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Applying the Food Choice Process Model to Ultra-Processed Food Consumption: The Role of Dietary Globalization and Quality Perceptions

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Abstract

This study examines the determinants of ultra-processed food (UPF) consumption frequency among young adults within the Food Choice Process Model, integrating macro-level (dietary globalization) and micro-level (perceptions of food quality, environmental awareness, and media exposure) influences. A survey was conducted with 310 young adults, and ordinal logistic regression analysis was used to test the hypothesized predictors of UPF consumption frequency.

Results indicate that dietary globalization is positively and significantly associated with UPF consumption, supporting the hypothesis that exposure to international dietary patterns increases the likelihood of consuming ultra-processed products. In contrast, negative perceptions of international food quality are negatively associated with consumption frequency, confirming that unfavorable quality evaluations reduce UPF intake. Environmental awareness and exposure to internet and social media content do not emerge as statistically significant predictors.

Overall, UPF consumption among young adults appears to be primarily shaped by globalization-related dietary exposure and evaluative perceptions of food quality, rather than environmental concerns or digital media influence. These findings provide empirical insight into the structural and cognitive drivers of contemporary dietary behavior and inform public health strategies aimed at reducing ultra-processed food consumption.

Keywords: Ultra-processed food, dietary globalization, environmental awareness, food quality, food choice process model

Introduction

Consumer food trends play a pivotal role, as consumers are the final actors in the food system. Food systems are complex, encompassing "the related resources, inputs, production, transport, processing and manufacturing industries, retailing, and consumption of food as well as its impacts on environment, health, and society" (von Braun et al., 2021, p. 7). Similarly, the FAO (2018) defines food systems as the totality of actors and value-adding activities involved in producing, processing, distributing, consuming, and disposing of food, all within broader economic, social, and environmental contexts. Global food systems are shaped by strong macro-level pressures, such as population growth projected to reach 9.7 billion by 2050 (UNDP, 2022) conflicts, unexpected events, and long-term challenges including climate change (Galanakis, 2021). These pressures highlight the need for sustainable and resilient food systems. Food systems innovation is paying attention, among other things, to changing the metrics used to measure progress, placing more emphasis on sustainable increases in dietary quality and total factor productivity rather than focusing solely on increasing yields.

Simultaneously, food consumption patterns are undergoing significant transformations. Key phenomena include shifts toward healthier and more sustainable diets, such as reduced red meat and sugar intake (Van Zanten et al., 2019; Willett et al., 2019); food enrichment with bioactive compounds; increased popularity of novel products (Galanakis et al., 2020); the personalization of food choices (Mathers, 2019); and the influence of cultural diversity on culinary innovation (Enriquez & Achila-Godinez, 2021). This evolution has driven growing demand for convenience foods that save time (Luga & Mehmeti, 2024), alongside increasing industry attention to sustainability, focusing not only on yields but also on dietary quality and total factor productivity.

The main nutritional challenge of contemporary agri-food systems is access to healthy diets. Global data indicate widespread deficiencies: an estimated 3-3.5 billion people suffer from inadequate intake of iron or vitamin A, surpassing the number of undernourished individuals (Gómez et al., 2013). Unlike the 20th century, when the primary concern was hunger eradication, today diet related health problems arise from excessive carbohydrate consumption and insufficient intake of essential micronutrients, dietary fiber, and bioactive compounds (Bai et al., 2020; FAO et al., 2020). Marketing campaigns promoting highly processed, convenient, and shelf-life

foods reduce consumer sensitivity to nutritional quality (Barrett, 2021), while supermarket shelves frequently emphasize UPF at the expense of fresh and minimally processed foods characteristic of traditional diets (Leite et al., 2022).

This study aims to examine how dietary globalization, environmental sensitivity, perceptions of food quality, and the influence of online social media content affect the consumption of highly processed products among young adults. By integrating macro-level drivers (globalization, social media) with micro-level determinants (personal perceptions, environmental values), the study expects to identify the combined influence of structural, social, and individual factors on ultra-processed food consumption, providing a holistic understanding of contemporary dietary behavior.

Theoretical Framework: Food Choice Process Model

The Food Choice Process Model (FCPM) (Furst et al., 1996) conceptualizes food consumption as a dynamic process shaped by multiple interacting factors, including personal, social, cultural, and environmental influences. According to the model, individuals' food choices are not only guided by personal preferences but also by life course experiences, social relationships, and contextual constraints, such as availability and accessibility of food. The FCPM incorporates five main categories of influences on food choice: ideals, personal factors, sources, social frameworks, and food context (Furst et al., 1996). These influences interacted reciprocally, reinforcing, competing with, and shaping one another. While the boundaries between these influences were often blurred, the central themes of each influence remained distinguishable. Each influence appeared to affect the food choice process to the extent that it was salient for a specific eating event.

In the context of this study, dietary globalization represents the influence of international and globalized food availability on ideals and social frameworks, increasing exposure to ultra-processed foods. Environmental awareness reflects personal values that can constrain or guide choices toward more sustainable options. Perceptions of food quality influence the personal evaluation of available options, shaping both the selection process and the prioritization of health and nutrition. Finally, the influence of social media and online influencers acts as a source and contextual driver, shaping ideals and social norms around food consumption. Together, these factors interact dynamically within individual, social, and environmental contexts, influencing young consumers' decisions regarding ultra-processed food.

Dietary Globalization

Globalization functions as a platform for cultural exchange, enabling individuals within a society to share their traditions, values, and practices, fostering mutual recognition and understanding across communities. Together with the high degree of urbanization, these phenomena have influenced many aspects of life, including diet and eating patterns. Interest is focused on the impact of globalization on eating practices, both in the context of physical and psychosocial health and in that of the sustainability of food systems (Sproesser et al., 2019). These changes are now known as the 'colonization of the Kitchen' or 'McDonaldization', referring to the widespread influence of fast food culture (Hawkes 2006). Despite the positive aspects of this phenomenon, it is also worth noting the negative aspects, such as the "supermarket revolution", which has largely replaced traditional and cultural diets (Mergenthaler et al, 2009). We only need to look at our shelves and we can understand that ultra-processed foods are the mainstay of a 'globalized diet' whose consumption is increasing in all regions regardless of income (Baker, et al., 2020). According to Monteiro et al., (2019), ultra-processed products are ready-to-eating or heated foods made by combining food substances, mainly commodity ingredients and 'cosmetic' additives, that have been subjected to multiple industrial processes (Monteiro et al., 2019). They include a very wide spectrum of products that makes consumer orientation even more confusing. Developments in the retail sector have significantly contributed to the consumption of UPF, especially in low- and middle-income settings (Baker et al., 2020). This means that dietary patterns around the world are becoming increasingly processed and less diverse. Dietary Globalization aligns with the social and cultural spheres of the model. Exposure to international foods and globalized diets increases the availability and desirability of UPS, potentially shaping consumption patterns among young consumers. This supports H1, which proposes:

Hypothesis 1: Dietary globalization increases the likelihood of UPS consumption among young adults.

Environmental Awareness

Environmental awareness plays a key role in driving consumer behavior, including that of young people (Lim, 2017). According to Liu et al., (2020), environmental awareness is related to the understanding that an individual has about environmental issues, which serves as a worldview to interpret environmental information, perceive and create beliefs about them (Liu et al., 2020). Awareness and undertaking environmental initiatives often depend on the positive will to undertake sustainable practices by both industries and individual consumers (Lim, 2022). Environmental awareness

has been treated in a limited way, often considering it as a one-dimensional concept (Al Amin et al., 2023). In this perspective, the different forms of consumer behavior towards environmental awareness have faded (Lim et al., 2023b). Environmental concern is a much broader concept encompassing the emotions, feelings that individuals have towards the environment, which then translate into consumer reactions (Kennedy & Givens, 2019). These emotional responses or triggers motivate attitudes and behaviors towards environmentally friendly products or practices (Pong & Tam, 2023). Various studies show that there is a significant lack of public awareness about the impact of dietary choices on the environment (Boermans et al., 2024). Through their food choices, consumers play a very important role in environmental issues (FAO, 2010). Many studies assess factors such as price, convenience, organoleptic characteristics and health concerns as the main influencers of food choices (All`es et al., 2017). Despite the increasing awareness of environmental issues, various studies still claim that consumers do not value environmental concerns as much (Lehikoinen & Salonen, 2019). Consumers are increasingly hearing more and more concepts related to the environment and sustainability when it comes to their food and diet choices. According to FAO, sustainable diets are diets with low environmental impacts that contribute to food and nutrition security and a healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems; culturally acceptable, accessible, economically just and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; and that optimize natural and human resources (FAO, 2010). The complexity of this definition gives importance to the way consumers interpret the concept of sustainability in relation to their eating patterns. Consumers‘ understanding of sustainability, mainly related to food, has been examined mainly in the context of local and organic foods (Feldmann & Ulrich, 2015, Hartmann & Michael, 2017) or green products. Consumers‘ understanding of food-related sustainability in a highly processed food context has not been sufficiently studied. In this regard environmental awareness fits within the personal values and ethical considerations dimension. Young consumers who are more environmentally conscious may consciously avoid UPS due to perceived ecological impacts, supporting the hypothesis below

Hypothesis 2: Environmental Awareness has a negative effect on UPS consumption.

Perception of Food Quality

Consumer concern about the quality of food products extends to every stage of the production chain. This has also fueled the growing demand for safe and high-quality food, especially since rapid economic

development and changes in the food supply chain have contributed to the growing interest in the issue of quality in the food sector. Over the past decade, the research orientation in food quality studies has increasingly evolved toward a consumer-centered perspective, emphasizing consumer perceptions, preferences, and decision-making processes (Grunert, 2005). Previous studies have adopted a range of theoretical approaches, including the means end perspective, expectancy value models, information economics frameworks, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction approaches. According to Grunet, quality is an abstract and multidimensional concept, with four main pillars, interconnected with each other, such as: health, hedonic characteristics of food, convenience and the production process (Grunert, 2005). Consumers who strongly associate quality with food safety linking it to organoleptic characteristics, health protection, origin of production, and related ethical standards tend to perceive a product as safe only if they also regard it as high in quality (Van Rijswijk & Frewer, 2008). Identifying the determinants that influence food quality perception, as well as the consumer segments shaped by these determinants, is fundamental for strategic market positioning and product differentiation. According to Mascarello et al., (2015), consumers evaluate food quality not only through hedonic gratification and the preservation of culinary traditions, but also through attributes related to production methods and geographical origin, which remain central drivers of perceived quality. The demand for UHPs continues to grow (Brief, 2025), driven by factors such as rapid urbanization, changing lifestyles, and aggressive food marketing strategies. Consumer perceptions of highly processed products are associated with high levels of undesirable ingredients and nutrient deficiencies. Consumers view these products as designed as meal replacements, while others view them as snacks or savory snacks, such as packaged sweets and processed meat products. The demand for convenience and value for money makes them more popular with consumers (Baker et al., 2020). While some consumers are attracted to UHPs due to their affordability and ease of access, others may avoid them due to perceived nutritional quality and long-term health risks. The perception of the quality of these products fluctuates between varying degrees of trust and acceptance influenced by advertising strategies, information on labels and expert recommendations (Ilieva et al., 2025)

Perception of Food Quality relates to the personal and sensory domains in the model. Consumers' beliefs about the nutritional quality and healthiness of food guide their selection processes, supporting H3, which expects a negative relationship with UPS consumption if perceived quality is low.

Hypothesis 3: A negative perception of food quality is associated with lower consumption of UPFs.

Influence of Internet and Social Media

The rise of digital technologies has transformed the way individuals interact, enabling them not only to sustain existing relationships but also to shape social influence and establish new connections (Ellison et al., 2006). Social networking platforms can be understood as online environments that facilitate large-scale content sharing, allow users to build personal networks by adding contacts, and make these connections visible within the digital community (Vural et al., 2010). Technological innovation has intensified the speed, transparency, and reach of food-related information, reshaping how consumers evaluate and select products. Through video-based content, individuals can directly observe food production processes, which may either reinforce trust or generate skepticism toward specific brands or food categories. YouTube, as one of the most dominant video-sharing platforms with billions of daily views (Radonjic et al., 2020), exemplifies how digital media amplifies exposure to food-related content at a global scale. Beyond passive exposure, social media actively shapes consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions (Sebastián & Batalla, 2024). Moreover, evidence from Ding et al., (2022) indicates that live streaming of restaurant kitchens within online food delivery (OFD) services increases perceived transparency and food safety assurance, thereby enhancing perceived well-being benefits. A key and growing influence on the formation of social norms and eating behavior is social media, where the visual presentation of food plays a central role. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram are saturated with images of food, particularly highly processed items, which subtly convey what is typical or desirable to eat (Barre et al., 2016; Holmberg et al., 2016). Many of these posts also depict social contexts, such as dining with friends or eating out, further reinforcing norms about what, how, and with whom people eat (Qutteina et al., 2019).

Within the FCPM these dynamics can be interpreted as part of the broader social and informational environment influencing food decisions. Digital platforms function as contextual and social frameworks that shape beliefs, perceived risks, and trust formation, ultimately affecting food preferences and consumption patterns particularly among digitally engaged cohorts such as young adults. Influence of Internet and Social Media integrates the contextual and social network influences dimension. Visual and interactive content on social media can normalize or promote certain eating behaviors, supporting the hypothesis 4.

Hypothesis 4: Through visual images social media influences positively on UPS consumption.

By applying the FCPM, this study captures both macro-level influences such as dietary globalization and social media exposure and

micro-level determinants, including personal perceptions of food quality and environmental values, on young adults' food consumption. The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates how these study-specific factors are embedded within the broader FCPM. Each factor is positioned within the model's components ideals/social influences, personal values, resources, and social context demonstrating their role in shaping food choices. Arrows from these factors toward UPF consumption highlight the hypothesized relationships (H1-H4), showing how structural, social, and individual influences converge to determine young consumers' decisions regarding ultra-processed foods.

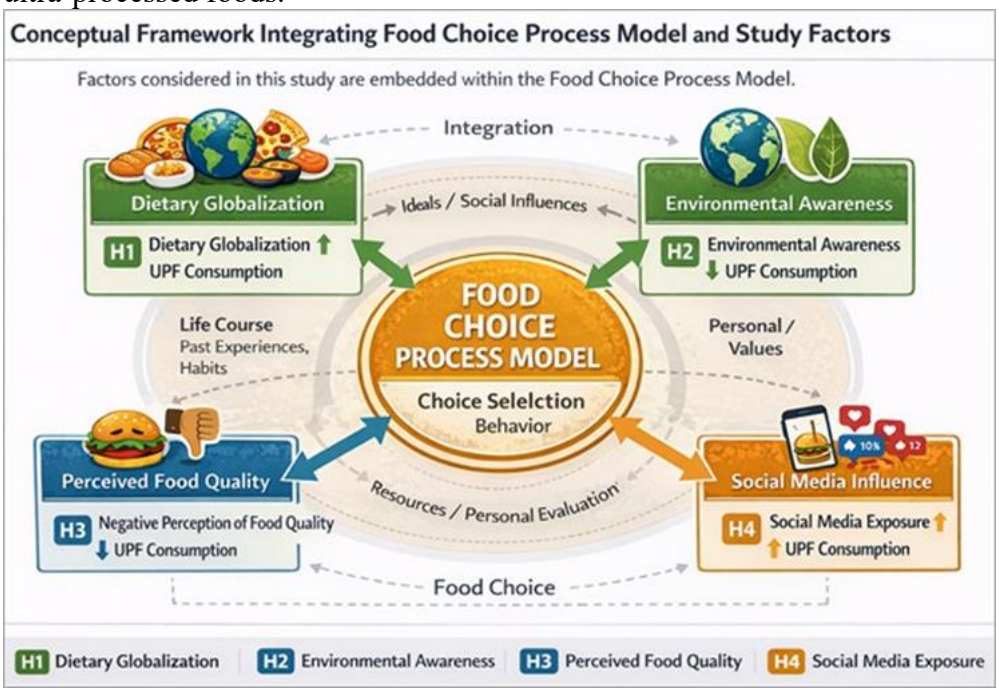

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the study

Methods

Data Collection and Sample Characteristics

Data were collected in 2025 from students at the Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania, to investigate young adults' behaviors and attitudes toward food consumption. The study followed standard ethical principles for research. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to completing the structured questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw at any time, and all responses were collected anonymously and treated confidentially. A structured, self-administered questionnaire with closed-ended items was used, covering three main areas: demographic characteristics (gender, age, and total family income), general

food consumption patterns, and attitudinal constructs measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), including globalization of diet, environmental awareness, and the influence of internet and social media on food choices.

A total of 310 valid responses were obtained, comprising 116 males (37.4%) and 194 females (62.5%). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, with a mean of 20.6 (SD = 1.67). Average total family income was 150,860.9 Albanian Lek (ALL) (SD = 51,503.2), ranging from 80,000 to 300,000 ALL. Most respondents reported changes in their diet over the previous five years (80.1%). The most frequently reported proportion of imported food in total dietary intake was 40-50% (51%), and 58.9% of participants perceived a decline in the quality of international food.

Table 1: Key demographic variables

	Mean	**Median**	**Std. Dev**	**Min**	**Max**
Age	20.6	20	1.67	18	25
Total family income	150,860.9	150,000	51503.2	80,000	300,000

To examine factors influencing the frequency of UPF consumption, an Ordinal Logistic Regression (OLR) model was estimated. The dependent variable was the frequency of UPF consumption, categorized as daily, 2-3 times per week, once per month, and never. The independent variables included globalization of diet, environmental awareness, perceived quality of international food, and exposure to internet/social media. Gender was included as a control variable to account for potential differences between males and females.

Table 2: Variables included in the OLR model

	Variable Name	**Measurement**	**Scale**	**Hypothesis**
DV	Frequency of UPF consumption	1 = Daily; 2 = 2–3 times/week; 3 = Once/month; 4 = Never	Ordinal	-
IV	Globalization of diet	Perceived increase in international food consumption in young adults' diet	Likert scale (1-5)	H1 ✓
IV	Environmental awareness	Level of environmental concern related to food consumption	Likert scale (1-5)	H2 x
IV	Perceived quality of international food	0 = No (no decline), 1 = Yes (perceived decline)	Binary / Dummy	H3 ✓
IV	Influence of social media	Impact of online visual content on food choices	Likert scale (1-5)	H4 x
CON	Gender	0 = Female, 1 = Male	Binary / Dummy	Control

Note: *DV – Dependent variable; IV – independent variable; CON – Control variable; ✓ – hypothesis supported, x – hypothesis not supported*

Results

Model Fit

The overall ordinal logistic regression model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors collectively improved the fit compared to a null model ($\chi^2 = 39.991$, df = 5, $p < 0.001$). Goodness-of-fit tests suggested that the model adequately described the data, and the Nagelkerke pseudo R^2 indicated moderate explanatory power. The test of parallel lines revealed that the proportional odds assumption was violated, suggesting that some predictors may have varying effects across consumption categories. Despite this, the overall interpretation of the model remains valid.

Hypothesis Testing

Parameter estimates indicated that dietary globalization was positively associated with UPF consumption frequency (B = 0.561, p = 0.043, 95% CI: 0.018 - 1.104), fully supporting the hypothesis that exposure to international dietary patterns increases the likelihood of UPF consumption. In contrast, negative perceptions of international food quality were significantly and negatively associated with consumption frequency (B = -1.675, p < 0.001, 95% CI: -2.267 to -1.083), supporting the hypothesis that unfavorable quality perceptions reduce UPF intake. Environmental awareness (B = -0.053, p = 0.850) and exposure to internet and social media (B = 0.184, p = 0.450) did not emerge as statistically significant predictors of UPF consumption frequency. Gender was also not statistically significant (B = -0.259, p = 0.260), but was retained in the model to control for potential gender-related differences.

Overall, these findings indicate that UPF consumption frequency among young adults is primarily shaped by exposure to globalized dietary patterns and evaluative perceptions of food quality, whereas environmental concerns and social media exposure do not appear to exert a significant influence within this sample.

Discussion

Eating patterns and consumer behaviors versus dietary habits are widely accepted to combine internal consumer factors such as personal preferences that, under the influence of factors such as time, affordability, food market competitiveness, cultural norms, and business influence through marketing, influence various decisions.

This study applied the FCPM to examine how macro-level and micro-level influences shape UPF consumption among young adults in Albania. By integrating dietary globalization, environmental awareness, perceived food quality, and social media influence into the model, the study

provides empirical insight into how structural and perceptual determinants interact in a transitional food environment.

Dietary Globalization as a Structural Driver of UPF Consumption

The findings confirm Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that dietary globalization significantly increases the likelihood of UPF consumption. This result aligns closely with the social and cultural spheres of the FCPM, where ideals and social frameworks shape food-related norms and availability structures. Exposure to international food products, imported brands, and standardized retail systems appears to normalize UPF consumption among young adults.

These findings resonate with the concept of "McDonaldization" introduced by George Ritzer, which describes the global diffusion of efficiency-driven, standardized food systems. The "globalizer" school attributes the decisive weight to the pressure of globalization/Americanization/McDonaldization, which pushes towards the cultural homogenization of cultures (Ram, 2025). In transitional economies such as Albania, globalization does not merely expand food variety; it restructures dietary aspirations, convenience expectations, and symbolic meanings associated with modern consumption. UPFs become embedded in everyday routines not necessarily because they are preferred nutritionally, but because they represent accessibility, modernity, and time efficiency. This conclusion is consistent with the fact that food is also an area where young people create their identity and from where they derive their identity and group affiliation (Priya, 2017). The influence of peers and businesses is as influential as that of cultural elements that come from family eating habits, creating a tension of forces in the formation of eating habits (Leibowitz et al., 2012). Within the FCPM framework, globalization operates at the macro-structural level but penetrates the "food context" domain, influencing availability, affordability, and habitual exposure. The positive association observed in this study suggests that structural exposure outweighs personal resistance mechanisms among young consumers.

Perceived Food Quality as a Protective Factor

Hypothesis 3 was also supported. A negative perception of international food quality significantly reduced UPF consumption. This finding highlights the importance of evaluative cognitive processes in food choice decisions. When young consumers perceive imported or highly processed foods as nutritionally inferior or less trustworthy, they are less likely to consume them frequently. This supports the multidimensional conceptualization of quality proposed by Grunert (2004) who emphasizes health, sensory characteristics, convenience, and production processes as

interconnected pillars of perceived quality (Grunert, 2004). In this study, quality perception appears to function as a filtering mechanism within the personal domain of the FCPM, counterbalancing structural globalization pressures. Interestingly, more than half of respondents reported a perceived decline in the quality of international food. This may reflect skepticism toward industrial processing, additives, and standardized production methods. It also suggests that awareness of nutritional concerns may be more influential than broader environmental narratives in shaping actual consumption behavior. The magnitude of the coefficient (B = -1.675) indicates that perceived quality is a stronger predictor than globalization in this model. This reinforces the idea that cognitive evaluation and risk perception play a critical moderating role in food decision-making among young adults (da Cunha, 2025)

The Non-Significant Role of Environmental Awareness

Contrary to Hypothesis 2, environmental awareness did not significantly predict UPF consumption. Although respondents expressed environmental concern, this did not translate into measurable differences in consumption frequency. This finding reflects the well documented attitude behavior gap in sustainable consumption research. While environmental awareness is increasing globally, behavioral change often remains constrained by convenience, price sensitivity, and habitual patterns. Price sensitivity often outweighs environmental concerns and thus consumer attitudes toward food consumption (Yue, 2020). Within the FCPM, environmental awareness falls under personal values, yet the model also acknowledges that values influence behavior only when salient within a specific eating event. For young adults, food decisions may be driven more by convenience and taste than by ecological considerations. Furthermore, environmental sustainability in the context of UPS may not be cognitively linked in consumers' minds. Habitual behaviors, lack of knowledge, and cognitive dissonance, which reflects conflicting values and purchasing behavior, contribute to unsustainable consumption (Bosone, 2022). Many sustainability discussions emphasize local or organic foods, while the environmental impact of industrial processing receives less visible attention in everyday purchasing contexts. Thus, environmental awareness alone may be insufficient to counteract structural dietary globalization, particularly in settings where economic and convenience constraints are strong.

Social Media Influence

Hypothesis 4 was not supported, as exposure to social media did not significantly influence UPF consumption frequency. This result is noteworthy given the widespread assumption that digital platforms shape

eating norms among young people. From the perspective of the FCPM, social media functions as both a source of information and a social framework that shapes ideals and perceived norms. However, the absence of statistical significance suggests that mere exposure to food related content may not directly translate into measurable consumption frequency. Several interpretations are possible in this case. Social media influence may operate indirectly, shaping attitudes rather than frequency. The effect may be moderated by individual traits such as susceptibility to peer norms. Exposure may include both healthy and unhealthy food content, neutralizing net effects. While visual platforms such as Instagram and YouTube intensify food visibility, this visibility alone may not override structural determinants such as availability or entrenched habits. In this sample, globalization and quality perception exerted stronger explanatory power than digital exposure.

Theoretical Implications

By embedding globalization, environmental values, quality perception, and digital influence into the FCPM, this study demonstrates the model's flexibility in capturing contemporary food system transformations. The findings reinforce the multi-level nature of food choice: Macro-level drivers (globalization) significantly increase UPF consumption. Micro-level evaluative processes (quality perception) significantly reduce it. Value-based orientations (environmental awareness) and digital exposure (social media) did not show direct effects. These results suggest that structural availability and cognitive evaluation are more decisive than normative or value-based factors in this context. The violation of the proportional odds assumption also indicates that predictors may influence different consumption levels differently. For example, globalization may primarily increase frequent consumption, whereas quality perceptions may mainly differentiate between moderate and low consumers. Future research could explore partial proportional odds models to capture these nuanced effects.

Practical Implications

The findings carry important implications for public health and policy in transitional food systems: Regulatory interventions addressing the availability and marketing of UPFs may be more effective than awareness campaigns alone. Quality-focused communication strategies highlighting nutritional risks and ingredient transparency could reduce consumption more effectively than generalized sustainability messaging. Universities and educational institutions could integrate food literacy programs that strengthen critical evaluation of processed food claims. Since environmental awareness alone did not predict behavior, policymakers should consider

bridging the gap between sustainability narratives and concrete dietary consequences.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Second, the sample was restricted to students from one university, which may limit generalizability. Third, self-reported consumption frequency may introduce reporting bias.Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to assess behavioral change over time; explore mediating or moderating mechanisms between social media exposure and consumption; compare results across urban and rural populations; investigate interaction effects between environmental awareness and perceived quality.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that ultra-processed food consumption among young adults in Albania is primarily shaped by structural exposure to globalized dietary patterns and by individual evaluations of food quality. While environmental awareness and social media exposure are conceptually relevant within the FCPM, they did not exert significant direct effects in this sample. The findings highlight the dominance of globalization-driven availability and cognitive quality assessments over value-based sustainability concerns in determining UPF consumption behavior. Understanding this hierarchy of influences is essential for designing effective nutritional interventions in rapidly globalizing food environments.

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