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Reshaping the Traditional Pattern of Food Consumption in Romania through the Integration of Sustainable Diet Principles. A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: The Romanian traditional pattern of food consumption as a whole is no longer a reference point in shaping a healthy and sustainable food behavior due to the growing discrepancies between the return to traditions and the constraints of sustainable development, so the aim of this study is to provide solutions for reshaping the food pattern by incorporating the principles of sustainable diet. The research conducted is based on qualitative data and the semi-structured interview was used as method of data collection from a sample of 21 Romanians traditional food consumers. The study led to a typology of respondents that combines two consumption orientations, “healthy” and “convenience”, with two attitudes towards traditional diet, “hedonism” and “conformism”. Although respondents do not completely reject the idea of flexitarianism, they showed the tendency for overconsumption of meat-based traditional foods and a weak concern for environmental sustainability. For these reasons, a set of recommendations for a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population, focused on the relationship between traditionality, sustainability, and health, was put forward. The research findings show the need for supporting nutritional education programs and extensive information campaigns targeted at Romanian consumers to encourage the adoption of flexitarian style and the switch to a more sustainable diet in the near future.

Keywords: traditional pattern of food consumption; traditional dishes; Romania; qualitative research; flexitarianism; sustainable diet

1. Introduction

Eating more sustainably has become one of the greatest challenges in the 21st century. However, to achieve this purpose, specific changes are required in humans’ relationship with food, that should consider environmental, socio-cultural, and economic factors, as Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, Rome, Italy) [1] pointed out in the definition of sustainable diet.

“Sustainable diets are those diets with low environmental impacts that contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy lives for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable, are nutritionally adequate, safe, and healthy, and optimize natural and human resources”. Thus, a sustainable diet includes, among its major determinants, agriculture, health, socio-cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions.

Starting from a widely recognized idea in previous research [2,3] that traditional food products have a high contribution in preserving biological and cultural diversity and improving all aspects of

living, this paper is focused on cultural dimension of sustainable diet, expressed through the cultural pattern of food consumption.

Before the era of modern nutrition, people's food choices used to be guided by the habits of their own food culture, because, over time, food cultures have worked equally as guidelines on what, how, and why individuals were eating [4]. Also, as people were not sedentary, and raw materials were not ultra-processed, the food behavior based on local food habits could ensure their health and longevity [5–8].

In the modern period, especially in the aftermath of the Second World War, technical progress, which is closely linked to industrialization and urbanization [9–11], has had a lasting impact on food culture. Capital and technology have transformed agriculture into an industrial process, allowing the development of a powerful food industry [12]. Another key factor in food processing during this period was productivity. As Scholliers [13] showed, increased productivity has resulted in lower prices, generating fundamental changes in foods' hierarchy. Thus, many traditional food products, being industrially processed and becoming standardized and cheap, have gradually lost their special status.

Summarizing the ideas expressed in scientific literature, it can be stated that in terms of food transition amid industrialization, all developed countries have experienced, at different rates, the following tendencies: A shift from raw products to sterilized and frozen products after 1950, a constant increase in sophisticated manufactured ready to eat food and dishes [14,15] along with the shift from local shops to supermarkets and hypermarkets as main food providers from 1980 [11,16] and the progression of the commercial catering from 2000 [17].

In the last decades, along with and also as a consequence of the industrialization, which determine an obvious tendency to shape the food system after research, production, and distribution standards [12], the society has witnessed a systematic undermining of traditional food cultures everywhere [4]. Moreover, internationalization that has led to the emergence of a “world cuisine” [18], which, dominated by the logic of quantity [19], is characterized by the abundance of standardized products and uniformity of taste [5].

However, abundance has led to overconsumption, the immediate consequence being, as Baudrillard [20] warned few decades ago, the excessive exploitation of natural resources, most of them difficult and expensive to regenerate. Furthermore, the huge waste of food that doubled overconsumption can be considered one of the main sources of the today's energy and climate crisis.

On this background, sustainability has become part of the conversation about food system, both producers and consumers sharing the responsibility for it as Grunert [21] pointed out. While producers have committed to set climate targets across their businesses to limit the “worst impacts” of climate change [22], the transition towards a plant-based and low-meat diet it is considered one of the most important contributions of consumers to the environmental sustainability and a leading factor in adopting a sustainable diet [23,24].

Because of all dimensions of sustainable diet “healthy” has been considered the most important one [25], much research to date has focused on it [25–30]. Whilst the issue of health is crucial for nowadays sustainable food system, food is also implicated in the cultural identity, both individual and collective and expresses cultural ways of being [6,31–36]. This suggest that cultural dimension of sustainable diet requires further attention.

In Romania, as previous research has shown [32,37], the cultural food pattern and the traditional elements of food preferences are still important. However, looking at the composition of traditional meals, it can be noticed that meat is deeply embedded in Romanian food culture, being the main ingredient in most of traditional food products and dishes [38,39]. As research has highlighted that meat is the most environmentally harmful form of food consumption [23,40,41] and a leading factor in the development of non-communicable diet-related diseases (NCDs) [11,42,43], it is quite obvious that the Romanian cultural pattern of food consumption does not meet the principles of sustainability.

Taking as a starting point the fact that the eating habits derived from Romanian cultural traditions can no longer be a point of reference for a healthy life of today and, much less, for environmental

sustainability, this study, focused on cultural dimension of sustainable diet, addresses the following questions: How can a sustainable diet be built based on the reference points of the Romanian traditional pattern of food consumption? How can the traditional pattern of food consumption be redesigned in order to integrate the principles of sustainable diet?

Therefore, the goal of this qualitative research is to provide suggestions concerning the solutions for reshaping the traditional food pattern in Romania by incorporating the principles of sustainable diet. To do this, a semi-structured interview was performed aiming at providing an in-depth description of the traditional pattern of food consumption in Romania challenged by the sustainability requirements (emphasizing the characteristics in the behavior of Romanian traditional food consumers and understanding their willingness to make the switch to a sustainable diet).

Consequently, the main objectives of this study are as follows: To provide insights into Romanian consumers' perception and consumption habits of traditional foods, to bring evidence of consumers' attitude towards meat-based products, and to point out consumers' concerns for health and environmental sustainability.

The significance of this study lies in its more contemporary approach, as it analyzes the traditional pattern of food consumption in Romania in the light of sustainability principles, thereby differing from previous research that have focused either on sustainable food consumption [44–50] or traditional diet [51–58]. The proposed typology of Romanian traditional food consumers, that combines two consumption orientations, “healthy” and “convenience”, with two attitudes towards traditional diet, “hedonism” and “conformism”, represents an element of originality of our work. Plus, it puts forward a set of recommendations for a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population, focused on the relationship between traditionality, sustainability and health, which represents a step ahead of the Romanian Dietary Guidelines in force (Guidelines for a healthy diet) [59] and a unique initiative in Romania so far. Thus, the results of this study could be valuable for scholars and practitioners, as well as for policy makers in the field of nutrition and public health.

The paper is divided into seven sections. After the Introduction comes the section of Theoretical Underpinnings of Food Culture and Sustainable Diet, which is followed by Data Collection Method and Data Analysis, Results, and Discussion. The paper continues with a section of Recommendations, one of Conclusions, and ends with the section dedicated to Limitations.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings of Food Culture and Sustainable Diet

2.1. The Traditional Pattern of Food Consumption: Basic Elements

In any specific culture, we have to notice the key place and the central role of food [60], which has always integrated beliefs, practices, or representations shared by a group of individuals [33]. We draw on literature to explore the range of meanings that food can communicate: A fundamental, vital, and everyday act [60], a medium of communication between individuals and about the self [61], or a privileged support of social rituals and conviviality [62].

Food is also a central pillar of cultural identity, because the traditional cuisine patrimony is passed on to future generations and the food choices of different cultural groups are strongly connected to ethnic behaviors and religious beliefs [36]. Moreover, food is the most accessible level of a specific culture, because enjoying its traditional foods one can understand the core of its spirit [33].

With regard to the definition of traditional foods, from the standpoints expressed in previous studies of Trichopoulou et al. [51], Pieniak et al. [63], Guerrero et al. [53], DeSoucey [54], and Boza and Munoz [64], which captured different issues related to this concept, two main dimensions that generally characterize traditional food products emerge: Traditional ingredients, which refer to raw materials or primary products whose characteristics are closely tied to an identifiable geographical area (reflecting the idea of “terroir”), and traditional production methods, meaning artisanal methods applied before the era of mass production.

In any specific culture, no matter how popular, traditional foods are seen as an expression of history and lifestyle, as they have been consumed for an extensive period of time [54]. However, as long as traditional foods frame the gastronomic heritage passed down from one generation to another [65] and considering that tradition rarely honors foods that are not palatable and healthy [51,55,57], one could expect they provide sanogenetic benefits and sensory satisfaction.

However, the fact that foods are traditional does not necessarily mean that they implicitly provide health benefits [52]. In some European countries, where the traditional cuisine is richer in meat and fat, the traditional foods are overall considered less healthy, at least from the perspective of current dietary recommendations [65,66].

As for Romanian traditional cuisine, in prior literature [67–70], this is metaphorically compared with a kaleidoscope made up of countless fragments, representing elements of originality plus items adopted from different cultures (Dacians, Celts, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Slavs, Ottomans, Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, French, etc.). Many foods and dishes originating from other cultures were adapted, most often in a very creative way, and they have become, over time, local symbols of traditional Romanian cuisine (such as force-meat rolls in cabbage leaves or grilled minced meat rolls). This evidence confirms the findings of Weichselbaum et al. [52] according to which even typical local recipes are often the result of cultural exchange.

The influence of religious habits and beliefs on traditional foods and dishes emphasized by Parasecoli [71] can be seen in Romanian traditional food pattern too. The study of Roman [72], underlining the salient role played by religion in Romanian society, shows that the feasts established by the church have contributed over time to the enrichment of Romanian gastronomic culture, through the great variety of festive dishes.

In terms of traditional products and dishes, Petrescu et al. [38] pointed out that meat is deeply embedded in Romanian food culture (especially pork, but also beef, chicken, or lamb), being used in various traditional dishes (soup, force-meat rolls in cabbage leaves, pork stew, sausages, bean ragout with smoked pork, grilled minced meat rolls, meatballs, etc.) [39,73–76].

Although the traditional food consumption model in Romania has always been characterized by high consumption of meat-based products and fat, our ancestors had a better health and a higher longevity, and obesity was almost unknown [7]. This paradox can be explained through a strict compliance of previous generations to certain rules in food consumption, such as [77]: The ritualic dimension of meals, the emphasis on diversity, naturalness, and freshness of foods, the moderation in food and beverages consumption, and the observance of the fasting periods.

All the above lead to the idea that the effectiveness of a food model in preserving people health depends on certain particular circumstances [51,56]. Once circumstances change, it is less likely that the traditional model could still be a landmark for a healthy lifestyle [7].

2.2. The Impact of Industrialization Over Traditional Food Cultures

Traditional culinary cultures have been influenced by the structural changes that have taken place in our society [78]. Globalization, urbanization, modernization, and migration have modeled and transformed the way in which modern civilization consumes food [79] and have led to the emergence of a “world cuisine” based on standardized products and uniformity of taste.

In the wake of the Second World War, in Western societies, capital and technology transformed agriculture into an industrial process [80] and led to development of a strong food industry based on mass production, which brought to market a great diversity and a high volume of standardized food products. These products were subsequently distributed at reduced price [33].

Against this background, many of the once handcrafted traditional foods (bread, charcuterie, cheese, etc.) started to be industrially processed and mass sold in supermarkets and hypermarkets, losing their special status [13]. Moreover, in the last decades, the increased development of commercial catering sectors in supermarkets and hypermarkets should be noticed [17], which included cooked

dishes and pastry products based on traditional recipes. Thus, the local traditional cultures have faced a constant undermining as a main consequence of the industrialization process.

However, abusive consumption of industrially ultra-processed foods, abundantly available on the international market, both energy-dense and nutrient-poor, has led to a situation that Pollan [4] called the nutritional equivalent of inflation, causing individuals to consume more and more to get the same amount of essential nutrients. Such an unbalanced eating behavior determined individuals to become simultaneous overfed and undernourished, a status defined by Popkin et al. [81] as the “double burden of malnutrition”. This was one of the leading risk factors of the great prevalence worldwide of non-communicable diet-related diseases (NCDs), such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, and cancer [82,83].

Alongside the increasing prevalence of NCDs, the abundance and overconsumption have generated huge amounts of food loss and waste imposing serious environmental, social, and economic consequences [28].

2.3. *Today's Challenge of a Sustainable Diet*

In the framework of today's world, characterized by serious environmental and public health issues caused by the overconsumption of high processed foods, sustainability has become a challenge for both food producers and consumers. According to Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, London, England) and Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition (BCFN, Rome, Italy) report [84], “sustainability refers to the ability of the food system to be maintained without depletion and exhaustion of its natural resources or compromises to its health and integrity”.

The challenge for producers is to limit the worst impacts of climate change and to reformulate their products in order to fit dietary recommendations.

Lately, a focus on consumers' responsibility for environmental sustainability can be noticed, being considered that they have a major role in making food chain more sustainable. Recent research [22,40,41] has claimed that one of the most important consumer contributions, along with other actions such as recycling, favoring locally sourced foods, or reducing food waste, could be the transition towards a plant-based and low-meat diet, as meat has been identified the most environmentally harmful from all food products. Therefore, to make the switch to a more environmentally sustainable diet, consumers are to firstly reduce meat consumption. Thus, a flexitarian style appears to be the right choice from a health and environmental point of view [85].

A huge emphasis is given to flexitarianism in national dietary guidelines that integrated health and sustainability, for example those developed in Sweden, Germany, Brazil, or Qatar to promote sustainable diet among population. These guidelines highlight that a plant-based diet has advantages both on health and environment, while meat has the worst impacts [26,86].

With regard to attitude towards meat, according to Derbyshire [87], consumers fall in three categories: “meat-eaters”, “meat-reducers”, and “meat-avoiders”. The typical “meat-eaters” are reluctant to give up meat and keep consuming it for hedonistic reasons [88–90]. “Meat-reducers” are those pretty concerned about their own health and environmental sustainability who are willing to reduce to a certain extent the amount of meat [23,24]. In the latter category, it has been noticed that an increasing number of consumers very concerned about their own health and environmental sustainability have adopted the extreme attitude of doing away with meat and other animal origin foods, embracing veganism as eating style [91]. These consumers can be labelled as “meat-avoiders”.

This new attitude of rejecting meat is strongly criticized by supporters of flexitarianism, who argue that meat can be part of a sustainable world [24]. If meat is produced in a sustainable manner, it is the best way to feed ourselves and to use the land [92,93].

However, sustainable diets should not be only healthy and environmentally friendly as it was highlighted in most research to date [29,30,43–50], they should also be culturally appropriate, promoting and preserving traditions that involve culturally acceptable foods [1,94]. Due to the increasing interest

of consumers for traditional foods that has been noticed lately [53,63,65], there is a hope for future development of sustainable diets.

As for Romania, there is a growing interest for traditional food [8] amid the development and the increasing economic importance of the gastronomic rural tourism [95]. However, as it was previously shown, because the cultural model of food consumption is based on high meat consumption, there is a conflict between returning to traditions and the issue of sustainability. In this context, the Romanian cultural pattern of food consumption as a whole can no longer be a reference point in shaping a healthy and sustainable food behavior.

The paper aims to provide a solution to this conflict, proposing to reshape the traditional food pattern by incorporating the principles of sustainability. Considering that the 2018 Food Sustainability Index (which measures countries' performance on sustainable agriculture, nutritional challenges, and food waste and loss) was 64.4 for Romania, ranking it among average-scoring nations worldwide (position no. 44 out of 67 countries) [96], a more appropriate approach is to create and implement sustainable diet guidelines for Romanian population folded into the cultural pattern of food consumption.

3. Data Collection Methods

This qualitative study, aiming at providing solutions for reshaping the traditional pattern of food consumption in Romania by incorporating the principles of sustainable diet, is situated in the interpretivist paradigm. The starting point of the epistemological approach of this research was the fact that the social world is far too complex to be described by a set of law-like generalizations in the way the physical one can be, because any social actor has his own way to see and understand the world [97].

The research question, seeking to explain how a sustainable diet for Romanian population could be built based on the reference points of the traditional pattern of food consumption, requires an in-depth description of the behavior of traditional food consumers. In this respect, the semi-structured interview was the method of data collection from a selected sample of Romanian traditional food consumers. Although the research interview may not lead to objective information, it is considered an useful tool by scholars as it captures many of the subjects' views on a specific phenomenon [98–101]. Plus, it was assumed that subjects' viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in an openly designed interview [102].

3.1. Designing the Interview Guide

The interview guide (Appendix A), used as supportive tool, consisted of a list of questions, grouped in three sections. The introductory one comprises questions related to demographic issues and socio-cultural context of the participants. The questions of the second section refer to consumption behavior of Romanian traditional foods and were formulated based on the food-related lifestyle model of Grunert [21]. The questions from the third part are meant to highlight respondents' willingness to make the switch to a more sustainable diet.

3.2. Sampling

Given the aim of the research, a purposive sample [103] was used, composed of 21 information-rich participants, recruited from the acquaintances of the research team, with the attachment for Romanian traditional cuisine as inclusion criterion (meaning frequent consumption of traditional foods and respect for Romanian culinary traditions). The criterion to establish the size of the sample was data saturation: The interviews were performed until no significantly new information was produced that would allow for generating any new code [98]. The sample consisted of 5 men and 16 women, aged from 30 to 68 years. They were all urbans, living in Bucharest, but born in different regions of Romania. Table A1 (Appendix B) shows the characteristics of the sample.

3.3. *Piloting and Conducting the Interviews*

To ensure that each member of the research team was thoroughly familiar with the focus of the interview, the entire process was role-played before. The work in pairs was the manner agreed for conducting the interviews, with one researcher being interviewer and the other observer.

Following Kvale's [100] advice, aiming at avoiding biases from both participants and interviewers, the following basic rules were established for conducting the interview: To speak in modest amounts and to be clear (to ask simple and short questions), to ask follow-up questions (prompts and probes), to be empathetic, to be flexible, to stay neutral, to analyze when interviewing, to be open, and to maintain a good rapport. All in all, the interviews were carried out around the principle highlighted by Spradley [104] "learn from people, rather than study them".

Interviews were carried out between September and December 2019. They were held in a neutral space, a meeting room from the research team's faculty. Each individual interview lasted about 60 min. The discussions were audio recorded with the agreement of the respondents.

3.4. *Data Analysis*

Keeping in mind that a compelling story, resulting through data narrative, is the very essence of qualitative research [105,106], a comprehensive treatment of the collected data was done in order to provide an in-depth description of the Romanian traditional pattern of food consumption challenged by the sustainability requirements. After each interview, the team that conducted it produced the transcript, gave codes to the data presented as text with the support of Microsoft Word and Excel (by counting relevant keywords), and built-up categories. Thus, data analysis was an ongoing process, as data collection and analysis did not occur in a linear sequence but alongside each other, as it is recommended by scholars [98,107]. After each batch of three interviews had been completed, the researchers had a meeting to discuss the findings and to agree on the differences between the identified themes. Also, the decision regarding whether or not to continue to interview was made at each of these meeting.

At the end of the process, when data saturation was achieved, the research team discussed all the findings and agreed on the final categories. The relationships between categories were further analyzed.

4. **Data Analysis, Results, and Discussion**

4.1. *Emergent Themes from Data Analysis*

Based on the data collected during the interviews, the Romanian pattern of food consumption was analyzed, emphasizing the patterns in the behavior of traditional food consumers. The emergent themes data are presented below.

4.1.1. *Perception of Traditional Foods and Valued Attributes*

With regard to respondents' perception of traditional food, a reinterpretation of traditionality was noticed, which goes beyond the limits of regulated framework. The concept of "traditional food" appears to be associated with the age of the recipe and the traditional habit rather than the legalized certification process. Thus, under the umbrella of traditional food, alongside certified products, the following categories with non-attested traditionality were included by respondents: Foods made by small local producers, based on traditional recipes and methods; industrially mass-processed products that are based on traditional recipes and reflect traditional consumption habits; and products made in individual households, according to recipes, customs, and traditional methods.

In relation to non-attested (non-certified) categories identified by the respondents as traditional products, some clarifications are required.

The first issue is related to the age of the traditional recipe, implicitly of the custom it reflects. In respondents' opinion, to be traditional, a recipe and a custom must have a reasonable age; that is,

to be passed down from generation to generation. This fact, which also operates as an expression of cultural identity, is in line with Almerico [36], Shapin [31], and Crowther [60].

The second issue is related to industrially processed foods sold in hypermarkets and supermarkets, which, in respondents' perception, have the "image" of traditional product. Consumers perceive these products as being traditional too, because they are based on traditional recipes and reflect Romanian traditional consumption habits. This may be explained by the fact that hypermarket and supermarket are the favorite places to buy food of Romanian urban consumers [35,108].

The respondents' positive attitude towards Romanian traditional foods is based firstly on certain special symbolic meaning associated with them, reflected by the feeling of belonging to both local community and their family or that of living the traditional life. Respondents also choose to consume traditional products because they find both intrinsic and extrinsic quality attributes that have previously been shown [2,3,63,109,110] that consumers generally look for in food items, such as: Authenticity, healthiness, naturalness, tastiness, or freshness. The interest to support products made in Romania and small local producers emerged as driver for traditional food consumption as well, in line with the study of Lengard Almli et al. [55].

Local traditional products and dishes are found in the respondent's diet in a large and very high proportion, with one of the main reasons being a high level of local pride associated to their consumption.

"I come from the Transylvanian area and I am very proud of my origin, and the consumption of traditional products specific to my area gives me the feeling that I have not lost my roots living in a cosmopolitan city like Bucharest for more than 25 years." (R10)

Furthermore, the desire to preserve the traditional habits passed down from generation to generation is another cultural motivation, a fact that it is stressed out by previous research [111,112]. The recipes learned by parents or grandparents are considered authentic as they are based on local ingredients perceived as tastier than imported ones.

"I learned to cook most of the traditional dishes from my mother and grandmother. For more than 20 years I have kept a notebook with traditional recipes of my grandmother and my mother. For example, recipes for spicy eggplant paste, for cucumbers in vinegar and pickles are passed down from my grandmother to my mother, and my mother passed them down to me. I also have some cooking tools kept from my grandmother, for example a round cast iron tray that I use to cook steak and pie and a few wooden spoons." (R18)

In addition, there is also a psychological motivation, the respondents asserting that the products specific to the native area remind them of the taste of childhood or pleasant events spent together with the family, which they update through these products. The same idea was highlighted by Raoult-Wack [62], Pollan [4], and Almerico [36] who claimed that food symbolic meanings are based on association with other meaningful experiences, because the smell is connected to emotions and has to do with past events from one's life.

"I often cook the cheese pie according to my grandmother's (Muntenia area) recipe, because every time I eat it, I think of my happy childhood in the countryside and the unforgettable holidays spent with my grandparents...and this feeling I like to recall as often as possible." (R3)

4.1.2. Purchasing Context

Although some of the respondents stated that they usually prepare certain traditional Romanian products in their own household (sausages, blood pudding, smoked lard, eggplant paste, jam, meat loaf, Romanian sponge cake, pickles, canned vegetables, etc.), most of the traditional foods are purchased from the commercial network. Generally, the older respondents showed a greater concern in preparing the traditional food products at home, while younger respondents are more focused on buying them from different sources, the main reason being the need to save time.

The interviewees stated that they purchase traditional foods either alone or with their life partner, the favorite places being, in general, the agri-food markets, individual peasant households, culinary fairs or festivals, shops of local producers, and, to a lesser extent, supermarkets or hypermarkets.

Regarding the favorite places for buying traditional products, it is worth emphasizing the appetite of the majority of respondents for participation in gastronomic fairs or festivals. Moreover, as respondents reported, participation in such events predisposed them to purchase and consume traditional food products, sometimes more than necessary, as they had been stimulated by the festive atmosphere and seduced by the very attractive manner of products' presentation. These neo-tribal aspects of consumption, which characterize respondents' behavior, fit into the big picture of the today's hyperconsumption society based on experiential consumption, as it was described in previous literature [113,114].

A particular aspect can be noticed around the holidays, when respondents who are not home-cooking oriented buy the specific traditional dishes from catering companies or restaurants with Romanian traditional menu, which have adapted their offer and promotion strategy to meet this need of home delivery.

Another special situation, which arises only in the case of a small number of respondents but is worth mentioning because it reflects a very close relationship based on trust between consumer and supplier, refers to the preference for buying certain traditional foods or ingredients only from a single local small producer.

"I get used to buying meat and traditional based-meat products only from X. He is our "family butcher" and I trust that everything I buy from him is safe, fresh, safe and high quality." (R15)

4.1.3. Consumption Situations and Meals Significance

Respondents' consumption situation of the main meals during the weekdays and weekend are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents' consumption situation.

Meal	Consumption Situations
Breakfast	Weekdays and weekend: mainly taken at home with family
Lunch	Weekdays: mainly taken at the work place with colleagues (except retirees who usually take lunch at home) Weekend: taken at home, together with family (this being a traditional habit)
Dinner	Weekdays: taken at home, together with family Weekend: taken either with family or with friends (often eating out)

As for significance, family meals are perceived by respondents, especially those with specific attitude towards food preparation, as an important way of strengthening the family cohesion. Family dinners on working days are moments where all members gather around the table and share with each other the events they went through during the day. Family lunches during the weekend, which take place more often on Sundays, have a ritualistic dimension for respondents, being a specific custom of the Romanian culture ("Sunday in the family"). Usually, Sunday meals include close relatives of respondents (parents, siblings, cousins) and food is freshly cooked for this occasion. In addition to the sense of unity they offer, these meals provide an opportunity for respondents to spend time with their family. The meanings associated by interview participants with family meals overlap with the finding of Moisio et al. [115], Casotti [116], and Constanda et al. [117].

"For me, family meal is not just about food. It means equally preparing food together, setting the table, gathering around the table, making small talk, relaxing, in other words spending time with family. Having meals together gives me the feeling that we are a united family." (R3)

When eating out, most respondents prefer restaurants with Romanian traditional menu, either for the authenticity of the recipes, or for the desire to discover the taste of traditional dishes that they do not prepare at home. Eating out is usually done in the company of friends.

4.1.4. Eating Habits and Meals Composition

Regarding the number of meals per day, most interview participants stated that they usually eat three meals a day. Those who usually eat only two meals a day have argued either some disruption of the meal schedule due to the workload schedule, or a self-imposed restriction related to giving up the last meal of the day, due to the increased concern of maintaining the silhouette or weight loss.

Table 2 shows the most consumed Romanian traditional food products and dishes during the three main meals of the days and snacks.

Table 2. The most consumed Romanian traditional food products.

Meal	Consumed Products
Breakfast	ham, smoked lard, moss fillets, sausages, virsli, salami, carp roe caviar, “telemea” cheese, pressed cheese, kneaded cheese, yogurt, milk, eggs, eggplant paste, bread, butter, jam, honey Soups: Meat (pork, poultry, beef) and vegetables Main course: Force-meat rolls in cabbage leaves, pork stew, meat and vegetable stew, grilled minced meat rolls with French fries, steak, meatballs, schnitzels, sausages, peppers stuffed with minced meat and rice
Lunch	Sides: Mashed potatoes, French fries, rice, baked vegetables Salads: Fresh vegetable salads in season and, in the off-season, pickled vegetables or vegetables in vinegar Desserts: Pie (with cheese, apple, or pumpkin filling), Romanian sponge cake, sweet cheese dumplings with cream and jam, crepes with jam, foam cake or fruit cake, crème brûlée, homemade cakes with different cream fillings
Dinner	polenta with cheese and sour cream, meat and vegetables stew, steak with garnish (potatoes, rice, or vegetables), fish brine, sausage, macaroni and cheese baked pudding, rice with milk pudding
Snacks	ham, sausages, cheese, eggplant paste, yogurt, homemade cakes, pie, pudding, crepes, semolina pudding, jam, yogurt, fresh or dried fruits Alcoholic beverages: Wine, pálinka, or fruit-based liqueurs (sour cherry drink, bilberry drink)
Beverages	Non-alcoholic beverages: Coffee, fruit tea, medicinal herbs tea, fruits compotes and syrups (plums, cherries, sour cherries, peaches, grapes, berries, etc.)

The dishes (especially those for lunch and dinner) are homemade, with respondents generally being home-cooking oriented, a feature of Romanian consumers stressed out in previous research [29–31,62]. Most female respondents of the sample are used to cooking several dishes at the end of the week in larger quantities, which are consumed alternately during the following week.

Some of the interview participants stated that they are religious persons and respect fasting periods, when they consume only traditional products of vegetable origin.

The respondents’ traditional eating habits on Christmas, Easter, and other events (birthdays, commemorations, and other religious holidays) are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Festive meals’ composition.

Festive Meal	Consumed Products
Christmas	Dishes (based on pork meat): Force-meat rolls in cabbage leaves, steak, pork stew, sausage, bacon, smoked lard, meat loaf, blood pudding, pork jelly, pork greaves Desserts: Romanian sponge cake
Easter	Dishes (based on lamb meat): Soup, steak, “drob”, lamb stew Desserts: Romanian sponge cake
Other events (birthdays, commemorations, religious holidays)	Dishes: Force-meat rolls in cabbage leaves, steak or grilled meat, grilled minced meat rolls, cabbage with pork hocks, boeuf salad Desserts: Romanian sponge cake, cake, homemade cakes, koliva, sweet dough martyr figurines

The discussions with the respondents outlined the existence of some forms of seasonality in consumption, in the sense that the rhythm of consumption of certain foods is not constant throughout the year. The existence of this seasonality in consumption has multiple explanations, being influenced by many factors, either natural or anthropogenic. The most important influencing factor is the alternation of vegetative cycles, based on the existence of four seasons, which generates a higher consumption of fresh vegetables in spring and summer and one of preserved vegetables and fruits during winter (pickles, eggplant pastes, compotes, jams, etc.). Another factor is religion (majority orthodox), which, in the fasting periods, imposes strict restriction in the diet composition (by prohibiting the consumption of animal origin foods). The issue of seasonality as reflected by this research is in line with the findings of Morăraşu and Drugă [118] who highlighted the significant role played in the evolution of Romanian gastronomic culture by its particular geo-political context, including the cyclic change of four seasons, and also the alternation of fasting and fast-free periods.

Regarding the composition of meals, the conclusion that emerges from data sources analysis is the obvious preference for traditional products and dishes based on animal origin ingredients, which are found to be much more widely used in the daily diet of respondents compared to those of vegetable origin. Also, the preference for the consumption of meat and meat-based products at all three main meals of the day should be noticed, as well as for high-sugar products, especially in desserts and snacks, habits that are in obvious contradiction with the principles of healthy eating [7,83,119,120].

4.1.5. Health and Environmental Concerns

When asked about the risks of their eating style based on Romanian traditional products, most respondents indicated: A too high amount of meat or/and a too high intake of fat, salt, and sugar. Respondents perception matches-up to the findings of previous research in this area [7,119,121].

“I am a gourmand and I really like the taste of Romanian traditional foods, although I am aware of the high amount of fat they provide. In addition, I cannot refrain myself from consuming traditional pastry. However, the weight gain has started to worry me a lot lately and it is clear that I don’t have to postpone any longer a change in my diet. But it is an issue of will too ... ” (R1)

Regarding the attitude towards meat, the idea of substituting, in certain percentage, the meat from the recipes of traditional dishes with ingredients of vegetal origin (for example: Mushrooms and other vegetables, pulses, rice, etc.) was accepted only by few respondents, those who have become concerned with the long-term negative consequences of high level of meat consumption. According to Derbyshire [87] they can be considered “meat-reducers” type. Only one respondent (female) falls into the category “meat-avoiders”, as she declared she had completely given up eating meat years ago, being vegetarian. She cooks Romanian traditional foods, but only with ingredients of vegetal origin.

Most respondents are typical “meat-eaters”, eating meat within their meals every day, a finding in line with Honkanen [70]. Although these respondents are aware that they consume meat in quite large quantities, they do not appear open to switch to a plant-based and low-meat diet, which is the core principle of flexitarian eating style [23,85,87].

Also, it was noticed that respondents who stated that they respect the fasting period are not interested in reducing the meat consumption too. They are “meat-reducers” by default, as during the fasting periods religion prohibits the consumption of animal origin foods [122,123]. Regular fasting may be somehow associated with the idea of flexitarianism but being mostly based on religious reasons rather than one’s own health and environmental concerns.

Respondents’ environmental concern is generally expressed through the support for local producers. Certain locally sourced foods (most often fruits, vegetables, cheese, dairy, eggs, sausages, meat, beverages, jam, eggplant paste) are bought from small producers not only for their high sensory and nutritional quality, but also because their production is perceived less polluting compared to that of conventional foods.

“About 90% of basic food products used in our household to prepare traditional foods and dishes are purchased from small producers (animal and vegetable farms).” (R8)

“We usually eat home-cooked traditional food, with no unhealthy added substances and no taste enhancers, for which we largely use locally sourced ingredients bought from peasant households of our native area (Muntenia).” (R5)

In order to avoid food waste, a large part of the respondents stated that they used to offer the surplus of food to other people (other extended family members, neighbors, needy people).

Only few interviewees declared they occasionally collect separately the food waste. The weak concern of respondents for environmental sustainability can be explained by the Romanian consumers' lack of skills and tools to deal with their food-related activities [124].

4.2. Profiling the Respondents

To build the respondents' typology, we explored the respondents' consumption experience of traditional food products, firstly documenting any evidence relevant to their consumption orientation. Data source analysis revealed “healthy” and “convenience” as the main features of traditional foods that guide respondents' consumption decision. This results in two main categories of traditional products that consumers are interested in: Healthy foods and convenience food.

The choices of healthy-oriented respondents are focused on traditional foods that are natural, less processed, seasonal, and locally sourced. These foods are purchased mainly from small producers or cooked/produced in their own household. As previous studies have shown [43,56,125], the desire to fulfil the essential nutrients, to maintain health and body weight, or environmental concern are the most important reasons for choosing healthy products.

Convenience-oriented respondents seem to be less interested in nutritional balance, but rather in the desire to save time, as they usually have a very alert pace of life. That is why their choices mainly concern traditional semi-prepared or ready-to-eat foods, purchased from supermarkets/hypermarkets or from catering network. Usually, these consumers prefer to eat out and they are not interested in cooking, as it was pointed out by Buitrago-Vera [126].

Next, we looked for evidence that the identified dimensions, “healthy” and “convenience”, are corroborated with different data sources. We found out the evidence in data related to respondents' attitude towards traditional diet, which revealed an oscillation between indulgence and restraint [112]. We conclude that a high level of indulgence in eating behavior can be associated with “hedonism”, while a high level of restraint can be associated with “conformism”.

Hedonistic attitude generally characterizes consumers self-declared as gourmands who give a huge emphasis to the olfactory-gustatory characteristics of foods that strongly stimulate their appetite [34]. It was noticed that respondents with hedonistic attitude are “meat eaters” and also very fond of pastry. This finding resonates with those of previous studies of Bobe et al. [119] and Hemann et al. [120], which revealed that the attitude of striving for personal enjoyment in food consumption often results in overweight related health issues.

Respondents with conformist attitudes tend to guide their eating behavior according to the principles of healthy diet, are attached to Romanian traditions, cook and consume traditional foods in daily life and on special occasions, fast, and are concerned about sustainability to a greater extent than the rest of the sample. Broadly similar findings can be identified in the study of Van Huy et al. [125], where consumers included in the “conservative” cluster pay attention to healthy food, like to cook, and prefer food originated from their own region.

The pairs “healthy”–“convenience” and “hedonism”–“conformism” should not be considered as rigid categories, but rather as poles between which respondents' choices and their general attitude towards traditional diet range. Therefore, what differentiates consumers is not the total acceptance or rejection of a particular pole, but the clearer orientation towards one or another of the poles of each pair. For example, the healthy-oriented respondents claimed that they had sometimes consumed

foods from the “convenience” category too, especially if they were being “healthy”. Similarly, the convenience-oriented respondents also declared that they had consumed foods that fall more clearly into “healthy” category too, as they had been firstly time saving.

Moreover, some respondents with clear hedonistic behavior said they were sometimes restraining from certain foods, at least for medical reasons. On the opposite, consumer that seems to be generally conformists manifested hedonic shades for certain foods.

By combining the two orientations with the two attitudes, four typologies in which most respondents fit can emerge: Healthy hedonist, healthy conformist, convenience hedonist, and convenience conformist. However, research data showed that there are also some respondents who appear to be in an area of neutrality, located halfway between both “healthy”–“convenience” and “hedonism”–“conformism”. Thus, to the four abovementioned typologies, one more can be added—the careless consumer (Figure 1).

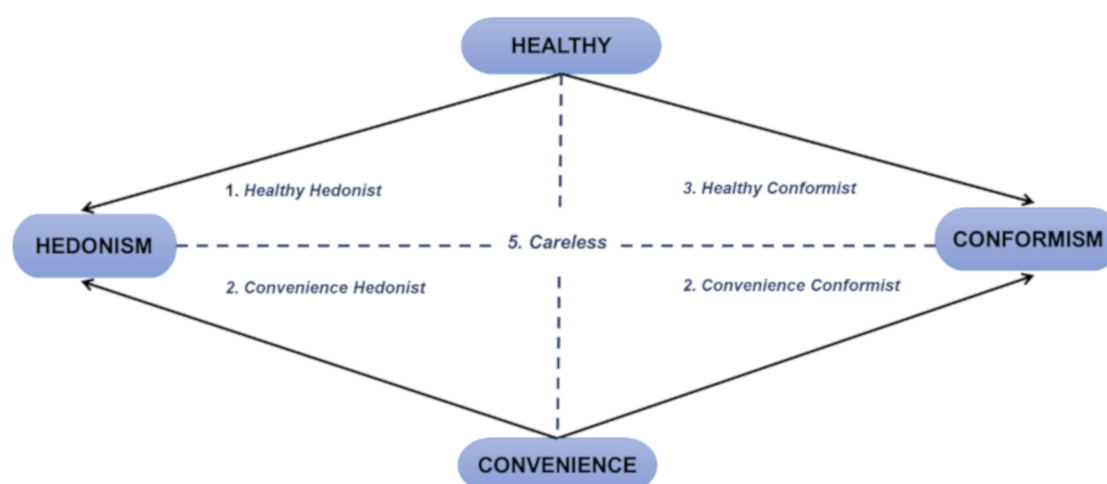


Figure 1. Respondents typology.

The emergent types of the research respondents can be briefly described as follows:

- Healthy hedonist: Equally concerned about food quality and personal pleasure; healthy eating is a matter of ethics too for him;
- Healthy conformist: Highly demanding of the quality of food, likes cooking traditional dishes, respects the traditions, fasts, concerned about his health and environmental sustainability;
- Convenience hedonist: Mainly concerned about personal pleasure, manifests a low interest towards the quality of food, being mostly interested in convenience;
- Convenience conformist: Chooses products that can satisfy his health concern, but that are convenience in the same time, respects traditions, fasts, and is not too fond of cooking;
- Careless: Appreciates both the ready-to-eat and home-made traditional foods and is not interested in quality and freshness; he is the least concerned about food production and environment.

Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents in each of the five proposed typologies.

Table 4. Respondents distribution in each type.

Respondent Type	Number of Respondents	Respondent Code
Healthy hedonist	8	R2, R3, R4, R10, R14, R16, R18, R21
Healthy conformist	5	R5, R8, R11, R13, R20
Convenience hedonist	3	R1, R7, R12
Convenience conformist	3	R6, R15, R19
Careless	2	R9, R17

4.3. Research Trustworthiness

Regarding the validity, reliability, and objectivity of our research, we followed the approach of Lincoln and Guba [127] who introduced the alternative concept of trustworthiness. It is made up of four criteria, each having a parallel criterion in quantitative research [98]: Credibility (equivalent to internal validity), transferability (equivalent to external validity), dependability (equivalent to reliability), and confirmability (equivalent to objectivity).

Credibility is assured through the techniques of triangulation and respondent validation [98].

As recommended by Denzin [128], triangulation was done through a long engagement of the research team with data sources, repeated reading of interviews' transcripts, continuous observation of the most important features of the investigated phenomenon, and identification of counter evidence ("negative case"). The respondent R19 (female) who is vegetarian was treated as the "negative case" of this research, because her eating style differs from the main body of evidence. Although this respondent adopted an extreme attitude by not eating meat and other animal origin foods, her case shows that the cultural pattern of food consumption, traditionally based on a high consumption of meat-based products, as it was shown by previous research as well as the present one, can be reshaped. If it is possible to prepare traditional foods based only on vegetal origin ingredients, then it should be even simpler to reduce the amount of meat in the diet.

To obtain respondent validation, the findings were challenged by three of the research participants (R7, R11, and R6) to confirm that the investigator's understanding was correct [98]. The respondents' validation was obtained, as they confirmed that the findings are linked to the reality and no additional information was needed.

Considering the in-depth and detail-rich description of Romanian traditional food culture provided by the carried-out research, the transferability of its findings to another context could be feasible [127].

With regard to the dependability and confirmability criteria, we performed an "auditing" process, following the approach of Lincoln and Guba [127], cited by Bryman ([98] pp. 392–393). Therefore, the findings along with the entire set of data were submitted to a peer (marketing professor) to check all the phases of the research process. The validation was obtained, as the peer confirmed that proper procedures were followed, and personal values of researchers did not obviously bias the results.

5. Recommendations

As the findings of the semi-structured interview showed, even though respondents do not completely reject the idea of flexitarianism, the tendency for overconsumption of meat-based traditional foods and a weak concern for environmental sustainability are obvious among them. Therefore, the initial assumption according to which eating habits derived from Romanian cultural traditions can no longer be a point of reference both for a healthy lifestyle of nowadays consumers and environmental sustainability was confirmed.

Consequently, for Romanian traditional food products to reach their full potential in preserving biological and cultural diversity and improving all aspects of living, the need for reshaping the Romanian cultural pattern of food consumption by integrating the principle of sustainable diet is clear.

The research team's initiative of redesigning the Romanian traditional food pattern had the starting point of the healthy eating pattern promoted by the Romanian Dietary Guidelines in force (entitled Guidelines for a healthy diet), elaborated by Graur et al. [59]. Even though these guidelines do not have a direct focus on the sustainability, through some of its principles, such as eat plenty of cereals, eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, choose foods that contain small amounts of fat, and eat highly processed foods high in sugar sparingly, they might have different impacts on the environment.

We propose to policy makers in the field of nutrition and public health to elaborate a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population, which includes key messages more focused on the relationship between traditionality, sustainability, and health. In this regard, we suggest the consideration of the key components of sustainable diet proposed by Lairon [129]: Wellbeing and

health; equity and fair trade; cultural heritage and skills; food and nutrient needs; food security and accessibility; biodiversity, environment, climate; and eco-friendly, local, seasonal foods.

The key messages included in the new model of sustainable diet could be organized in the following three pillars: Tips targeting foods and cooking methods; directions for reinforcing the traditionality; and general recommendations addressing health and sustainability.

Considering the experience of other countries that already have integrated sustainability in their dietary guidelines [26,86], we suggest that the first pillar (tips targeting foods and cooking methods) comprises key messages concerning recommended foods, foods to be eaten sparingly, and the healthiest cooking alternatives. To be convincing for consumers, the recommended foods could be gathered in a section entitled “Focus to”, which will emphasize the locally grown fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds, whole cereals, lean protein sources, cold-pressed vegetable oils, etc. For the other category, foods to be eaten sparingly, we propose to be included in a section entitled “Try to avoid”, which will stress the health risks of saturated and trans fats, sugar and sweets, or strong alcoholic beverages [130]. As for the healthiest cooking alternatives, our proposal is to be gathered in a “Cooking methods” section, which should briefly explain the advantages and risks of different heat treatment methods applied to food.

We propose that the key messages included in the second pillar (directions for reinforcing the traditionality) be grouped in two sections, one underlining the importance of eating in humans’ life and the other focusing consumers’ attention to locally sourced and seasonal as main attributes of traditional foods. The section “Make eating important in your life” should include messages that remind consumers to eat regularly and respect the timetable for the main meals of the day, to slow down the pace of everyday life and enjoy meals with family and friends and to share cooking skills [4,5] so that Romanian traditional recipes and cooking methods to be preserved and passed on to future generations. The messages included in the other section, which may be entitled “Consider seasonality”, should mainly advice Romanian consumers to focus on seasonal and locally produced foods, to eat canned local vegetables and fruits in the off-season, to eat light meals during the warm season, and to eat pork and charcuterie moderately during the cold season [77,123].

As for the key messages clustered in the third pillar (general recommendations addressing health and sustainability), our suggestion is that they be conceived as a catchy checking list of recommended actions, such as be active, stay hydrated, drink alcohol in moderation, eat small servings, limit the consumption of ultra-processed foods, reduce sugar consumption, be flexitarian, use a shopping list, check food labels, reduce your household’s food waste and loss, consider environment when cleaning, etc. Each recommended action should provide with a brief description, based on scientific evidence [46,130–133]. In Figures 2 and 3, we suggest the appropriate description in case of few recommended actions.

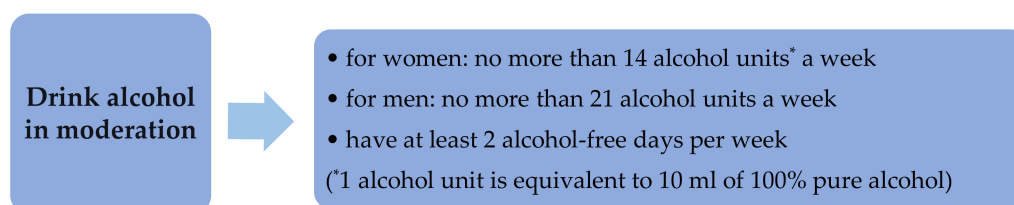


Figure 2. Recommended action regarding alcohol consumption and its description. Source: Adaptation after Health Promotion and Disease Prevention-Alcoholic beverages [134].

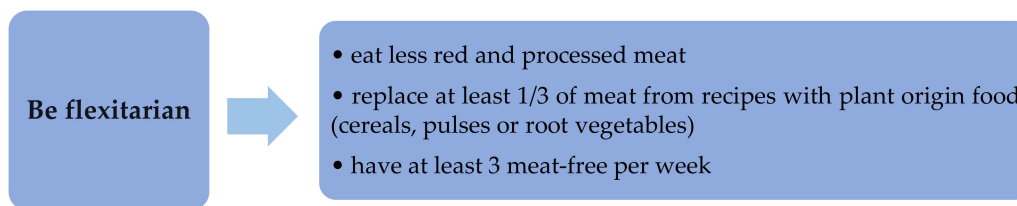


Figure 3. Recommended action regarding flexitarianism and its description. Source: Adaptation after Morrison [92].

Our proposal for a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population aligns with the conclusions of The World Resources Institute (WRI, Washington, DC, USA) report [40], which warns that, “it becomes very urgent to profoundly change our food strategy and to promote fair, culturally-appropriated, biodiversity-based, sustainable diets”. WRI pleads for implementing a consumption-based solution, which could have a positive impact on human health and environmental sustainability: To shift the diets of populations who consume high amounts of calories, protein, and animal-based foods.

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

6. Conclusions

6.1. Theoretical Implications

In the era of globalization and climate change, it has become mandatory to comprehend the determinant factors and the processes that enable the switch to a more sustainable diet. Therefore, knowing the particularities of eating behavior of targeted consumers appears to be a very important stage in this action.

In terms of consumption habits, the research results showed the respondents’ clear preference for traditional products and dishes based on animal origin ingredients, especially meat, to the detriment of vegetal origin ones. Similar results, which express an unhealthy eating behavior were stressed in the studies of Heerman et al. [120], Bobe et al. [119], and De Graaf [83].

Analyzed through the attitude towards meat, most respondents are typical “meat-eaters” [87], as they show the tendency for overconsumption of meat-based traditional food products and dishes and seem quite reluctant to substitute a part of meat with ingredients of vegetal origin [23]. This attitude can be explained through the moral defense “4Ns justification” scheme [88,89], according to which meat consumption is perceived by individuals as “natural”, “normal”, “necessary”, and “nice”. Of all the justification factors, “nice”, which expresses the enjoyment translated through tastiness or hedonic pleasure of eating meat, should be considered a major obstacle in reducing meat consumption among the research participants, a fact that was emphasized too by the previous study of Piazza et al. [89] and Buitrago-Vera et al. [126]. Alongside the psychological mechanism of moral defense, the influence of cultural values should also be taken into account in the respondents’ willingness to reduce meat consumption, as De Boer and Aiking [24] pointed out in their research. Especially when meat consumption is deeply rooted in a local food culture, being seen as a traditional habit and associated with pleasure, as is the case of Romanian culture [38], consumers tend to be more reluctant to cut it down [90,135].

A hope for a possible switch to a more sustainable diet in the near future was introduced by those respondents who fall into the “meat-reducers” category [87]. Concerned with the long-term negative consequences of high level of meat consumption, they appear to be open to a certain degree to reduce the meat from the diet, a finding that resonates with those of Garnett [46], Pieniak et al. [43], and Mylan [49].

Starting with respondents' orientations in traditional food consumption, which were shown to range from "healthy" products to "convenience" ones, and combining those with the identified attitudes towards traditional diet, "hedonism" and "conformism", a respondents' typology was built, consisting of the following types: Healthy hedonist, healthy conformist, convenience hedonist, convenience conformist, and careless. We propose the identified consumers types to be considered in relation to existing models [120,125,126], stressing the need to validate and improve them in future research.

The results of the semi-structured interview strongly underline the need for reshaping the Romanian traditional pattern of food consumption, through the integration of sustainable diet principle.

Through the conceptualization of a new typology of traditional food consumers and a new a model of sustainable diet for Romanian population, this study may have contribution to recent debates in the field of sustainable diet, showing that the study of traditional pattern of food consumption in the light of demands of sustainable diet deserves further attention.

6.2. Future Directions

The research has economic, social, and environmental impact whilst providing an in-depth description of Romanian traditional food consumers behavior and recommendations for reshaping the traditional pattern of food consumption through the integration of sustainable diet principles.

The research findings show a significant range of meanings attributed by respondents to traditional foods; firstly, a dichotomous classification in public rhetoric, in "certified" and "non-certified" products, appears to be appropriate to bring some order in the big picture of Romanian traditional food products. In the case of "certified" traditional products, everything is clear, as the conceptual framework is regulated by national legislation. As for "non-certified" products, a multidimensional approach was noticed among respondents, who included in this sphere the products that, reflecting Romanian traditional habits and being based on traditional recipes, can be industrially mass-processed, small-scale processed by local producers, or homemade in consumers' household. Of these categories, that of industrially processed with the "image" of traditional foods requires further debate. As much research to date [6,18,62,77,83] has provided evidence that industrially processed foods (obtained through techniques such as refining, hydrogenation, preservation, or extensive use of food additives) are highly sensory attractive, but unhealthy and nutritionally unbalanced, we call for significant reshaping of industrial supply of traditional foods in order to enhance consumers' health protection and environmental sustainability. This way, the traditionality of non-certified industrially processed products might reach its full potential.

Secondly, as research results stress out a tendency of meat and animal origin overconsumption among respondents, the solution supported by the research team is the middle ground between the excessive consumption of animal origin foods, implicitly meat, and their complete elimination; that is, adopting a flexitarian style. For this reason, a set of dietary recommendations was put forward to be considered by nutrition and public health policymakers in the development of a new model of sustainable diet for Romanian population, based on the references points of the traditional pattern of food consumption. This should be further promoted through messages focused on the relationship between health, traditionality, and sustainability.

The adoption of healthy eating habits by Romanian consumers should be supported and promoted by the state governance, through capitalizing the local gastronomic traditions in accordance with the contemporary dietetic recommendations and with the current demands on the food in global context, as it implies legislative and educational issues.

Regarding the national education system, it can intervene on the one hand by supporting extensive campaigns of information and awareness of the risks regarding consumers' poor nutrition. This will have the purpose of improving population' health and reducing medical expenses of an inadequate nutrition. On the other hand, introducing and developing nutritional education programs among young people will encourage the adoption of healthy eating style, such as flexitarian. Along with this, the education for environmental sustainability must be reinforced, too.

From the legislative point of view, measures are needed to stimulate sustainable non-polluting food production (through agricultural subsidies, VAT reductions or exemptions), encouraging suppliers and traders from the short supply chain with fresh food, as well as strengthening the national system of consumer protection capacity for prevention, control, and detection of fraudulent maneuvers of food products. NGOs working in the area of consumer protection and education could also get more involved into the process of regulation of traditional food processing and supplying.

7. Limitations

Given the qualitative nature of this research, the limitations inevitably occur. First of all, the limited number of people investigated at the in-depth interview cannot allow a statistical generalization of the results. Plus, the sample seems to be biased towards women, even though we tried to avoid stereotypes and prejudices about gender. However, to have a gender-sensitive perspective, it should be considered that the roles assigned to gender are determined by economic, social, religious, and cultural factors, and the changing interrelations between them. The fact that Romanian women have been historically more involved in preparing food for the family than men explains their greater willingness to participate in an in-depth interview about traditional eating and cooking habits compared to men, who were more reluctant. Apart from gender, other limitations related to the characteristics of the sample are education, as the vast majority is highly educated, and age, as young people are poorly represented. Plus, the results are closely linked to a specific context, offering insights into Romanian traditional food consumers and a framework for the cultural pattern of food consumption in Romania. Nevertheless, the results and the proposed solutions could be used by those scholars interested to study the cultural pattern of food consumption in different contexts. Moreover, the results of this research could be used further as starting point in conducting a quantitative research on the same topic in Romania.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

A.1. Interview Guide

A.1.1. Introduction (10 min)

- *Welcome and introduction*
- *Could you please introduce yourself in few words? How old are you? What profession do you have? What do you do? What is your social status?*
- *Could you please describe your household? How many members does your household have? How many children do you have?*
- *What region do you come from?*

A.1.2. Traditional Food Consumption Habits (30 min)

- *What are the main reasons you consume Romanian traditional foods? For example: healthy, natural, tasty, locally sourced etc.*
- *Do you consume traditional products and dishes specific to the region you come from? What are your favorite ones? How do you feel when you eat them?*
- *Where do you buy traditional Romanian products? Who buys traditional products in your family?*
- *Do you normally prepare traditional Romanian products at home? Which are these?*
- *What are your cooking habits? Is cooking one of your hobbies? Who cooks traditional dishes in your family? To what extent is the partner involved in cooking it? What about the children? From whom did you learn to cook traditional Romanian dishes?*
- *Could you please give me details about your dinning habits? How many meals and snacks do you eat in a day? Where do you usually eat? With whom do you eat together? What do the daily family meals mean to you?*
- *Could you describe a typical traditional breakfast of yours? How many traditional food products do you usually eat for breakfast?*
- *What are your eating habits related to lunch? How many courses do you usually eat at lunch? Are the dishes you eat at lunch usually home cooking? What about the desert? If not, where do you buy them from?*
- *What does a typical traditional dinner looks like for you? Is dinner usually freshly cooked before eating it?*
- *What traditional products do you usually eat at snacks daytime?*
- *Are there any differences between the weekdays' meals and the weekends' meals?*
- *What are the food habits in your family at the main religious holidays of the year? What traditional foods do you eat for Christmas? What about Easter?*
- *What traditional foods do you usually eat at other special events?*
- *Where do you buy traditional dishes for festive meals that you do not prepare at home?*
- *When dining at the restaurant, how often do you order Romanian-specific dishes?*
- *Do you normally fast? If yes, how often?*

A.1.3. Willingness to Change Food Consumption Behavior (15 min)

- *Are you concerned about the long-term consequences of high consumption of animal origin foods, especially meat? What are the risks you think you're exposed to?*
- *Would you be willing to replace a part of the consumed meat with products/ingredients of plant origin?*
- *What is the significance of locally-sourced traditional food products for you? What are some of the reasons you buy from small producers? What fresh products do you buy? What processed products do you buy?*
- *How concerned are you about reducing food waste in your household? What are you doing exactly?*
- *Do you normally sort the waste resulting from the consumption and cooking of foods? How often do you do this?*

A.1.4. Closing the Interview (5 min)

Final conclusions of the interviewer and addressing thanks to interviewee

Appendix B. The Characteristics of the Sample

Table A1. The characteristics of the sample.

Crt. No.	Gender	Age	Profession	Occupation	Marital Status	Region	Size of the Household	Children	Income EUR
1	F	57	mathematician	expert reviewer	married	Transylvania	3	2	1001–1500
2	F	62	seamstress	retired	married	Muntenia	2	1	450–1000
3	F	36	economist	university lecturer PhD	married	Muntenia	3	1	Over 2000
4	F	38	economist	head of administrative department	married	Muntenia	3	1	1001–1500
5	F	49	teacher	teacher	married	Muntenia	3	1	1501–2000
6	M	67	engineer	retired	married	Muntenia	2	1	1001–1500
7	F	48	pharmacist	pharmacist	married	Moldavia	3	1	1501–2000
8	F	48	economist	secretary	married	Banat	4	2	1501–2000
9	M	47	economist	professor PhD	unmarried	Muntenia	1	1	1001–1500
10	F	62	engineer	engineer	married	Transylvania	2	1	450–1000
11	F	50	cosmetician	cosmetic salon administrator	unmarried	Transylvania	2	1	450–1000
12	F	51	psychologist	sales assistant	married	Transylvania	2	2	1501–2000
13	M	55	engineer	retired	married	Transylvania	2	1	1501–2000
14	F	34	technician	technician	married	Dobrogea	3	1	1001–1500
15	F	53	technician	technician	married	Muntenia	2	1	450–1000
16	F	56	technician	technician	married	Oltenia	4	1	450–1000
17	M	52	driver	driver	married	Muntenia	2	2	450–1000
18	F	49	school-mistress	school-mistress	married	Muntenia	3	1	1501–2000
19	F	30	economist	operations specialist	married	Muntenia	1	0	1001–1500
20	M	68	informatician	retired	married	Oltenia	2	2	450–1000
21	F	67	economist	retired	married	Moldavia	2	1	1001–1500

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