - 90.4)	81.0	(73.2 - 88.8)	93.0	(87.9 - 98.1)
20-29	84.8	(76.8 - 92.8)	88.6	(81.5 - 95.7)	87.3	(79.9 - 94.8)	91.1	(84.8 - 97.5)
≥ 30	89.3	(77.6 - 99.9)	92.9	(83.1 - 99.9)	88.9	(76.7 - 99.9)	92.9	(83.1 - 99.9)
Living situation		$p^h = 0.395$		$p^h = 0.274$		$p^h = 0.125$		$p^h = 0.066$
Alone	81.4	(69.6 - 93.2)	83.7	(72.5 - 95.0)	86.0	(75.5 - 96.6)	86.0	(75.5 - 96.6)
Friends	83.8	(71.7 - 95.9)	94.6	(87.2 - 99.9)	94.6	(87.2 - 99.9)	100.0	-
Relatives	89.0	(83.5 - 94.5)	85.0	(78.8 - 91.3)	81.0	(74.0 - 87.9)	92.1	(87.4 - 96.9)
Currently works		$p^h = 0.118$		$p^h = 0.118$		$p^h = 0280$		$p^h = 0.091$
No	88.3	(83.3 - 93.3)	88.3	(83.3 - 93.3)	85.8	(80.4 - 91.2)	93.8	(90.1 - 97.6)
Yes	79.1	(66.7 - 91.4)	79.1	(66.7 - 91.4)	79.1	(66.7 - 91.4)	86.0	(75.5 - 96.6)
Economic Class (BARC)		$p^t = 0.097$		$p^h = 0.304$		$p^h = 0.265$		$p^t = 0.448$
A+B	90.9	(84.8 - 97.0)	89.8	(83.4 - 96.2)	84.1	(76.4 - 91.8)	92.0	(86.3 - 97.8)
C	83.9	(76.3 - 91.4)	81.7	(73.8 - 89.7)	83.7	(76.1 - 91.3)	92.5	(87.0 - 97.9)
D+E	78.6	(56.1 - 99.9)	85.7	(66.6 - 99.9)	100.0	-	100.0	-
University period		$p^h = 0.911$		$p^h = 0.164$		$p^h = 0.229$		$p^h = 0.061$
Daytime / Fulltime	86.7	(80.9 - 92.5)	88.9	(83.5 - 94.2)	86.7	(80.9 - 92.5)	94.8	(91.0 - 98.6)
Nighttime	86.1	(78.0 - 94.2)	81.9	(72.9 - 90.9)	80.3	(70.9 - 89.7)	87.5	(79.8 - 95.2)

95%CI: 95% confidence interval; p^h = Chi square of heterogeneity; p^t = linear trend test

DISCUSSION

The second edition of the FGBP was innovative by presenting recommendations on the act of eating and commensality. In order to influence the use of food and the pleasure of eating, it suggests that meals be eaten at the table, with time, attention and, preferably, with company. Moreover, these eating practices contribute to healthy, pleasurable eating and greater social interaction[1].

The results of the present study showed that breakfast is the meal most omitted by students and the one that is most often eaten without company. It is interesting to note that, at the UNIPAMPA, Itaqui, RS campus, classes start before 8 am and the University Restaurant does not provide breakfast, which can contribute to the lack of time for this meal. The literature shows that breakfast is one of the most omitted meals among university students[7,8,11]. A study carried out in a county in the USA examined the prevalence and patterns of commensality in 663 adults, revealing that the majority of respondents ate breakfast alone[14]. Breakfast is not usually a family meal where everyone gathers around the table; it is usually ingested individually, although it is the most common meal at home[15]. Research with university students from Mato Grosso do

Sul obtained similar results, showing that breakfast is usually eaten alone, because, even living with the family, their different schedules did not allow them to have the meal together with family members[8].

On the other hand, most university students usually have lunch and dinner in the presence of colleagues, family, and/or friends. It is believed that these are the most shared meals, since there is a break provided for these meals and they are available at the university restaurant, favoring lunch and dinner to take place with company. A qualitative study that investigated the eating habits of students from the Santa Monica campus of the Federal University of Uberlândia, MG, evaluated the most consumed foods at lunch, as well as how and with whom this meal was usually eaten. It was observed that despite the university students reporting little time available, most seek to have a company during meals. Even if it is a quick break for a snack, the students demonstrated the need to be together and share a meal with someone[16].

In this study it was also observed that most students participated in activities involving food. Likewise, a study carried out at the University of Beira Interior in Portugal noted that the participation of students in performing household chores at home varied between helping frequently and very often, with only 0.5% of students never participating in household chores[17]. Furthermore, a study that investigated the culinary skills and consumption of processed foods in university students in Barcelona, Spain[18] identified that more than half of the students were confident in relation to their culinary skills, feeling capable of preparing meals, handling, and storing food safely. Likewise, a study that evaluated the culinary skills of university students in Canada also showed that most participants reported feeling able to prepare meals[19]. This scenario is favorable to interventions aimed at encouraging healthy eating practices, such as the preparation and consumption of meals in accordance with the FGBP recommendations.

Having breakfast with company was more frequent among students in the older category. It is likely that these individuals are more aware of the importance of this meal and are more organized with their time and daily activities, which may favor having breakfast with company. In addition, it is possible that they have already formed a family, increasing the possibility of having meals together.

The practice of having meals with company was associated with housing composition and is more frequent among students who live with family members, when compared to those who live alone. Literature data corroborate these findings. Students from a university in Campo Grande, MS who live with their parents or friends reported eating together most of the time and referred to this ability of sharing this moment as a healthy act in their lives[8]. Another study, carried out in Chile, analyzing the commensal practices of adults living in Santiago, showed how these practices are influenced by the family structure and social context, and it is possible to observe that eating events occurred mainly in the company of family members[20]. In this context, university students from Chapecó, SC even mentioned preferring to have their meals at home with their family or friends[21]. For Flandrin and Montanari[22], the act of "eating together" is a way of maintaining or even starting new relationships. In the same way that the meal meets human physiological needs, it is fundamental to the development of a society's cultural identity.

In the present study, it can be observed that there is greater involvement of females, both in planning and preparing meals. It is known that, culturally, domestic work, including activities involving food, remains an essentially female task and is little shared with men. Studies

show that females have been responsible for preparing and purchasing food consumed by the family[23], as well as having higher averages of culinary skills[24]. Since the learning of these skills is associated with many behaviors related to cooking, practice, and food quality[25], questioning this cultural paradigm is a way to provide male students with the possibility of more autonomy in their self-care.

Some limitations of the present study must be mentioned. First, the population studied, being part of a single university, compromises the extrapolation of data. The results presented here should be interpreted with caution and with a view to raise new hypotheses on the subject. In addition, as a validated questionnaire was not found to meet the objectives of this study, the authors developed a self-administered instrument, which may have favored different interpretations by students, characterizing information bias. To minimize this issue, the instrument was tested prior to data collection in a population similar to that of the present study.

CONCLUSION

The present study showed that commensality is usually practiced by university students during lunch and dinner. Having breakfast with company is associated with older individuals, and those who live with family members are the ones who most often have the three meals together. In general, students participate in activities involving food, with a greater participation of female students in planning and preparing meals. Coexistence spaces at the university and public programs that aim to encourage, support, protect, and promote health are initiatives that can contribute to achieving the recommendations contained in the FGBP.

CRediT author statement

Conceptualization: Baptista, EF; Zanini, RV. Methodology: Baptista, EF; Fagundes, GP; Zanini, RV. Validation: Baptista, EF; Zanini, RV. Statistical analysis: Zanini, RV. Formal analysis: Almeida, LC; Baptista, EF; Zanini, RV. Research: Baptista, EF; Fagundes, GP; Zanini, RV. Resources: Almeida, LC; Zanini, RV. Elaboration of the original draft: Baptista, EF. Writing and proofreading: Almeida, LC; Baptista, EF; Fagundes, GP; Zanini, RV. Visualization: Almeida, LC; Baptista, EF; Fagundes, GP; Zanini, RV. Supervision: Almeida, LC; Zanini, RV. Project administration: Almeida, LC; Zanini, RV

All authors have read and agreed with the published version of the manuscript

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