

# Ethical implications of nutritional practices in the digital era: Navigating solitude and social connectivity

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**Abstract.** This study delves into the ethical and social ramifications of nutritional practices amidst the rise of digital consumption patterns, scrutinizing the erosion of traditional commensal relationships and the burgeoning phenomenon of virtual dining experiences. Amidst a cultural backdrop where solitary eating becomes increasingly normative, propelled by the fast-paced, individualistic tendencies of contemporary society, this research critically assesses the shift from physical to virtual spaces of communal eating. It explores how digital platforms, such as metaverse, offer alternative realms of social interaction and identity exploration through food, juxtaposing these against the diminishing practice of shared meals in physical settings. This analysis is situated within a broader discourse on the fragmentation of social bonds and the quest for belonging in the digital age, offering insights into how virtual food experiences both reflect and reshape our understanding of community, solitude, and the ethical dimensions of eating practices. By examining the transition from the communal hearth to the spectacle of online food consumption, the study highlights the complex interplay between food, identity, and social connectivity, proposing a nuanced perspective on the ethical considerations that arise from the digital mediation of nutritional practices.

**Key words:** ethical nutrition, digital era, social connectivity, nutritional practices, digital era, social bonds, identity, food

Food has historically served, and continues to serve, as a powerful social connector, shaping relationships within social groups, delineating group boundaries, and contributing to collective memory. The consumption of food is seen as an exceptionally rich social act, representing a malleable form of collective representation. Dietary practices distinguish one people from another, with consumption styles reflecting cultural differences that, from an ethnocentric perspective, differentiate “our” food from “others’,” homogenizing culture internally while differentiating it externally (1,2).

The act of eating holds significant symbolic importance within the social context and becomes an integral part of people’s culture and identity (3). Through the transmission of memories, traditions, and rituals, habits and lifestyles are formed. Throughout history, the convivial aspect often superseded sustenance

needs, with food becoming a means to convey human behavior and ethics.

Thus, the ritual of nutrition gains a strong symbolic value, signaling belonging or alienation, inclusion or exclusion (4), and various relationships between community members and their exterior (5). The choice of food, its preparation, its transformation into a meal, and the manner of its consumption distinctly demonstrate that food is a total cultural fact.

Indeed, the relationship humans have with food has determined the acculturation process and the formation of social groups and norms (6). This relationship marked the transition of humans from a state of nature to a state of culture. Within a triangular semantic field whose vertices correspond to the categories of raw, cooked, and rotten (7), foods present to humans in these three fundamental conditions. The raw state represents the natural aspect of food, while the

other two are semantically defined in opposite directions: the cooked as the cultural transformation of the raw, and the rotten as its natural transformation. This triangle forms a dual opposition: between processed/unprocessed on one side and culture/nature on the other.

Mythical thought attempts to explain this transition from nature to culture (8). Analyzing a variety of myths, both from archaic and tribal communities, it becomes evident that they all share the figure of a founding hero who first manages to light a fire to cook the meat from hunting, thus marking the transition from raw to cooked, or from nature to culture (9). The symbolic significance of this event highlights how the act of eating, linked to the use of fire, is a foundational element of human identity (10).

However, the transition from raw to cooked represents only the primordial form of a society's culturalization and does not offer much insight into the dynamics governing relationships within and outside the community. Thus, a more detailed observation of the individual dietary practices (11) adopted by the community and how these have reinterpreted the concept of cooked is necessary. The ways in which foods are cooked, processed, served, and consumed vary across cultures because, as observed, eating is a practice situated in space and time; thus, its observation allows us to understand the structures that define society since dietary practices reflect it like a mirror. If the methods by which foods are handled within a specific social group allow us to observe and understand the social dynamics that govern it (12), it is the ways in which food is consumed that suggest how relational dynamics take shape. Sharing a meal asserts belonging to a common cultural matrix and, especially on an unconscious level, feeling rooted in a common emotional experience. Dining together has played a significant social role throughout various historical periods and has led to one of the most astonishing manifestations of human sociability (13): commensality, which literally means sitting around the same table.

In a more complex and symbolic sense, commensality does not only denote the act of eating with someone but the practice through which values, thoughts, and social norms are transmitted through the food dimension (14). Food exchanges are a sensitive barometer, a ritual enunciation of social relationships, and

therefore used as mechanisms for initiation, reinforcement, but also destruction of sociability. It is through the exaltation of the social and convivial dimension that dietary practices have been elevated to a higher level (15), determining their inclusion in spiritual activities, thus moving away from the materialistic vision they have long been subjected to.

Thus, it becomes evident how eating together produces social bonds (16), bringing people closer, making the other feel more similar to oneself, generating a sense of proximity and intimacy. If sharing common dietary practices is fundamental for the constitution of society, where they serve as a mirror, it is equally important for the constitution of that more contained unit into which the social macro-level translates: the family. Not by chance, when referring to this institution, the expression "domestic hearth" is used (17). The fire metaphorically represented the family, as many great European families in the past found in living around the same fire the expression of their unity. The fire marked the transition to a shared culture, with the hearth literally becoming the center of social and family life, as a circle formed around it and the food cooked there. The sharing of food is constitutive of the substance of kinship, and this logic is transversal to every social group in every historical era.

Food nourishes kinship relationships, creates bonds over time as the transmission of vital substances from parents to child (18,19) does not occur once and for all at the moment of conception but unfolds as a process throughout life, thanks to the active participation of the protagonists. Relatives are connected with each other through a complex of socially produced and voluntarily acquired substances in daily coexistence.

Observing the family meal reveals not only the dietary habits of a specific social group but how the members sitting around the same table are connected, the dynamics regulating their interactions (20), and the roles they play within the family. The table becomes a place of social negotiation. A space and time, that of meals, used to coordinate other tasks, grant exemptions, claim privileges, disseminate information about the outside world, establish strategies to face it, and share evaluations (21). At the table, the family appears in its existential reality: thus, the mealtime becomes a sort of synthesis of family life.

The meal is a highly significant situation for family relationships; it is in this space that socialization processes and co-construction of meanings take shape (22): family members gather not only to eat but above all to share events and thoughts, often reprocessing them according to a lexicon and a perspective specific to the family. Food and dietary practices fulfill an ethical role as they mediate between society and the family environment, enabling the learning, formation, and experimentation of moral norms, and serving as a vehicle for the construction of citizenship. Food and its preparation processes thus convey fundamental cultural meanings through which individuals establish a sense of home and belonging to a social group, assimilating habits, tastes, prescriptions, and hierarchies that reconnect the here and now to history and familial memory (23). Food is not just a bond between generations; it emerges as a fundamental component of parental thought, maintaining a close connection with the individual and the creation of interpersonal bonds.

These reflections highlight how sociability is a foundational element of meals, both in public and private spheres. But what happens when this dimension is absent? Culturally, eating alone has always been viewed with disapproval, a solitary meal could be considered an oxymoron, since sociability is usually deemed a necessary component of eating. In recent decades, the trend of consuming meals in solitude has become increasingly prevalent in Western society (24), revealing a correlation with the rise of food-related pathologies. Commensality, besides fostering social bonds, plays a crucial role in regulating food intake; its absence leads to a simplification of meals both in spatiotemporal terms and in terms of quality.

Beyond health dimensions, the gradual relaxation of commensality has led to a loosening of social ties and a stronger push towards the individualization of choices and consumption. Food choices are now more individual, free of defined rules and constraints: the eating rituals that marked an individual's life and determined a socially shared lifestyle are crumbling (11), food seems to have partially lost its ethical function because it is becoming more individualized and divorced from convivial practices that aided the construction of individual identity and facilitated the experimentation of social norms.

The crisis of social bonds is attributable to the hegemony of speed, urgency, and bulimic consumption in contemporary society. These constructs have initiated the process of liquefaction (25), as described by Bauman (26), leading to the loss of solidity of stable references and plunging contemporary individuals into a fragmented and uncertain existence. In the post-modern era, consumption has adapted to these logics, hence the triumph of fast food, indicators of a culture of instantaneity and massification, where the imperative becomes quick and immediate consumption, provided one is willing to give up their identity, sociability, and physiological well-being.

The foods consumed in these places are depersonalized and the result of an industrialized and mechanical process, paraphrasing Augé (27), they are non-foods. The French sociologist coined the term non-places to denote spaces that have emerged in postmodernity and have the peculiarity of not being identity-based, relational, and historical; they are, therefore, places through which neither social relations, shared histories, nor signs of collective belonging can be deciphered. Non-places are structures necessary for the accelerated circulation of people and goods, transportation means, large shopping centers, and all spaces where millions of individuals cross paths without ever interacting, driven by the compulsive desire to consume (28). Similarly, non-foods, just like non-places, are products of what Foucault defined as hyper-modernity, subject to non-symbolized spatiotemporal logics. Non-foods lack history, and their socializing function is entirely absent. Non-foods have accelerated the individualization of consumption, uprooting the subject from a historically situated identity process and transporting into the faded contours of globalization. When discussing the individualization and depersonalization of consumption, it seems that institutions are more interested in the medical implications this entails: discussions are increasingly focused on nutrients, calories, physiology, and body weight. The influence of social factors and the context in which these phenomena originate seems to be consistently overlooked (29). The crisis of social bonds challenges us more than ever today; the issue of loneliness related to it is a pressing concern. What can be observed in contemporary society are two drives, two movements, closely interconnected, characterizing

the relationship between the individual and society: on one hand, there is an increasing withdrawal from social life and convivial situations perceived as burdensome, and on the other, there is a tension to reduce social distance (30) and loneliness through the exploration of relationships in alternative spaces.

Here emerges the theme of the virtual dimension, which allows individuals to experience a mediated social reality and live the experience of another world where they can rediscover their identity. A significant process of virtualization of the individual's life is underway, consider the increasingly widespread use of the metaverse. This process has also affected dietary practices, causing the ethical dimension of sharing food to give way to the aesthetic and visual dimension. Food becomes an object of desire: showcasing one's culinary experiences aims to create an intimate bond with the viewer, generating a synesthetic desire in the observer. The vicarious pleasure generated by food voyeurism fills the desire for something forbidden, in this case, food, creating a sensation of satiety both mentally and physiologically; delegating the act of eating to a third party is often followed by abstaining from eating itself because already satisfied by the fantasy of accessing food without limitations and especially without consequences for physical health (31). However, this fantasy might translate into reality and not remain confined to an imaginary plane, leading to attempts at imitation in the excessive consumption of unhealthy food; a tendency socially legitimized by the popularity and approval of such practices. The risk, therefore, becomes normalizing problematic eating practices (32).

Food is aestheticized, spectacularized: on one side, this is an index showing how in the consumer society the subject does not express themselves in the material act of consumption, but in the search and anticipation of pleasure, through a kind of mental hedonism generated in the space that separates the desire, present in the anticipation of the experience, from the fulfillment of the experience itself; on the other hand, it shows how the individualization of experiences leads subjects to seek new ways to create social bonds, experiencing them precisely within non-places. These phenomena, mirrors of contemporary society, where the virtualization of experiences is crucial for identity creation

and filling the need for conviviality that is increasingly marginal in the real world, through the illusion of socialization created by hyperconnectivity to a fictional reality.

**Conflict of Interest:** Each author declares that he or she has no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article

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