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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Food as an emotional and identity space in times of uncertainty

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Aim: To explore the role of food in emotional regulation and its influence on shaping personal and social identity in contemporary society, and to examine how stress, emotional insecurity, and the fast pace of life contribute to the consumption of comfort foods, and how such practices serve as mechanisms for coping, identity stabilization, and belonging.

Methods: This qualitative study was based on semi-structured interviews with 20 adult participants from Šibenik and the surrounding area. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. We used Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach to thematic analysis, whereby two-member research team developed the final themes manually using a multi-step abductive coding approach.

Findings: The analysis revealed three central themes: 1) emotional regulation through food and a sense of belonging, 2) ambivalence toward comfort food and the crisis of belonging, and 3) food as a link to identity and childhood, and the crisis of belonging. Food functions beyond physiological sustenance; it operates as a symbolic medium through which emotions, identity, and social belonging are expressed, negotiated, and stabilized. Emotional eating emerges as a mechanism for maintaining continuity and security amid social uncertainty. Conversely, a structuralist framework highlights deeper cultural and social structures that shape dietary practices through binary oppositions (*e.g.*, permitted/forbidden, clean/unclean), and through norms related to gender, control, and health. Thus, food becomes a space where individual emotional needs and collective social expectations are negotiated.

Conclusions: Food functions simultaneously as a means of emotional regulation, a symbolic marker of personal identity, and a vehicle for cultural belonging. These findings highlight the complexity of eating behaviors in uncertain contemporary environments and underscore the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to food, emotion, and identity studies.

Keywords: emotional eating; identity; belonging; reflexive thematic analysis; comfort food; nostalgia; uncertainty

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Introduction

Modern life is characterized by rapid social change, economic pressures, and complex personal expectations, leading to heightened uncertainty in everyday living. In this context, food has emerged as a powerful medium through which individuals navigate emotional states, construct personal identity, and negotiate social belonging. Beyond its biological function, food can serve as a tool for coping with stress and anxiety, particularly through the consumption of comfort foods – items consumed not out of physical hunger, but for emotional relief (*1*).

Although research on emotional eating has expanded, most studies focus on clinical populations, such as individuals with eating disorders (*1*). Less is known about how adults without clinical diagnoses use food to regulate emotions, maintain social bonds, and affirm identity in everyday life. This represents a notable gap in the literature: while prior work confirms the significance of emotional eating, few studies explore its role in shaping identity and social belonging under modern social pressures (*2*).

Food as a social and emotional phenomenon

In 21st-century Western societies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to form and maintain a stable personal and social identity. Within this context, food emerges as a symbolic system that conveys emotions, identity, and social affiliations (*2*). Rather than a mere biological necessity, it has become a means of emotional regulation, a symbol of identity, and a channel of social communication (*1*, *3*). In an era marked by fast-paced living and growing individualization, food takes on a new emotional function, especially during periods of stress, anxiety, or uncertainty. As a result, emotional eating is becoming more common, even outside the clinical context of eating disorders (*4*).

Empirical studies show that even people not diagnosed with an eating disorder often turn to specific foods in moments of sadness, stress, or loneliness (*5*, *6*). Such eating habits reflect attempts at emotional self-regulation and point to broader behavioral patterns in society. Particular emphasis is placed on so-called comfort food, which is consumed to achieve a sense of mental well-being.

The paper draws on the work of authors such as Abbots and Lavis (*7*), as well as Kemp, Bui, and Grier (*8*), who have expanded our understanding of eating behaviors within the complex social and cultural meanings of food. Food can operate as a system of communication that transmits cultural norms and values associated with religion, power, identity, and belonging. In doing so, it marks the boundary between culture and nature, situating itself within a broader discourse on identity (*9*).

Using an interdisciplinary approach, Jane Ogden (*1*) emphasized the role of food as a medium of identity articulation across dimensions such as gender, sexuality, self-control, and conflict. Yet it is also a form of social interaction, conveying love, power, health, and pleasure. Investigating the complex cultural, religious, and social meanings of food allows for a deeper understanding of individual identity, revealing how food choices express internal needs, conflicts, and a sense of self (*7*).

According to Giddens (*10*), identity is not fixed: it is shaped through ongoing narrative reconstruction, maintaining a coherent story of the self. In this light, emotional eating can be seen as a response to the identity crises brought about by late modernity. As Bauman (*11*) pointed out, the role of sociology is not to provide definitive answers, but to illuminate the various ways in which identity can be reinterpreted and expressed in everyday life, including, among other things, through food.

Emotions, identity, and food in contemporary society

Contemporary life, characterized by the fragmentation of identity and high stress, has heightened the need for self-regulation rituals, especially those revolving around food (*10*). The sensory aspects of food – its smell, taste, and texture – evoke memories and emotions, creating a sense of continuity and security (*12*). Within this context, comfort food emerges as a symbolic response to feelings of uncertainty (*13*).

This is particularly significant during periods of psychosocial tension, when comfort food serves as a symbolic reaction to insecurity and loss of control (*5*). While earlier research focused on behaviors associated with eating disorders, growing evidence shows that even people without such diagnoses use food as a method of emotional regulation. Steptoe, Pollard, and Wardle (*6*) demonstrated that mood significantly influences food choices, particularly among women, where food is used to reduce stress, promote relaxation, or improve mood.

Lupton (*3*) highlights that many individuals see eating as one of the most intense sensual experiences in everyday life, especially due to the emotional associations of taste and smell. In a dynamic society where individuals balance multiple life roles, there is an increasing need for personal space and control over one's time. Food, in this context, becomes a symbol of private space and self-reward.

The sociology of emotions, developing since the late 1970s, provides further insight into this relationship. Emotions are understood in terms of pleasure and arousal, and are increasingly recognized as socially-rooted phenomena. As an everyday object, food reflects social norms, cultural values, and identity patterns (*3*, *14*).

This paper explores the subjective meanings participants attach to food, the role of food in emotional regulation, and how it contributes to shaping personal and social identity. Food is part of the narrative construction of the self, offering a sense of belonging and shaping how we communicate love, power, and values (*1*, *2*, *15*).

Research context and significance

This study examines eating habits within the broader context of increasing individualization and a growing sense of social disconnection, particularly among young people. Traditional markers of identity, such as religion, high culture, class consciousness, and political affiliation, are losing their salience (*3*). In this setting, food is understood not only as a means of satisfying physiological needs, but also as a symbolic resource capable of

expressing a wide range of emotional and social meanings – f rom joy to sorrow, from celebration to comfort (*16*).

As Lupton (*3*, *17*) and others have shown, food and emotions are closely tied to the body, particularly for women, under the influence of social constructs that often portray the body and emotions as "uncontrolled" or "profane". As a cultural construct, comfort food is subjected to commodification and iconification, where certain dishes turn into symbols of emotional regulation. These meanings are not neutral; they are socially shaped and contingent on power and symbolic control over how food is interpreted.

By employing symbolic interactionist and structuralist approaches, it becomes possible to examine how particular foods are socially constructed as comfort food. Mead (*18*) argued that even basic biological impulses such as hunger are inherently social; their fulfilment involves, or even requires, a social context and social relationships. In this sense, eating as a social practice extends beyond the biological framework.

Structuralist theorists such as Barthes (*19*), Douglas (*15*), Fischler (*2*), Lévi-Strauss (*20*, *21*), and Mennell (*22*) emphasize the deep cultural embeddedness of eating practices. Douglas demonstrated that the consumption of specific foods can signal belonging to a particular class, ethnic, or religious group, while Lévi-Strauss stressed the symbolic structure of culinary techniques that reflect social order (*21*).

In this light, comfort food takes on a new meaning in a postmodern society marked by uncertainty and identity fragmentation: Individuals turn to food not only as a tool for emotional regulation but also as a symbolic resource for expressing and maintaining a sense of identity (*22*).

Aim and structure of the paper

This paper adopts an intersubjective approach linked to the concept of the self (*18*, *23*) to explore the emotional and social dimensions of comfort food consumption. Emphasis is placed on the role of family experiences and social interactions in shaping relationships with food. Preferential food choices are thus seen not merely as personal preferences, but as socially and culturally embedded practices through which individuals seek emotional stability and express their identity (*5*).

The central research questions focus on:

- the formation of eating habits during childhood and adolescence;
- emotional responses to specific foods;
- participants' definitions of comfort food; and
- the circumstances and emotional states that prompt individuals to turn to such food.

In this process, food choices are closely tied to questions of identity and belonging, connecting to the broader inquiry: "To whom do I belong?" Food thus functions as more than a source of nutrition; it reflects social, cultural, and personal values that continuously shape and reshape the sense of self. By examining how food is used to achieve emotional

well-being, particularly during moments of sadness, loneliness, or psychological strain, this study highlights its role in shaping personal and social identity in contemporary society (2, 10, 24-27). Grounded in symbolic interactionist and structuralist perspectives, food is considered both an expression of the self and a medium of social interaction, reflecting broader cultural and social forces (2, 27-29).

Methods

Study design

The focus of this study is on understanding how individuals experience and interpret their eating behaviors in relation to emotions, identity, and social connections, particularly among adults without diagnosed eating disorders. We report our findings per both the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (30) and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (31) to ensure completeness and rigor.

This study employs a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the emotional and social aspects of participants' food choices, following an operational model (32-34). Methods were operationalized to capture the complex relationship between individual emotions, social norms, and cultural practices in contemporary, high-stress environments (34). This approach enabled participants to express their perspectives in their own words, providing insights into the subjective meanings and contextual factors shaping food-related practices.

Participants/sample and recruitment

We conducted this study between June and September 2022 in the Šibenik area using purposive sampling. Participants were selected based on their relevance to the research focus, specifically their experiences of emotionally motivated eating. Participants were included if they were aged 18 years or older, resided in the Šibenik area, and if they demonstrated

Table 1. Recruitment and inclusion/exclusion criteria

Criterion/process	Description
Number of contacted individuals	~40 (total potential participants contacted)
Number of included participants	20
Response rate	~50%
Inclusion criteria	Adults (≥18 years); Šibenik residents; food choices influenced by emotions
Exclusion criteria	Diagnosed eating disorders (self-reported)
Selection method	Purposive; based on preliminary responses indicating emotional gratification
Pre-inclusion information gathering	Brief questionnaire and initial conversation
Additional screening procedures	None beyond the initial questionnaire and conversation
Interview setting	Cafés or participants' homes, scheduled according to availability
Method of contact	In person or by phone
Prior relationship between interviewer and participants	None

experiences of food choices influenced by emotional factors during an initial conversation (**Table 1**). Individuals with self-reported diagnosed eating disorders were excluded.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in cafés or participants' homes, depending on their preference. Prior to participation, all participants received information about the study aims and topics and provided informed consent. Participants were also briefed on the theoretical framework and objectives of the study to provide context for their responses. A semi-structured interview guide, developed specifically for this study, ensured consistency while allowing flexibility. After asking for general demographic information (gender, age, education, employment status), three topics were addressed:

1. Family dietary habits
   - Family dietary habits during childhood
   - Parental feeding styles
   - Parental control over food
2. Relationship with food
   - Current dietary habits
   - The distinction between "healthy" and "unhealthy" food
   - Dietary restrictions
   - Dieting
3. Perceptions and consumption of comfort food
   - Defining comfort food
   - Types of comfort food
   - Characteristics and reasons for consumption
   - Portion control
   - Emotions during and after eating (positive, negative)
   - Compensatory behaviors (skipping meals, dieting, working out).

The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and complemented by field notes capturing contextual observations.

Interviews began with sociodemographic questions, followed by questions on family eating habits and early food experiences (*34*, *35*). The next section addressed current eating behaviors, including food choices and perceptions of healthy and unhealthy eating (*36*). The final part focused on emotional eating, including definitions of comfort food, associated emotions, triggers (*37*, *38*), and behaviors before and after such episodes (*39*).

All interviews were conducted by a trained female researcher (PB), a sociology graduate student, under the supervision of an experienced academic (VK). A pilot interview

was conducted prior to data collection to familiarize the researcher with the procedure. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the study by avoiding leading questions and reflecting on potential biases.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (*18*, *40*). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded manually by two researchers. The concepts of data saturation or code saturation were not applied, as these are inconsistent with the values and assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis (*41*). Data triangulation was applied through field notes, observations, and multiple researchers coding the data to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. An abductive approach was applied, combining inductive coding grounded in participants' narratives with theoretical insights from existing literature. Codes were iteratively organized into subthemes and broader themes through ongoing discussion between researchers.

The analysis focused on the emotional and social significance of food, particularly its role in emotional regulation, social interaction, and identity construction. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were developed through active interpretation rather than predefined coding frameworks. Direct participant quotes are presented in the "Results" section and have been pseudonymized.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split (class: 029-06/25-03/00002, ref. no.: 2181-190-25-00017). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. All data were anonymized using pseudonyms and stored securely on password-protected dvices. No third parties were present during interviews, ensuring privacy and confidentiality.

Results

Approximately 40 individuals were initially contacted, of whom 20 (16 women and 4 men) agreed to participate (**Table 2**). We identified three core themes in our thematic analysis of semi structured interviews: the emotional function of food, ambivalence toward comfort food, and the significance of family and nostalgia in eating habits (**Figure 1**). Each theme is supported by analytical interpretation and participant quotations that illustrate their experiences, responses, and the personal significance they attach to food.

Theme 1: emotional regulation through food and a sense of belonging

Participants described using comfort food not only to cope with negative emotions such as sadness, stress, or boredom, but also to restore a sense of belonging and identity continuity through familiar tastes, rituals, and memories.

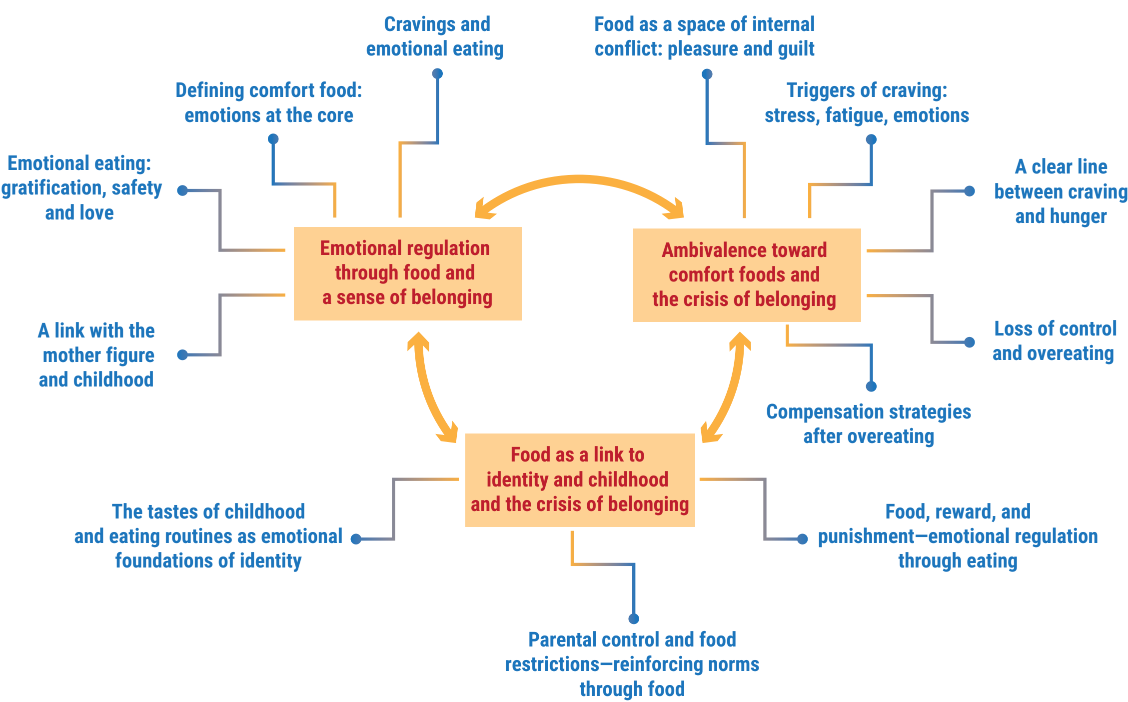

Figure 1. Thematic map of food as an emotional and identity space in times of uncertainty.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants (n = 20)

Characteristic		
Gender	Female	16
	Male	4
Age, mean (standard deviation, range)		35.2 (9.9, 20–59)
Education	Secondary school	9
	Higher professional education	5
	Bachelor's or master's degree	6
Education	Students	3
	Employed	14
	Unemployed/self-employed	3

Subtheme 1.1: defining comfort food: emotions at the core

Participants emphasized the emotional role of food in their definitions of comfort food:

> *I'd define comfort food as the kind of food that, in moments of sadness, depression, exhaustion, and so on, provides a kind of refuge, a kind of self-care strategy where we treat ourselves to our favorite food because we deserve it, to lift our mood a little, really to comfort us when we're feeling down. – S1.*
>
> *Participants' definitions simultaneously reflect both personal experiences and a general understanding of the concept, combining emotional comfort with individual interpretation.*
>
> *If I could make just one wish come true when I'm feeling sad, I'd choose to eat something from my comfort food category. – S10.*

It's the food we crave when we're physically or mentally drained, something that gives us comfort – often connected to a favorite childhood dish. – S12.

Food that reminds me of home, or of someone who took care of us – my grandma, my mom... – S13.

These responses indicate that the emotional dimension predominates over physiological function, with food perceived as a "refuge", "reward", or "mood-enhancer".

Subtheme 1.2: cravings and emotional eating

Most participants reported cravings for comfort food even in the absence of physical hunger, highlighting its role in emotional regulation:

As I've already said, gummy candies and chips are the usual go-to, but a good pizza can help, too. – S2.

If you could even call it food: sweets, cakes, cookies, chocolate, hard candy, snacks – everything goes. – S5.

Pizza, pasta, pastries, cakes... basically everything! – S9.

My comfort food ranges from sweet to savory, but I'd say mostly pasta, bread, pizza, mainly carbohydrates. – S12.

Participants typically craved calorie-dense, carbohydrate-rich foods such as sweets and salty snacks.

Subtheme 1.3: emotional eating: gratification, safety, and love

Participants described emotional responses to comfort food, including feelings of pleasure, safety, and nostalgia:

It feels like someone is giving me a hug and holding me tight... like the world stops and everything will be okay. – S10.

A sense of pleasure, happiness, literally comfort. – S12.

It evokes a feeling of nostalgia, good vibes, pleasant memories of childhood, family, and my home. – S13.

It's a sense of comfort... the feeling that I'll feel better once I eat whatever I'm craving. – S16.

In this context, eating emerges as a way to soothe momentary emotional discomfort, as well.

Subtheme 1.4: a link with the mother figure and childhood

For some participants, emotional connections with food were reinforced by childhood experiences and maternal or family practices:

Pizza, puffed corn snacks, and some of my mother's dishes like her stews or some of her special recipes. – S1.

My comfort food is ćevapi with ajvar. The smell and taste of childhood. – S3.

Probably breaded pork tenderloin... Then lasagna... I: Did your mother prepare those dishes? Yeah, and those few dishes are still my favorites. – S13.

These foods were frequently mentioned as symbols of emotional connection to family and the safety of home.

Subtheme 1.5: food as a symbol of belonging in moments of uncertainty

Participants highlighted how food evokes a sense of connection, even when eating alone:

> *Even when I eat alone, it feels like I'm sharing a meal with my family… it reminds me that I belong somewhere. – S13.*
>
> *When I eat my mother's old recipes, it feels like she is here with me, even though she is far away. – S3.*
>
> *The tastes from my childhood bring me home, I feel safe and a sense of belonging. – S12.*
>
> *The rituals of shared meals, even when I'm alone, remind me of my family and my home. – S7.*

These experiences were particularly frequent during moments of stress, fatigue, or emotional vulnerability. Comfort foods cited included traditional home-cooked meals, childhood snacks, and recipes prepared by mothers or grandmothers, illustrating that food often carries social and emotional significance beyond immediate consumption.

These findings confirm previous theories on the emotional function of food, yet reveal specific patterns in the local context of Šibenik, particularly a connection with family rituals and Mediterranean cuisine.

Theme 2: ambivalence toward comfort foods and the crisis of belonging

While theme 1 highlighted the emotional and social significance of comfort foods in providing a sense of belonging and continuity, participants' narratives also revealed a more ambivalent relationship with these foods. Comfort foods were described as offering pleasure, relief, and emotional support, yet these experiences were frequently followed by guilt, self-criticism, or a sense of lost control. This ambivalence reflects a tension between immediate emotional needs and internalized expectations regarding eating, self-discipline, and bodily control.

Participants shared the thought that comfort food could momentarily soothe emotional distress or evoke nostalgia, but that this pleasure often came with a moral or emotional cost:

> *When I'm stressed or upset, I usually reach for chocolate or pasta… it makes me feel calmer, at least for a while. But afterward, I feel guilty, like I shouldn't have eaten so much. – S5.*
>
> *Sometimes I treat myself to sweets, but then I feel guilty immediately afterward. It's like I'm punishing myself for a small comfort. – S8.*

This cyclical pattern of gratification and guilt mirrors the dual role of comfort foods observed in theme 1: while foods reinforce emotional security and a connection to childhood or family, they also create internal conflict in moments of emotional vulnerability. Participants described this tension as particularly strong in contemporary social contexts, where stress, time pressures, and cultural ideals about health and body image intensified feelings of ambivalence and self-judgment.

> *Eating my favorite foods makes me happy for a moment, but then I immediately start thinking about calories, health, and whether I'm being lazy. It's like a constant battle. – S19.*

Overall, theme 2 extends the insights from theme 1 by showing that emotional eating is not purely comforting: it is a complex practice that simultaneously supports emotional regulation and identity continuity, yet exposes individuals to conflicting emotions and self-reflection about belonging, control, and self-care.

Subtheme 2.1: food as a space of internal conflict: pleasure and guilt

Participants frequently described emotional eating as a source of momentary pleasure, immediately followed by feelings of guilt and discomfort, often related to the quantity of food consumed or its perceived lack of nutritional value. For example, one participant remarked: "During eating, it's great, but when I finish, I feel even worse than before" (S19). Another added: "Worse, because it's always extra unhealthy food" (S3).

These statements illustrate a pattern of hedonic ambivalence, whereby food provides immediate satisfaction but is quickly followed by emotional discomfort and a sense of loss of control. This dynamic aligns with the concept of the "forbidden fruit" described in the literature (*42*-*44*).

Participants also highlighted a clear categorization of food into "good" versus "bad" or "healthy" versus "unhealthy." For instance, when asked whether she classifies food in such terms, one participant responded simply "Absolutely" (S10), while another explained "I divide food into healthy and less healthy; I think any food is unhealthy in large amounts" (S12).

Control over the consumption of such foods varied among participants. One participant acknowledged "Of course, especially when I'm in a phase of overindulging" (S10), while another similarly noted "Sometimes I treat myself to unhealthy food" (S8).

Participants also emphasized their awareness of the need to limit unhealthy food consumption.

> *I enjoy it while eating, but after emotional eating I mostly feel bad... – S12.*
>
> *A little better, although due to overindulgence that feeling doesn't last long. – S8.*
>
> *Of course, especially when I'm in a phase of overindulging. – S10.*

Together, these examples illustrate how emotional eating operates as a space of internal conflict, where immediate pleasure is consistently counterbalanced by subsequent guilt and self-reproach.

Subtheme 2.2: triggers of craving: stress, fatigue, emotions

Participants described several triggers of food cravings, most commonly related to emotional and physical states, including stress, fatigue, life challenges, and emotional dissatisfaction.

> *Usually PMS, when hormones kick in, or after a bad day at work. – S2.*
>
> *Emotions, stress, habit. All at once. – S8.*
>
> *Usually certain life situations, stress, and problems. – S19.*
>
> *For me, it's usually when I'm really tired... [I like to] climb into bed, put on a movie, eat the food I love the most. – S1.*
>
> *Mainly dissatisfaction with my appearance. – S9.*

As she explained, comfort food is "probably something connected to favorite food from childhood, what we liked to eat when we were little, and that stays with us into adulthood" (S12), highlighting the enduring emotional link between food, memory, and family.

These accounts demonstrate that food cravings frequently arise in response to emotional or physical stressors, rather than purely physiological hunger.

Subtheme 2.3: a clear distinction between craving and hunger

Most participants made a clear distinction between emotional craving and physical hunger. While hunger was described as generalized and physiologically driven, craving was reported as a specific desire for a particular food item.

> *When you're hungry, you'll eat anything, but when you're craving, you want exactly what's on your mind. – S1.*
>
> *That's not hunger at all, it's a need to help yourself. – S2.*
>
> *I'd describe that craving as the feeling that everything's going to go to hell if I don't eat exactly what I want. – S19.*
>
> *It's different because it's connected to how we experience ourselves and the world. – S18.*

These statements illustrate that participants perceive craving as a distinct experience from hunger, characterized by a desire for specific foods rather than a general physiological need.

Subtheme 2.4: loss of control and overeating

Around half of the participants reported losing control during episodes of emotional eating, often consuming more than they had intended. These behavioral patterns were frequently followed by feelings of guilt and shame.

> *I eat much more than I planned to, and then I feel bad about it. – S12.*
>
> *While I'm eating, I feel great… but once I'm full, I feel terrible about what I've done to myself. – S14.*
>
> *If I overeat, I definitely feel worse, but if I manage to stay moderate, then I do feel better. – S16.*

The participants who were able to maintain control described it as the result of deliberate self-regulation and learned patterns of discipline. However, some noted that they managed to achieve control only occasionally.

Subtheme 2.5: compensation strategies after overeating

In the final segment of this theme, participants described behaviors following episodes of emotional eating. Another layer of ambivalence emerged, with some attempting to compensate through walking, exercise, skipping meals, or planning a new diet.

> *In most cases, yes, at least by going for a walk. – S4.*
>
> *Sometimes I skip a meal, sometimes not. Mainly, I start planning a new diet. – S10.*
>
> *I work out and reduce my portion sizes. – S17.*
>
> *I try sometimes, but the motivation doesn't last long. – S15.*

Approximately half of the participants reported not engaging in any compensatory strategies, while others attempted to reduce the "consequences" of emotional eating, sometimes using practices that were inconsistent or difficult to maintain.

These accounts illustrate that participants employ a variety of strategies – or none at all – after episodes of overeating, reflecting individual differences in attempts at self-regulation and management of emotional responses.

These findings demonstrate how emotional eating in the local context combines the trauma of contemporary stress with internalized social norms, highlighting the tension between immediate emotional gratification and socially conditioned expectations.

Theme 3: food as a link to identity and childhood, and the crisis of belonging

While theme 1 highlighted emotional regulation and theme 2 examined ambivalence, theme 3 focuses on the deeper symbolic connections between food, identity, and childhood. The third theme most directly highlights the connection between food, nostalgia, and belonging. Participants frequently referred to childhood tastes, smells, and family eating rituals as sources of emotional grounding, describing comfort food as a reminder of home, parental care, and earlier periods of life associated with safety and stability. In these accounts, food operates as a symbolic marker of affiliation to family, culture, and generational identity, linking present emotional experiences with remembered relational environments. Reaching for familiar foods in moments of uncertainty thus appears as a way of re-establishing continuity between past and present selves.

Comfort food is deeply connected to personal childhood experiences and family environments, creating emotional bonds that not only foster a sense of security but also mold core aspects of personal identity. Through food-related rituals, family habits, and parental prohibitions and rewards, food becomes a symbol of emotional support, discipline, and social affiliation. In this context, food is not merely a physiological need but a key medium through which cultural values, norms, and emotional patterns are transmitted.

Subtheme 3.1: the tastes of childhood and eating routines as emotional foundations of identity

Participants frequently linked comfort food to childhood tastes, everyday family meals, and early eating routines. These foods were described not only as familiar, but as emotionally charged reminders of home, care, and security. Through these narratives, food appeared as a medium through which participants connected present experiences with emotionally meaningful moments from the past.

> *My comfort food is ćevapi with ajvar. The smell and taste of childhood. – S3.*
>
> *Food was prepared by my grandmothers and mom based on traditional Croatian continental and Mediterranean cuisine... – S7.*
>
> *Every day we ate a variety of cooked meals. Classic Mediterranean cuisine... – S5.*
>
> *My mom did the cooking, and since she worked a lot, she mostly made stews and one-pot dishes. – S8.*

Descriptions of daily meals emphasized routine, repetition, and the predictability of family eating patterns, with participants often associating these routines with feelings of stability and normality. Discussions of food prepared by mothers or grandmothers were particularly prominent, suggesting that early food experiences were closely intertwined with caregiving, family structure, and emotional safety.

Shared meals were portrayed as more than nutritional events; they were remembered as moments of togetherness that shaped participants' understanding of belonging and family life. Holiday and traditional meals were described as particularly meaningful, reinforcing a sense of continuity with family history and cultural background. Through these

accounts, childhood food practices emerged as an important foundation for emotional memory and for the development of a sense of identity rooted in family and tradition.

Subtheme 3.2: parental control and food restrictions – reinforcing norms through food

Beyond comfort and togetherness, participants' accounts showed that eating patterns within the family were also shaped by discipline, restriction, and parental authority. Many described childhood food practices that involved rules, pressure, or conditional access to certain foods, which were generally presented by parents as necessary or beneficial.

> *(...) We could have no sweets until we ate the soup and meat. – S2.*
>
> *They made me try everything before I was allowed to say I didn't like it. – S8.*
>
> *Food was withheld in the form of withholding dessert... – S12.*
>
> *We were forced to finish lunch, whether we liked the food or not... – S16.*

These narratives indicate that food in childhood was not only a source of nourishment and comfort, but also a medium through which behavioral expectations were communicated. Participants described distinctions between foods that were considered "proper", "healthy", or "necessary", and those viewed as treats, which were often made conditional on compliance, good behavior, or completion of meals. In this way, everyday eating routines functioned as structured practices in which children learned rules, limits, and expectations related to food.

Subtheme 3.3: food, reward, and punishment – emotional regulation through eating

Some participants reported that food was used as a form of reward or punishment during childhood, highlighting its role as a tool of emotional and social regulation. These practices shaped relationships with food, pleasure, and self-control later in life.

> *When my brother and I were extra good... we'd go to the cinema and then have ćevapi. – S3.*
>
> *We celebrated school achievements by buying our favorite sweets. – S8.*
>
> *For being brave at the doctor's, I would get a cheese burek. – S14.*
>
> *We were punished only if we didn't finish our food – then we'd get no dessert. – S12.*

These accounts illustrate how food functions as a mechanism of behavioral regulation within the family. Food thus moves beyond the domain of physiological needs and enters the symbolic and emotional sphere, acting as a kind of emotional currency in childhood.

In adulthood, relationships with food continue to reflect these early experiences. Comfort food that evokes memories of parental care, family rituals, and the safety of home has lasting emotional repercussions for personal identity and eating behaviors (*3*, *5*, *45*). These patterns influence not only food preferences, but also emotional responses, which often persist into adulthood (*5*).

Parental feeding strategies – including restriction, coercion, and reward – demonstrate that food serves as an instrument of discipline, value transmission, and social regulation (*46*, *47*). Through these practices, norms around what is "good", "healthy", "deserved", or "forbidden" are internalized. Such patterns reflect not only physiological needs but also cultural, gendered, and class-based values (*3*, *48*). Theoretical frameworks, such as symbolic interactionism, suggest that eating patterns are not neutral but symbolically loaded,

gendered, and socially situated. Food thus becomes a material expression of identity, belonging, and emotional care (*2*, *27*).

The contemporary social context adds additional complexity. While childhood rituals and values shape early relationships with food, consumer culture, fast food, and societal ideals about body aesthetics (*49*, *50*) impose new pressures. This tension between the "authentic" food of childhood and modern ideals of self-control fosters an ambivalent yet deeply personal relationship with food – one that remains emotionally charged throughout life (*51*, *52*).

While confirming earlier theories on the symbolic role of food, these findings highlight the local specificity of its connection to family tradition and the continuity of identity in the context of Šibenik, which is rarely addressed in the literature.

Discussion

These findings suggest that food should be understood not merely as a means of physiological sustenance, but as a central symbolic resource through which individuals negotiate emotional stability, identity continuity, and social belonging (*3*, *5*, *12*, *34*). What distinguishes this study from previous research is the detailed exploration of how specific comfort foods, rooted in childhood experiences and maternal or family practices, serve simultaneously as emotional regulators and anchors of personal identity in moments of contemporary social uncertainty. Participants' narratives indicate that eating practices are deeply embedded in personal histories and relational contexts, particularly within family environments (*12*, *34*). In this sense, food operates as a socially and emotionally mediated practice, carrying past experiences, intimate relationships, and culturally shaped meanings into present emotional life (*2*, *5*, *10*). Eating thus emerges as a site where emotional, relational, and social dimensions intersect (*3*, *35*).

The strong presence of mothers, grandmothers, and family food routines highlights food as a symbolic link to significant others and to the past (*2*, *5*, *10*). Participants described food as mediating a sense of belonging, even in the absence or rupture of real social relationships. They emphasized that this sense of belonging and security is particularly pronounced during moments of emotional instability, uncertainty, or stress, when traditional forms of belonging (family, community, cultural identity) may be disrupted.

According to symbolic interactionism (*53*), the meaning of food is shaped through interactions. Within the family, food becomes a vehicle through which children learn about social rules, emotions, and belonging. Gallagher (*29*) emphasizes that food rituals, especially those taking place around the family table, act as the "glue" that binds community members. Through shared meals, individuals also share values, kinship, and feelings. Holiday meals, although more ceremonial, remain grounded in tradition, further reinforcing the connection to the past.

Familiar childhood foods, such as pizza, corn snacks, traditional stews, or specialties like *ćevapi* with *ajvar*, breaded pork tenderloin, or lasagna, reinforce emotional connections to family and evoke warm memories, suggesting that comfort eating functions both as a strat-

egy for emotional regulation and a mechanism for identity stabilization (5, 54). In moments of emotional instability, participants turn to these familiar flavors to reaffirm continuity, safety, and belonging. This aligns with previous research emphasizing comfort food's role in linking present emotional experiences with past relational and cultural contexts (2, 5, 42). It further highlights the sociocultural significance of emotional eating and opens avenues for further investigation into gender norms, social class, and media influences (43, 48).

Participants described how, in moments of sadness, stress, or inner emptiness, food becomes an emotional crutch – a kind of "embrace" that offers temporary stability. Although preparing and consuming food is often solitary, participants reported that it evokes a sense of connection, particularly with family members or close ones whose presence is symbolically recalled through tastes, smells, or eating rituals.

> *Even when I eat alone, it feels like I'm sharing a meal with my family… it reminds me that I belong somewhere. – S13.*
>
> *When I eat my mother's old recipes, it feels like she is here with me, even though she is far away. – S3.*

These narratives illustrate that, even in the absence or disruption of real social connections, food can act as a mediator of belonging. Participants emphasized that this sense of belonging is particularly pronounced during moments of uncertainty or stress, when traditional forms of belonging (family, community, cultural identity) may be challenged.

In line with symbolic interactionism and previous literature on comfort food, these findings suggest that food functions not merely as a biological necessity, but as a symbolic space through which emotions, memories, and identity are expressed. The quest for emotional regulation through food often reflects a search for one's place in the world – in past relationships, within the community, or even in relation to one's own body (10, 55). Emotional eating thus emerges as a strategy to re-establish the continuity of a fractured identity. In this context, food, especially comfort foods linked to childhood, home, and warmth, operates both as an emotional regulator and as a symbolic anchor of belonging.

Participants described an ambivalent relationship with comfort food, in which pleasure and emotional support coexist with feelings of guilt, self-criticism, and a sense of lost control (3, 5). While consuming favorite foods can provide relief, nostalgic memories, and emotional security, it can simultaneously trigger shame, anxiety, and self-consciousness (1, 45).

Some participants reported that, while consuming comfort food initially provides emotional relief, it is often followed by feelings of guilt or regret, particularly when the food is perceived as unhealthy. These experiences exemplify the tension between hedonic satisfaction and moral self-assessment, aligning with Chernin's "paradox of comfort" (56, 57), in which emotional relief is inevitably followed by guilt.

Some participants did not use any compensatory strategies, while others tried to mitigate the "consequences" of emotional eating through practices that were often unrealistic or unsustainable. Such behaviors could intensify feelings of guilt and personal failure, underscoring the emotional cost associated with comfort eating.

Food often functions as a symbolic anchor, linking present emotional experiences to past relationships and cultural contexts. Participants highlighted the role of familiar childhood

foods, family recipes, and maternal or grandmaternal practices in re-establishing a sense of continuity and belonging.

One participant noted: "Even when I eat alone, it feels like I'm sharing a meal with my family… it reminds me that I belong somewhere" (S13). Another shared: "When I eat my mother's old recipes, it feels like she is here with me, even though she is far away" (S3). These narratives illustrate that, beyond physiological need, food mediates emotional security and social identity, particularly in times of stress, uncertainty, or social disruption (*2*, *5*, *10*, *12*).

Media-promoted ideals of fitness and thinness further intensify ambivalence, emphasizing the contrast between self-acceptance and societal expectations of self-discipline and "healthy" habits (*44*, *58*). Women, in particular, were described in the literature as more likely to internalize these norms, which in turn shape perceptions of food and induce feelings of guilt, body insecurity, and emotional self-doubt (*42*, *43*, *46*).

Participants reinforced this pattern: "I try to eat healthy, but sometimes it feels impossible with all the pressure to be fit" (S10). Such statements confirm that emotional eating operates at the intersection of personal needs and socially-mediated standards of behavior, reflecting both internalized norms and broader cultural pressures.

Across the four subthemes of this study – initial gratification, emotional triggers (stress, fatigue, nostalgia), distinction between craving and hunger, and loss of control with guilt – food emerged as a symbolic space for affirming identity (*58*-*60*). Emotional eating is not merely a physiological process; it is a means of negotiating self-worth, regulating emotions, and re-establishing a sense of belonging (*5*, *59*).

As one participant noted: "When I'm stressed or upset, I usually reach for chocolate or pasta… it makes me feel calmer, at least for a while" (S5). Another reflected: "Sometimes I treat myself to sweets, but then I feel guilty immediately afterward" (S8). These examples illustrate how food simultaneously regulates mood and enacts a symbolic function, linking the self to past emotional centers, family, and home.

This ambivalence surrounding comfort food reflects broader social and cultural dynamics. It reveals how relationships with food are shaped by identity, gender norms, emotional needs, and social expectations. Food functions as a symbolic and emotional medium, helping individuals navigate uncertainty, reaffirm continuity, and negotiate the tension between internal desires and external norms (*27*, *48*, *61*, *62*).

This study provides insight into how and why individuals use specific foods to regulate their emotions, particularly in the context of stress, dissatisfaction, and business and everyday challenges.

> *When I'm stressed or upset, I usually reach for chocolate or pasta… it makes me feel calmer, at least for a while. (S5).*
>
> *Food becomes a symbolic resource for self-soothing – a means of mood regulation when emotional and social support systems are eroded.*
>
> *During eating, it's great, but when I finish, I feel even worse than before. (S19)*
>
> *Worse, because it's always extra unhealthy food. (S3)*
>
> *Sometimes I treat myself to sweets, but then I feel guilty immediately afterward. (S8)*

This behavior, which may be interpreted as a desire for an emotional "quick fix" (*37*, *63*), illustrates the ambivalence that participants experience.

This ambivalence, often due to the quantity consumed or the perceived "unhealthiness" of the food, supports what Chernin (*56*, *57*) termed the "paradox of comfort": food offers relief, yet simultaneously induces guilt, intensifying the emotional burden. These patterns reflect an internal conflict between the desire for emotional security and socially internalized norms of idealized body images, self-control, and "healthy" lifestyles, which are often gendered and class-based (*57*, *64*).

At the core of this ambivalence lies a deeper crisis of belonging, characteristic of contemporary society. Rapid social change, individualization, unstable labor markets, digital saturation, and a prevailing sense of insecurity make it increasingly difficult for individuals to define who they are. It also complicates understanding where they belong (*10*, *11*). Within this context, food assumes a new role, not merely as an energy source, but as a vehicle for emotional orientation and a symbolic link to identity and belonging. As Bauman (*13*) argues, in a "liquid" society marked by constant change, individuals often feel fragmented, exposed, and emotionally untethered.

Despite its temporary nature and the resulting guilt, the consumption of comfort food becomes a ritualized attempt to restore continuity with the self and with the past – a way of grappling with the question: to whom do I belong when traditional forms of belonging are crumbling? Participants in this study consistently distinguished between physical hunger and emotional craving, confirming that food carries multiple meanings in their everyday lives: it acts as a source of comfort and self-regulation, while also affirming identity and maintaining continuity with emotional centers from the past, such as family and home. In times of social and emotional uncertainty, food emerges as a powerful symbolic mechanism for re-establishing a sense of belonging – to a community, culture, family, or one's own emotional past (*12*).

Overall, these findings show that food supports emotional security and social identity, particularly in times of stress, uncertainty, or vulnerability. Rather than providing only narrow psychological comfort, it acts as a medium through which individuals re-establish coherence between past and present selves, reinforcing both emotional bonds and social identities (*2*, *37*, *65*, *66*). Adult relationships with food are strongly influenced by childhood experiences, family food routines, and emotional memories, including comfort foods that evoke parental care, family rituals, and the safety of home, which have lasting repercussions for personal identity, emotional responses, and eating behaviors into adulthood (*3*, *5*, *61*, *62*, *65*-*67*).

Parental feeding strategies, such as restriction, coercion, and reward, demonstrate that food serves as an instrument of discipline, value transmission, and social regulation (*46*, *47*, *61*). Food becomes a channel through which norms around what is considered "good", "healthy", "deserved", or "forbidden" are internalized (*3*, *48*, *61*, *62*). As suggested by theoretical frameworks such as symbolic interactionism, eating patterns are not neutral; they are symbolically loaded, gendered, and class-situated. Food thus becomes a material expression of identity, belonging, and emotional care (*2*, *27*).

The contemporary social context further complicates this relationship. While childhood shapes individuals through rituals and values, the culture of consumerism, fast food, and body aesthetics imposes new demands (*49*, *50*). In the tension between the "authentic" food of childhood and modern ideals of self-control, an ambivalent yet deeply personal relationship with food emerges – one that remains emotionally charged throughout life (*51*, *52*). Parental dietary interventions were guided not only by health concerns but also by a normative approach to food, where "good" food had to be eaten always, while "bad" food was conditional on behavior. Feuerbach's (*68*) and Corvo's (*69*) well-known assertion that "man is what he eats" illustrate how food becomes a tool of moral and bodily regulation. In this sense, food is not neutral; it conveys messages about proper conduct, care, and discipline, serving as a foundation for many contemporary sociological and philosophical interpretations of food.

As this study reveals, in moments of stress or uncertainty, food becomes more than a biological necessity; it acts as a site for emotional and identity expression (*65*, *66*). For many participants, food serves as a tool for regulating emotions, reconnecting with past experiences, and reaffirming social norms and personal identities (*65*, *66*). While frequently used as a form of self-care during periods of sadness or stress, this process is often marked by ambivalence: feelings of guilt or remorse following consumption reflect internalized conflicts between societal expectations, personal values, and emotional needs (*61*, *65*). Food thus functions both as a symbolic "embrace" and a social mirror, highlighting the interplay between belonging, identity, and emotional regulation in contemporary life (*61*).

Most participants in this study have retained eating habits deeply embedded in the family context and in the symbolic meaning of the home. Food thus serves not only to satisfy physiological needs but also functions as an emotional and cultural bridge to the past. Eating evokes scenes of shared meals, rituals, family gatherings, and (usually maternal or grandmaternal) care, creating a sense of safety and belonging.

> *Food was prepared by my grandmothers and mom... it reminds me of being home and safe. – S7.*

In this context, food serves as emotional memory – an archive of closeness and stability that reminds individuals of a "place" to which they belong, at least temporarily ((*5*) p. 289–290). Nostalgia plays a central role in food choice and consumption. Comfort food is often associated with childhood and home, recreating emotional patterns and reaffirming social identities.

> *My comfort food is ćevapi with ajvar. The smell and taste of childhood. – S3.*

These patterns reflect a need for emotional soothing as well as a deeper existential yearning for continuity in a time when traditional forms of belonging are increasingly unstable (*12*, *70*). Food becomes a response to the question: to whom do I belong when the boundaries of community, identity, and security have become blurred?

This form of emotional eating becomes especially prominent in contemporary social contexts marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and the erosion of traditional communities. Bauman (*11*) writes about "liquid modernity", in which stable social ties give way to fluid, precarious relationships, leaving individuals to seek emotional anchorage on their own. People often consume familiar foods in private when they feel socially isolated, sad, or de-

pressed. According to our participants, food can at least temporarily mitigate these states ((*5*), p. 290–291).

While the act of enjoying such food represents a moment of autonomy, its emotional effect stems from the evocation of close relationships from the past. Food becomes a symbolic medium through which individuals build a sense of connectedness with others, even if those connections no longer exist. This mechanism of psychological and cultural identity regulation is particularly prominent at a time when traditional forms of belonging – family, community, religion – are weakening, and emotional security is sought through the repetition of the familiar (*3*, *10*).

Resistance to new culinary experiences during moments of emotional vulnerability is also noteworthy. Fischler (*2*) describes this as the "omnivore's paradox" – the conflict between the desire for novelty and the comfort of the familiar, which creates tension between the need for variety and the fear of the unknown. In periods of uncertainty, familiar foods provide a sense of control and predictability, while unfamiliar ones may trigger anxiety. It is therefore not surprising that participants often reach for comfort food during times of stress, as they try to avoid new flavors and habits that might disrupt their emotional balance ((*2*), (*5*), p. 291).

In conclusion, our findings indicate that food, beyond its role in survival, holds multilayered meanings: it is an emotional stabilizer, a cultural signal, and an identity resource. In a world where the boundaries of belonging are fluid and vague, food becomes a quiet companion in the search for continuity, belonging, and emotional security.

This study examined food as a medium of self-expression, social interaction, and cultural identity. Participants highlighted how, in moments of stress or emotional tension, food could provide temporary comfort and a sense of control.

> *Sometimes I eat because I feel stressed at work, not because I'm hungry... it's the only moment I feel a bit in control. – S2.*

While comfort foods may offer short-term relief, our findings suggest that they do not fully resolve underlying emotional or social challenges. Instead, food can act as a mirror reflecting the limitations of personal coping strategies in contemporary life. Participants' experiences illustrate how expectations of solace and security often clash with reality, leading to moments of dissatisfaction and reflection on the broader social pressures that shape daily life.

In line with symbolic interactionism (*18*), the meanings participants assign to food emerge from their interactions and cultural context. Yet these meanings are also dynamic, evolving in response to new experiences and social realities ((*5*), p. 276; (*18*)). In modern, high-pressure societies characterized by rapid change, digital saturation, and fragmented social ties, food may simultaneously function as a source of comfort, a marker of identity, and a symbolic tool for navigating uncertainty.

Ultimately, these findings highlight that while food can temporarily regulate emotions and reaffirm identity, it also reveals the limitations of using consumption alone as a strategy for emotional and social stability. The study underscores the need to consider food not

merely as sustenance or comfort, but as a complex social and symbolic medium embedded in broader existential and cultural contexts.

In his review of the sociology of food and nutrition, McIntosh (*71*) observed that food, dietary practices, and bodily experiences carry emotional implications. Similarly, Rozin (*72*) and Rozin and Fallon (*73*) argued that some of our emotional responses, such as disgust, are learned through interactions with others in food-related settings. Chernin (*45*), Orbach (*46*), and Millman (*47*) described how women with eating disorders often link food and eating with feelings and with social-psychological expectations and needs ((*5*), p. 277).

This is a universal experience, although to a lesser degree than in the case of eating disorder patients. The very notion of disordered eating draws attention to the normative and emotional components of food. In her research, Lupton (*3*) highlighted a link between food and a broad spectrum of emotions, including anger, anxiety, worry, disappointment, disgust, discomfort, frustration, guilt, happiness, hatred, love, nostalgia, resentment, aversion, safety, and comfort. She also argued that although hunger is not typically classified as an emotion, it can take different forms, closely linked to the concept of appetite (*3*). Appetite is hunger with emotional overtones; relationships with food and eating are subject to powerful emotions in any context ((*3*) p. 33–34; (*5*), p. 277).

In his analysis of taste in food and art and class divisions, Bourdieu sought to demonstrate that taste is socially conditioned; taste is not simply a consequence but also a precondition of class differences in society. Consequently, class stratification is shaped not only by differences in social and economic capital but also by cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, tastes are ultimately determined by one's social origin, and in that sense, such differences are difficult to overcome, regardless of how developed our society may be (*48*).

I try to eat healthy, but sometimes it feels impossible with all the pressure to be fit. – *S10.*

Food can serve as a source of comfort by evoking images of a familiar and soothing way of life. Advertisers are acutely aware of this fact and often pick and choose themes or situations associated with specific food items. Such imagery offers consumers the opportunity to relive nostalgic memories through the consumption of specific foods ((*5*), p. 277–278). Taking into account both the social and physiological dimensions of food, this analysis shows that certain food items can play a role in the negotiation of identity. People use food to regulate emotional states, which, especially in times of uncertainty, can complicate the formation and maintenance of a coherent personal and social identity.

This research revealed notable gender differences in the selection of comfort foods. Women were more likely to choose foods associated with food preparation together with their loved ones (*e.g.*, salads) or items received as gifts (*e.g.*, chocolate), while men preferred foods that constituted a full meal or were prepared by someone else (*e.g.*, mothers). Research on disordered eating tends to emphasize that women use food as a form of expression. For example, Thompson (*74*) describes how marginalized women adopt food as a lifelong strategy for coping with various forms of abuse. Research by Steptoe *et al.* (*6*) similarly shows that women are more likely than men to choose food based on mood. Gender differences in the use of comfort food merit further investigation ((*5*), p. 293).

Moreover, our findings suggest that during certain periods in life, especially in moments of emotional or physical distress, concerns about caloric intake, fats, or sugars may temporarily subside. In some cases, food may alleviate psychosocial troubles more than it contributes to them, challenging dominant narratives about unhealthy relationships with food and disordered eating ((*5*), p. 294).

Additionally, comfort food may help mitigate sadness or depression while studying away from home or serving abroad in the military. Indeed, some of the most frequently requested and sent care packages among students and soldiers contain favorite foods. Food can thus be intentionally used to comfort others, highlighting another avenue for future research ((*5*), p. 294).

A close analysis of interview data showed that most participants were raised on traditional home-cooked meals, typically prepared by mothers. Many have retained their childhood eating habits, supporting Lupton's (*3*) claim that dietary preferences and routines established early in life never disappear entirely – they remain influential, whether consciously or unconsciously. All participants reported distinguishing between "healthy" and "unhealthy" foods, and many admitted to restricting or attempting to avoid items they perceived as harmful. In line with this, most had engaged in dieting at some point in their lives.

Bourdieu (*48*) argued that traditional class-based distinctions remain embedded in food consumption practices. Our findings support this perspective, as most participants retained food-related habits. At the same time, ordering vegetarian meals, eating meat pies, dining in trendy cafés, drinking premium wines, or consuming exotic cuisine can function as social markers of status, group affiliation, or philosophical belief (*2*, *41*). Modernity's ability to invent and manipulate such associations for commercial or political ends (*50*) was clearly recognized by participants.

According to Fischler and Lupton (*3*, *5*), the consumption of certain foods is a primary way in which individuals exercise control over the body, mind, and identity. In contemporary consumer society, managing food intake and the emotions it evokes has become a powerful means of asserting control over the self and our lives (*3*). Everyday life in modern society, marked by stress, psychological discomfort, and personal dislocation, has led to a growing reliance on comfort food – a need that capitalist markets have actively exploited (*3*).

As a result, individuals in consumer-driven cultures increasingly struggle to form and maintain stable personal and social identities, while being ever more defined by what they consume (*3*). Postmodern conditions introduce ever-growing stressors, often beyond individual control, thereby increasing the likelihood that people will turn to food for comfort. Most of the participants in our study had experienced cravings even in the absence of physical hunger. They also made clear distinctions between craving and hunger in terms of their characteristics and associated emotions.

Jamieson (*75*) helps clarify this difference: while hunger signals the body's need to replenish energy, cravings reflect a desire for pleasure. They tend to be sudden, intense, and focused on specific foods, whereas hunger arises gradually, can be delayed, and is satiated by a broad range of items (*62*). To better understand the experience of craving, we asked

participants what feelings were evoked by their most-craved comfort foods. All respondents associated these foods with positive emotions, especially comfort and satisfaction, and most reported feeling exceptionally good during episodes of emotional eating.

These findings point to the need for further research into how and why certain foods are used to generate gratification accompanied by positive emotional states, particularly in times of sadness, depression, or loneliness. Unlike other comfort objects, food is ingested and incorporated into the body, producing not only psychological and emotional but also physical effects. Food plays a central role in the construction of the self, intersects with sexuality, and acts as a site of intrapersonal conflicts between guilt and pleasure, consumption and denial, self-control and loss of control. Most of our participants confirmed these findings. Moreover, our study also confirmed that food allows individuals to manage difficult and concerning emotions by evoking memories of warmth and closeness.

At the level of social interaction, food can symbolize love and care, health- and pleasure-related dilemmas, and power relations within the family (*1*). Ultimately, our participants embedded these meanings within broader social contexts, with food also serving as a marker of cultural identity. As Locher (*5*) notes, postmodern conditions introduce ever-growing stressors, often beyond individual control, thereby increasing the likelihood that people will seek solace in food. In addition, modern food systems make nearly any food item available at any time, further exacerbating the phenomenon of comfort eating (*3*), a pattern clearly observed among our participants.

This study illustrates the multilayered role of food in participants' lives: as a tool for emotional regulation and as a source of internal conflict. It is essential to understand emotional eating as embedded in family, cultural, and social practices that shape both personal and collective histories. This analysis underscores the importance of continued research on the role of food in identity formation and emotional well-being, with particular attention to the cultural and social factors that shape our relationship with food.

Study limitations

The transferability of our findings is limited due to the local and qualitative nature of the study. All participants were recruited from the city of Šibenik, reflecting a specific sociocultural context. Additionally, the sample was predominantly female, with only two male participants, which limits insight into how men experience and interpret emotional eating. As a result, the findings primarily reflect women's narratives and perspectives.

The purposive nature of the sample means that participants were selected specifically for their emotional engagement with food. The aim was not statistical representativeness, but depth of understanding. Sociodemographic factors such as gender, age, education, and socioeconomic position likely shaped participants' experiences, yet these influences should be interpreted as contextual, rather than generalizable patterns. Data collection settings (cafés and participants' homes) and the voluntary nature of participation may also have influenced who chose to take part. These factors should be considered when assessing the transferability of the findings to other populations or contexts.

Implications for future research

The association between emotional eating and outcomes such as overweight/obesity, depression, anxiety, stress, and dietary patterns has been extensively documented in clinical research (*58*, *59*, *76*). Building on these findings, the themes identified in this study provide a foundation for future research on emotional eating, particularly regarding the psychological consequences of ambivalence toward food and the role of familial and cultural practices.

Future studies could examine how cultural norms, religious beliefs, and socio-economic conditions shape emotional responses to food. Given the increasing influence of social media and digital culture on dietary habits, research into the impact of societal pressures, such as body ideals promoted through influencer marketing and fitness trends, may offer valuable insights into experiences of guilt, emotional overeating, or restrictive behaviors (*58*).

Longitudinal research exploring the effects of emotional eating on physical and mental health outcomes, including obesity, diabetes, depression, and anxiety, would help clarify its long-term consequences (*59*, *77*). Additionally, further studies could investigate how emotional eating influences interpersonal relationships within families and social networks, as food often serves as both a source of emotional connection and potential conflict (*78*).

Future research might benefit from using interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore emotional eating, as this method allows for an in-depth exploration of rich, personal, and emotionally charged participant narratives. This approach is another useful qualitative tool for exploring this complex phenomenon (*79*-*81*). While reflexive thematic analysis is grounded in constructivist epistemology, highlighting the active role of the researcher in meaning-making, interpretative phenomenological analysis is rooted in phenomenological epistemology and aims to understand lived experiences from the participant's point of view. These are two distinct research paradigms that approach experience analysis from different theoretical frameworks.

Further research should also explore gender differences with larger and more balanced samples, examine the impact of socioeconomic status, age, and education on emotional relationships with food, and investigate how media discourse, diet culture, and social media shape perceptions of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" foods (*82*, *83*). Emotional eating remains a significant topic not only within psychology and nutrition but also in cultural studies, gender theory, and broader social analysis.

Practical implications

The practical implications of this research for society highlight the need for education on emotional intelligence and health. Schools and workplaces can implement programs that encourage healthy strategies for coping with stress and managing emotions, which may in turn reduce the tendency toward emotional eating (*59*, *84*). Equally important is raising awareness of the relationship between emotions and food, as well as providing alternatives, such as physical activity, meditation, or creative outlets, as methods for dealing with emotions.

At a broader societal level, the widespread use of food as a means of emotional regulation suggests structural implications. If comfort food fulfils important emotional and social functions, this may point to a need for greater public responsibility in shaping food environments. Governments and public institutions could play a role in regulating the food industry, particularly with regard to the availability, nutritional composition, and marketing of foods commonly associated with emotional comfort. Policies could include measures to promote healthier alternatives, limit excessive marketing of high-sugar or high-fat comfort foods, and support access to resources for emotional well-being beyond food. Such structural interventions would complement individual-level strategies and contribute to healthier food environments while acknowledging the psychological role of food.

In society at large, emotional eating and overeating are often stigmatized, which can lead to feelings of shame and guilt among individuals who engage in such behaviors (*57*). Developing support programs and awareness-raising initiatives that frame emotional eating not as a failure of willpower but as a complex psychological process could help reduce stigma and encourage people to seek help (*59*). Given that family meals play a key role in emotional relationships with food, promoting shared meals as both a social and emotional activity may have a positive impact (*85*). Initiatives encouraging communal eating among families and friends may help reduce emotional stress associated with food.

Continued research and implementation of these practical recommendations could enable societies to better understand emotional eating, reduce stigma, and improve strategies for emotional well-being (*59*, *85*). Social and cultural initiatives can also contribute to developing healthier relationships with food, promoting emotional and physical balance (*85*). Developing social norms that simultaneously support physical health and emotional well-being may help alleviate some of the more negative aspects of emotional eating (*84*). Our findings reaffirm that food plays a central role in everyday life, carrying multiple meanings and exerting physical, psychological, and emotional effects that shape and sustain both personal and social identity (*48*)

In the modern context of emotional instability and fragmentation, food becomes a symbolic resource for seeking and affirming a sense of belonging by invoking relationships, places, and periods in which we felt connected, safe, and acknowledged.

This research on food as an emotional and identity-affirming space in times of uncertainty clearly demonstrates that eating practices extend far beyond fulfilling biological needs. They are also symbolic acts through which individuals interpret, express, and negotiate their identities, emotional states, and social relationships (*3*, *5*). In this context, symbolic interactionism offers a valuable analytical framework. It allows us to understand how everyday interactions around food, from meal selection to eating rituals, shape the meanings individuals attach to themselves and their roles within society. Food becomes a "symbolic language" through which people express emotional needs, cultural belonging, and personal narratives (*3*, *27*).

Conversely, a structuralist approach reveals deeper, often unconscious patterns that underpin these symbolic choices. On a structural level, eating practices reflect cultural codes, gender norms, and social hierarchies. The consumption of so-called "permitted" and "forbidden" foods points to the existence of binary oppositions – pure/impure, male/female,

control/indulgence, health/pleasure – that structure social reality and, in turn, shape individual identity orientations (*82*).

In a time of social uncertainty marked by stress, fragmented identities, and emotional disintegration, food becomes both an emotional crutch and a symbolic space for self-affirmation (*51*). Emotional eating, in this sense, should not be seen as pathological, but rather as an adaptive response to a broader social context in which stable identity anchors are increasingly difficult to find (*5*, *86*). Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, we see how meanings associated with food are constructed and transformed through everyday practices. A structuralist perspective, meanwhile, helps explain why these universal patterns recur despite individual differences.

Therefore, analyzing food as an emotional and identity domain requires attention to both micro-level meanings and macro-level frameworks. It is at the intersection of the symbolic and the structural that food reveals its potential as a medium for understanding broader social dynamics, especially during periods of collective insecurity and personal identity crises.

Despite sociodemographic differences, our findings point to universal patterns of emotional eating among participants, with a clear link between food and emotional regulation, feelings of guilt after overeating, and nostalgia for childhood. These patterns reflect deep psychological processes that transcend social differences, making them relevant to a wide segment of the population (*5*, *86*).

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