

Qualitative Examination of Factors Associated with Attitudes and Behaviors Regarding Ethnic Foods Among College Students

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Abstract: The current study examined attitudes and behaviors regarding ethnic foods among university students. Fifteen college students from diverse cultural backgrounds participated in this study, and semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with the participants. Data were analyzed using QDA Minor Lite. Six themes that emerged from data analysis included family food tradition, shared connections through food, sensory perceptions and experiences, parental support, curiosity about cooking new foods, and health and food safety concerns. Family traditions and shared connections were salient to many of the participants. Family food traditions were the basis of participants' introduction to foods. Shared connections with other people, regardless of their ages, helped participants feel at ease when unfamiliar foods were introduced to them. Participants noted that shared human relationships directly influenced participants' perceptions and associations with foods within their identified ethnicity, as well as foods outside of their ethnic group. They reported being more willing to try unfamiliar ethnic foods while socializing within close interpersonal connections. Participants identified parents playing a crucial role in their experience with new food. Participants also noted that sensory perceptions were factors directly associated with their first experience of the food. Some of them reported enjoying cooking new foods and incorporating ethnic foods into their diet. When asked what healthy or clean foods meant to participants, they demonstrated high disregard for the synonymous use of clean and healthy. Instead, they had the belief that clean foods were associated with food safety and sanitation, and concerns surrounding food safety in the U.S. and foreign countries were apparent. The consensus regarding the nutrition content of foreign food was high in contrast with the dissatisfaction of American food and should be addressed in future research. Increasing variety in people's diets may improve their satisfaction with food-related life and well-being. Public health efforts that teach people the necessary cooking skills may strengthen their interest in diversifying their connections through a shared understanding of others' cultures.