

NAZARBAYEV UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

Eating habits of Nazarbayev University students: How has an attitude towards

commensality changed?

CAPSTONE PROJECT

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Abstract

This capstone project studies changes in the eating habits of Nazarbayev University students and their attitudes towards commensality, namely eating together, during their academic journey from the first to the last year. This study uses a qualitative research approach based on interview results conducted among students from different backgrounds. Eating habits reflect changes in students' social identities when adjusting to university. For example, in the first year, students are interested in integrating into the university's new society through communal meals. In contrast, they tend to strengthen their social connections and group identity in their senior year.

The practice of sharing meals helps to strengthen social capital among students. Commensality is the opportunity to create new connections and establish mutually beneficial relationships, which influences the formation of social networks and support in the university environment. Social practices in the context of the university community reflect sociocultural norms and expectations, which explain how students interact and establish their social relationships through food.

The findings may help shape cafeteria policies, organize social events, and create a supportive environment for students at the university. Additionally, the study reveals the importance of communal nutrition in forming student culture and social adaptation in the university environment. The results obtained within the project are discussed and analyzed in the context of changing perceptions and attitudes towards commensality, social relationships, and the evolution of students' eating habits.

Introduction

For most students, university is the beginning of a new chapter since they face a massive change in their lives, which is connected with the environment, daily habits, and values. Eating habits are also variable since they are not only about having a meal due to a biological need but also have sociocultural significance. Among various cultural practices, commensality, or the act of eating together, plays a pivotal role in shaping students' social interactions, cultural integration, and overall well-being. This research aims to explore the evolution of attitudes towards commensality among students at Nazarbayev University, tracing how these attitudes transform from the initial year to the final year of their university life. The unique feature of this capstone project is that the changes in eating habits were studied from the experience of the Nazarbayev University students by focusing on the attitude toward eating together. In addition, commensality was studied to analyze how important it is for students' eating habits.

The research question guiding this study is as follows: How has the attitude towards commensality changed among Nazarbayev University students during their academic journey from freshman to senior year? By examining this question through a qualitative approach, we seek to uncover the nuanced shifts, challenges, and transformations that students undergo in their perceptions, behaviors, and practices related to communal dining.

Through a comprehensive investigation encompassing literature review, research design, data collection, analysis, and discussion, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on commensality within the university context. By elucidating the factors that influence students' attitudes towards communal dining over time, we hope to offer insights that

can inform campus dining policies, student support services, and broader initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive and vibrant campus communities. The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform university policies on student welfare, engagement, and community building. Since the topic is related to the NU community, the Department of Student Affairs can analyze how current and future projects and facilities can be improved to make students' experiences better. The study helps to understand the connection between society and food habits.

By understanding the shifts in commensality practices, university administrators and student organizations can better cater to the social and cultural needs of the student body, promoting a more inclusive and supportive campus environment. Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader academic discourse on commensality, offering insights into how shared dining experiences can impact social relationships and cultural integration within higher education institutions.

Regarding the question, it concerns how students' attitudes may change in their first and fourth years in terms of commensality and underlines specific gaps in it as justification for new research. In terms of scope, this research is focused on the student population of Nazarbayev University, offering an in-depth analysis of the changing attitudes towards commensality from freshman to senior year. Through a qualitative method, the study aims to capture a holistic view of the students' dining experiences, ensuring a nuanced understanding of this cultural practice within the university setting.

Literature Review

Relevance of the Research

For this capstone project, the relationship between social practices and eating habits have been studied in order to identify how they impact the attitude toward commensality. Herman (2015) mentions the importance of considering food consumption in a social context because others' eating decisions also affect our decisions. This decision can be related to food choice, product amount, time, or dining place. As Higgs (2015) explains, social norms are one mechanism that shows the connection between the eating process and social context. It creates social eating norms that are accepted as appropriate consumption for the social group where we include ourselves. These social norms are translated through cultural practices, behaviors, or implicit rules in eating habits (Higgs, 2015). According to Deutsch & Gerard (1955), one of the main reasons why people follow social food norms is that they consider themselves part of a particular group and thereby adhere to their rules. In other words, habits, such as sharing food, eating together, or solo, can also be part of social norms. The relevance of this research question is that students also have their social eating norms, which can change throughout the years depending on which social group they belong to. The studying of this pattern could be useful while studying Nazarbayev University students' experiences to understand by what standards they can differ. For example, there can be common patterns in shared values, beliefs, and cultures, so social norms should be elaborated.

The studies of students from different countries are important to have an overall picture of commensality. Since there can be common patterns of food habits, cross-sectional studies are considered in literature review. According to the cross-sectional study done by Cho et al. (2015), Asian countries have different perceptions towards commensality. Although Korea and Japan may have similar social and cultural conditions in the country, the participants of the research showed distinctive results. To be more specific, Korean students prefer commensality more than

Japanese students since eating alone definitely causes negative emotions for them (Cho et al., 2015). It is interesting to note that students connect their perception about sharing food with the quantity of food they consume. In other words, for participants from Japan, there is no difference in the consumption of meals while eating alone or with someone else. Nevertheless, the participants from both countries associate the commensality mostly with good emotions that evokes happiness, while solo eating means loneliness for them (Cho et al., 2015).

In comparison, Danesi (2018) studies the approach toward commonality among young adults from three different European countries, such as France, Germany, and Spain, by discussing the social aspects of having a meal. Participants from France and Spain prioritize commensality and the timetable for every meal (Danesi, 2018). Dining is considered the most frequent time for gathering among these countries' participants, which helps to build a social boundary between companionships. For NU students, this experience can be the same because the course schedule may be different for friends. Therefore, people probably prefer to have dinner together rather than breakfast or lunch.

Theoretical framework

The aim of the theoretical part is to show the connection between eating practice and sociology concepts. This research project focuses on *commensality* as a central concept, which means "eating together" (Jönsson et al., 2021). It is not only about having a meal with someone since this concept can be explained in different ways. The meaning of commensality raises different questions regarding place and condition while having a meal. Moreover, the authors note that it can also mean sharing food and the table. Fishler (2011) mentions commensals, which are people practicing commensality. In contrast, Fischler (2011) uses the term "solo eating", which means

having a meal alone. This term can be used to better understand how commensality can be different from eating alone.

There are three main theories - social capital, social identity, and social practices interconnected. In order to understand how commensality is embedded in everyday life, the study applies *social practices theory* by exploring routines and habits related to food consumption. According to Delormier et al. (2009b), each group, as the local configuration of social relations, has its own eating patterns built within this community. At this point, eating can be studied as *a social practice* in order to understand social relations between people since they are interconnected. In other words, the social practices of students in daily life emphasize their attitude and behavior. Moreover, changing social practices have their own effect on other practices, such as eating, studying, or spending time with friends. However, there is a gap in understanding the specific transformations in the practice of commensality among university students and the implications of these changes for social cohesion and identity formation.

This capstone project studies individuals in terms of *social identity theory*, which explains how being in a specific group affects their attitude and behavior. According to Hogg (2016), the *social identity* theory is related to the self-conception of the person in group activities and intergroup relations. By focusing on social identity, Liu et al. (2019) discuss the relationship between social norms and eating patterns. It is mentioned that for individuals, adherence to specific groups can be associated as a part of their identity, so having lunch or dinner together can be an essential aspect of their socialization.

Another important approach for this capstone project is *social capital* since commensality can contribute to developing social norms, networks, and trust within society. According to Field (2016), this term defines intangible wealth, including shared values and trust within the

community in everyday life. In other words, *social capital theory* can highlight the importance of social relationships to enhance expected benefits, so it is linked to commensality in terms of making social networks while sharing meals. It means that the changes in attitudes toward commensality can be explained from the perspective of how social capital is shifted in the structure of relationships. In the context of commensality, it can illuminate how shared meals foster community bonds, facilitate the exchange of information, and create a sense of belonging among university students.

Methodology

This capstone project does qualitative research because it allows the study of people's experience deeper to understand different phenomena (Hennink, 2020). Hennik explains that this method allows us to study social norms, which corresponds to the topic of studying human attitudes towards the commensality associated with food. There is focus on details of a human's attitude and actions, so the interpretive approach can be used (Hennik, 2020). During the interview, students shared their thoughts and ideas about their past and present experience with their friends while eating. For the analysis, all histories were combined to make an interpretation and connect it with concepts.

While quantitative approaches are sometimes used to study anthropology of food (Hubert, 2004), the qualitative method is used for this capstone project because this capstone project studies individuals' experiences. Through a qualitative approach, they can make a reflection on how their attitudes have changed throughout the years. It is important to mention that the semi-structured interview was conducted. There were ten main questions related to the topic. Additional questions were integrated during the interview to get more specific answers and clarify some

details based on participants' responses. Kallio et al. (2016) explain that semi-structured interviews are both versatile and flexible, and they are successful in enabling reciprocity between interviewer and interviewee, which makes them popular in qualitative research.

Significance and Gaps

While existing studies have explored the social aspects of eating and the influence of social norms on dining behaviors, there is a noticeable gap in longitudinal research examining how these dynamics shift over the course of a university student's academic career. This project seeks to address this gap by focusing on the changing attitudes towards commensality among students from their freshman to senior years by studying the interplay between social capital, social identity, and social practices in shaping these attitudes. Through this lens, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of commensality in the social lives of university students, with implications for enhancing student engagement and community building within higher education settings.

The study also has potential limitations, including the recall bias mentioned earlier and the possibility of a limited representative sample due to the snowball sampling method. These limitations are acknowledged as inherent to the qualitative approach and the specific research context. They give the understanding that the depth of the data collected provides valuable insights despite these constraints.

Although the literature on commensality provides valuable insights into its social, cultural, and psychological aspects, there are still some gaps and limitations. Specifically, there is a lack of longitudinal studies that track changes in attitudes towards commensality among university students. This gap hinders our understanding of how social capital, social practice, and social

identity intersect and evolve over time within this specific group. Additionally, there is a need for more research that explores how commensality intersects with other social phenomena, such as globalization, urbanization, and digitalization. Investigating these intersections further will help us better understand the complexities of contemporary dining practices. Since there is a lack of information about Central Asian countries, the study within this region would be also helpful to see trends related to commensality among youth.

Connecting to Research Question

This review underscores the importance of examining commensality through a multidimensional lens, integrating insights from social capital, social practice, and social identity theory to elucidate the nuanced dynamics of communal dining experiences. By addressing these theoretical frameworks, the present study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how attitudes towards commensality evolve among Nazarbayev University students over the course of their academic journey, with implications for social integration, cultural adaptation, and community cohesion within the university context.

Research Design

Research Sample, Recruitment and Feasibility

This capstone project uses qualitative design with semi-structured in-person interviews among Nazarbayev University students in order to study their experiences.

Since the research focuses on Nazarbayev University, the interview was conducted within the university. The research sample consisted of six Nazarbayev University senior-year students, depending on to what extent the topic has been covered and the necessary answer has been

received. The participants are students with different backgrounds from diverse academic courses (sociology, mathematics, robotics, CS, biology, petroleum engineering, electrical and computer engineering), schools (SSH, SEDS, and SMG), and demographic characteristics (gender and age). The main criteria for selection is their year of study because seniors already have experience both as freshmen and seniors, so they can give specific answers. Another criterion is going to be related to their background because this capstone research covers people with various academic and extracurricular activities. The participants were selected from different schools and majors because they have different curriculum and course schedule peculiarities. For example, SSH students have more choices, and most courses can be held on specific days. It should be mentioned that senior year students who studied in the foundation program and were directly admitted were recruited because direct students had online classes due to COVID in their first year. It means that their experiences can be quite different from each other.

The snowball sampling was used. The recruitment was mostly among friends of friends, groupmates or clubmates to approach people who meet the criteria. They were recruited through group chats, channels, and word of mouth. All participants were involved on a voluntary basis after familiarization with the purpose and theme of the project. The consent form was sent to get their permission for participation. The interview was conducted at Nazarbayev University after scheduling the specific time for this meeting. The interview was conducted in places that are comfortable for the participants, such as cafeterias, atriums or individual study rooms. Separate rooms were reserved if the participant wants to stay in a private place.

The semi-structured interview includes ten primary questions, each accompanied by two to three sub-questions designed to elicit detailed responses and personal reflections. These questions were span the participants' entire university experience, with a focus on:

- Background information to understand the participant's academic and social context.
- Specific experiences related to commensality during their freshman year, exploring initial attitudes and practices.
- Changes and continuities in commensality practices and attitudes observed by the participants as they progressed to their senior year.

This structure facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the evolution of commensality among university students. It allows us to get qualitative insights into how social practices around eating together are constructed, maintained, and transformed over time.

The feasibility of the study was increased thanks to the community. The researcher has a connection with other students with different backgrounds, so there is no problem with approaching participants. Moreover, the comfortable time and place was chosen with the interviewee. The potential challenge was choosing an appropriate time with interviewee based on their availability. However, the timeframe of the interview was discussed in advance to solve it.

Also, there was a risk that some students may not clearly remember about their freshman year.

During the recruitment process, they were asked how well they remember their first year.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Making sure everyone feels safe and comfortable is really important in this study. We have made sure that everyone who takes part knows exactly what they're agreeing to and that their answers are kept private. All interviewees of the research participated voluntarily. The interview process

and other procedures related to recording, coding, and making results were clearly explained. It helps ensure that participants clearly understand their and the researcher's actions within the framework of the project. For this, the consent form was sent in the requested language, and participants can ask all questions for clarification. The consent form contains necessary information about the research topic, its significance, potential risks, and benefits. After receiving a signed consent form, the date and place for the interview was chosen with the participants.

Confidentiality was provided. A recording was saved on the researcher's laptop with a password without mentioning names. The advisor and instructor of the capstone project may also have access based on their request. The names of participants were not mentioned in the research paper to keep it private. The interview was conducted in a private place with the interviewee. There was no harm to participants, both physically and mentally. If participants feel uncomfortable with a question, we can skip that question.

It is essential to mention that the recruitment and interview process was started after receiving permission from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC). Preliminarily, the required form was submitted to IREC, and all comments were processed according to ethical standards. The capstone project values human privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.

In summary, the research design for this capstone project is thoughtfully structured to explore the different experiences of Nazarbayev University students' attitudes toward commensality, employing a qualitative methodology that emphasizes ethical rigor, participant diversity, and methodological flexibility. This approach ensures a thorough exploration of the research question, contributing meaningful insights to the fields of food anthropology and sociology.

Chapter 1: Living Conditions and Commensality

The living conditions at Nazarbayev University (NU) play a significant role in shaping students' attitudes towards communal dining. Through interviews with NU students, it becomes evident that living arrangements, particularly in the dormitories, heavily influence the communal dining experience.

Importance of Dormitory Living:

The majority of respondents, both from Astana and dormitory residents, highlight the importance of NU's living conditions, particularly the dormitories, in facilitating communal dining. Living together in close proximity makes it easier for students to decide on shared meals and engage in communal dining practices. For instance, many students mention cooking and eating with their roommates, emphasizing the communal aspect of meal preparation and consumption within the dormitory setting.

Differences in Living Experience

Two participants currently reside in dormitories, while two others live in Astana. Interestingly, two participants have experience living in dormitories and their apartments in Astana, reflecting diverse living arrangements.

While dormitory residents enjoy the convenience of communal living, Astana residents experience a different living dynamic. For students residing in Astana, communal dining experiences are less prevalent because they often live separately from their peers and may not have access to shared kitchen facilities. This means they are more likely to prepare meals individually and eat alone in their living spaces, such as studio apartments or family homes.

Some Astana residents maintain connections with their families, often visiting them whenever possible. It's worth mentioning that Astana residents sometimes find it challenging to "align their schedules with dormitory residents for lunch," prompting them to bring food in lunch boxes. This practice underscores the flexibility and adaptability of Astana residents in navigating their dining arrangements, especially when faced with differing schedules and communal dining preferences. Familial traditions, personal preferences, and individual schedules often influence their dining experiences at home. Some may prioritize convenience and options for quick meals, while others may prioritize health and nutrition, preparing meals from scratch.

Additionally, students living with their families may have communal meals with their relatives, which could influence their attitudes towards communal dining at university. Living with their families exposes students to communal dining experiences within a familial setting, which can profoundly impact their perceptions and behaviors regarding communal dining at university. Sharing meals with family members fosters a sense of togetherness and social bonding, positively shaping students' attitudes toward communal dining. These familial dining experiences often involve shared responsibilities, such as meal preparation and cleanup, promoting cooperation and teamwork. Additionally, family meals provide opportunities for communication, storytelling, and cultural exchange, enriching students' understanding of the social significance of communal dining. As a result, students who regularly engage in communal meals with their families may develop a strong appreciation for shared dining experiences, which can carry over into their university life and influence their interactions in communal dining spaces on campus.

Finance and commensality

The financial state of students is a significant factor influencing their dining habits and attitudes towards communal dining within the context of this research. Financial constraints can impact students' ability to access dining facilities, purchase food, and participate in communal dining experiences.

For instance, students facing financial difficulties may be more inclined to choose cheaper dining options or prepare meals at home rather than dine out with peers. This may result in a preference for solo dining or communal dining experiences that are more cost-effective, such as potluck gatherings or shared meals cooked in dormitory kitchens. As some respondents mentioned, "if there is no stable income despite stipend, they have to be economical and less practical." In other words, the financial situation influences the frequency of meeting friends at coffee shops on campus. Students from lower-income backgrounds may experience feelings of exclusion or embarrassment when unable to afford specific dining experiences, therefore they had to avoid communal dining situations altogether. On the other hand, students from more affluent backgrounds may be flexible in their dining choices. They may be more likely to participate in communal dining activities as a social norm or cultural practice.

The financial state of students also intersects with social identity and social capital theories. Students from lower-income backgrounds may feel marginalized or stigmatized due to their financial limitations, which affect their sense of belonging within the university community. Conversely, students from more affluent backgrounds may enhance their social status or build social networks through communal dining experiences.

Impact on Social Practices and Identity:

The dormitory environment is conducive to communal dining and serves as a hub for various social practices among students. These practices extend beyond mere food consumption to encompass broader social interaction and community engagement. For instance, students often gather in communal areas to share meals and engage in collaborative activities, study sessions, or leisurely conversations. Through social practices, students build bonds, exchange ideas, and form connections beyond the dining table.

Additionally, communal dining in dormitories fosters a sense of shared responsibility and reciprocity among students. In dormitories, students often gather in kitchens or common areas during weekends or evenings, where food is a focal point for social interaction and bonding. These spaces encourage students to share meals, exchange stories, and form connections with peers, developing a vibrant social atmosphere within the university community. Cooking and sharing meals promotes cooperation and teamwork, as students collaborate in meal preparation, serving, and cleanup. This shared responsibility strengthens interpersonal relationships and instills a sense of collective ownership and belonging within the dormitory community.

Furthermore, communal dining practices in dormitories often reflect cultural and social norms prevalent within the university community. For example, students may observe certain customs or traditions related to food preparation, serving rituals, or mealtime etiquette, reinforcing social cohesion and identity within the group. These shared practices form a distinct communal culture within the dormitory, where students collectively shape and uphold social interaction and behavior norms.

Additionally, communal dining plays a significant role in constructing social identity within the NU community. For example, sharing coffee with professors in laboratory settings has become

common among some students. As one of the respondents mentioned, “This ritual not only allows students to engage in informal discussions with faculty members but also reinforces their sense of belonging and importance within their community in the laboratory.” In other words, by participating in these communal dining practices, students establish connections with their peers and mentors, shaping their identity as active university community members. Moreover, both professors and students support having coffee together because it serves as a break during the working day that helps them stay connected.

Chapter 2: University Facilities and Communal Dining

The presence of university facilities such as coffee shops, dining halls, and shops on campus further catalyzes communal dining practices among NU students. Interviews with respondents shed light on the impact of university facilities on their dining habits and social interactions.

Role of On-Campus Establishments:

Respondents emphasized the pivotal role of on-campus establishments such as Sandwich Spot, Daily Cup, Health Project, Coffee Day, and other cafeterias in shaping communal dining experiences among NU students. Beyond merely providing sustenance, these dining venues serve as vibrant social hubs where students come to study and build social connections.

One notable finding is the influence of these establishments' availability and operating hours on students' meal schedules and social interactions. For instance, the 24/7 operation of certain cafeterias caters to students' varying schedules, allowing them to dine at any hour of the day or night. Several respondents mentioned that this flexibility lets students synchronize their meal times with peers through spontaneous gatherings and impromptu social encounters. Furthermore,

the accessibility of these establishments on campus reduces the need for students to seek dining options off-campus, thereby promoting a sense of community within the university grounds.

Moreover, these establishments' diverse culinary offerings cater to students' preferences and dietary requirements. For example, Daily Cup and Health Project provide a cozy atmosphere for coffee enthusiasts to enjoy study sessions or casual conversations with friends. Moreover, Drinkit offers a unique convenience by allowing students to place orders from their seats during lectures, which helps to save time. The idea was that "society influences me; when I see that everyone is walking around with Cinnabons and coffee, then I also go to the Daily with friends." This statement reflects the influence of social norms and practices on individual behavior, aligning with the concept of social practice within communal dining. The individual acknowledges the impact of societal cues, such as observing others consuming specific food items like Cinnabons and coffee, on their own dining choices with friends. Such behavior shows that communal dining practices are not only shaped by personal preferences but also by broader social influences and norms within the university community.

Furthermore, the statement underscores the role of social identity in shaping communal dining behaviors. By referencing popular dining spots like Daily Cup, the individual aligns with a specific social group or community with similar preferences and practices. Gatherings in Daily Cup with a group of people highlight the interconnectedness between communal dining experiences and social identity formation.

Interestingly, respondents highlighted the social rituals and traditions associated with specific dining venues. For instance, Sandwich Spot emerged as a popular late-night hangout spot among students, offering not only delectable sandwiches but also a lively atmosphere conducive to

socializing and unwinding after a long day of academic pursuits. The communal nature of dining at Sandwich Spot encourages students to come together, share stories, and forge lasting friendships, thus solidifying its reputation as a cornerstone of the NU social experience.

Some respondents mentioned that "the presence of a canteen and coffee shops at NU implies that we should eat there." It shows that the convenience and accessibility of these establishments encourage students to incorporate communal dining into their daily routines by creating social norms and practices associated with shared meals. Whether grabbing a quick bite between classes at Coffee Day or going with friends over sandwiches at Green Food, students support social bonding with each other. In this way, these establishments catalyze social interaction, community building, and identity formation among NU students.

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social bonding with each other. In this way, these establishments catalyze social interaction, community building, and identity formation among NU students.

Convenience and Social Interaction:

Many respondents note that going for coffee or snacks between lectures at on-campus establishments is integral to their student life. The convenience of these facilities encourages students to socialize with friends or attend meetings, enhancing opportunities for communal dining and social interaction. During short breaks between classes, students seize the chance to grab a snack and chat simultaneously, further reinforcing the social aspect of communal dining within university facilities.

Gender differences in attitudes towards commensality

The approach to shared eating among interview participants was analyzed considering the gender differences identified in their responses. Women interviewed generally rated eating together as an essential aspect of university life. They emphasized its social significance, seeing it as an opportunity to build relationships and strengthen ties with friends. In their answers, they paid attention to the atmosphere of joint dinners, emphasizing their role in creating a comfortable environment for communication and exchanging impressions. They mentioned that "food should be not only delicious but also aesthetic because it gives a good mood." In other words, women also romanticized gatherings in coffee shops, sharing this experience on social networks, and loved to buy sweets for coffee in the company of their friends.

On the other hand, men were more practical about sharing meals. Although they recognized the social significance of shared meals, they paid more attention to the practical aspects of such meetings, such as the availability and variety of dishes.

During the interviews, it became clear that women and men have slightly different taste preferences and preferences regarding food type and style. Women were likely to prefer food from a coffee shop, as they often get together with friends there. Men generally expressed an interest in more substantial food options since they need more than panini or hot dishes served in coffee shops.

Women were more likely to describe lunches as an opportunity to socialize and exchange ideas, while men noted their role in providing quick and convenient meals between activities. These differences in attitudes toward communal dining reflect individual preferences and broad sociocultural and gender differences in society.

Chapter 3: Social Dynamics and Communal Dining Evolution

This chapter examines the changing social dynamics of communal dining practices among NU students as they progress through their academic journey. By analyzing shifts in students' attitudes, behaviors, and preferences towards communal dining, this chapter offers insights into the evolving nature of dining experiences throughout their time at the university.

The phrase of one of the respondents, "NU community has such a culture," indicates a shared understanding and expectation among students that food will be an integral part of any social gathering or meeting with friends. It is essential as a facilitator of social bonding and connection

within the NU community, and it has likely evolved and persisted over the years. By emphasizing that "any meeting with friends must include food," we can suggest that communal dining fosters relationships, strengthens social ties, and builds student camaraderie. This aligns with the concept of social identity, as communal dining practices contribute to forming and expressing group identity among NU students.

Transition from Freshman to Senior Year:

The study reveals a shift in students' dining preferences from their freshman to senior year. While many first-year students prefer dining in the university cafeteria to socialize and make new friends, senior students tend to prioritize efficiency and individual nutrition. The communal aspect of dining becomes less of a priority for senior students as they focus on strengthening existing social bonds and managing their time more effectively. However, there is a trend to support commensality among some students, according to the respondent who shared that they eat with someone because "there is a need for it." It reflects an individual's intrinsic desire for communal dining and social interaction.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on eating habits

Since today's senior students are the first generation to experience their first year of college online, it is essential to note the impact of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the eating habits of Nazarbayev University students, especially in the context of communal dining. This period profoundly impacted students' social dynamics and relationships, as well as the formation of their social capital. In this case, social capital refers to

the network of social connections and resources available to students in the university environment. With limited personal meetings and interaction opportunities, students needed to review their habits and adapt to new realities.

During the period of online learning brought on by the pandemic, students have lost access to shared spaces such as dining halls and dorms where they used to have communal eating. Online periods have led to changes in foundation year program students' eating habits and preferences and decreased opportunities to form new social connections through shared nutrition. All students lived at home and ate home-cooked food accordingly, so they shared meals mostly with their families. However, despite these challenges, some students had the opportunity to use their social capital resources to maintain contact with friends, even during distance learning. For example, they organized virtual dinners or group cooking sessions to "maintain social connections and a sense of community."

This experience showed that social capital plays a vital role in students' adaptation to new conditions and maintaining their social networks during periods of change. The pandemic has exposed vulnerabilities and resources in students' social capital, highlighting the importance of its development and support in the university environment.

In comparison, this experience is much different for direct students since their first two years were spent on Zoom with other students they had not met in real life. The "online generation with black squares in Zoom" could adapt to the university only in the Spring semester of 2021, when quarantine ended, and there was no substantial control over group gatherings. At that time, there was a limited number of students and canteens in the dormitory, and Astana residents were not allowed on campus at all as online learning continued. Accordingly, direct student integration with other students in real life occurred late. However, this situation also has a positive impact on sharing meals. Since the students were isolated from society for two years after the easing of quarantine, they actively sought new connections. As some interview participants noted, students

could easily sit next to each other in the canteens and get to know each other since they lacked communication. This trend can be explained by the fact that personal meetings took place only in the dining halls and common areas of the university, so this allowed them to actively interact with each other and strengthen their "belonging to the Nazarbayev University community." The students' social identities began to form and reinforce through these interactions as they began to perceive themselves as part of a larger social class.

Therefore, *social identity theory* explains how interactions with other members of the university community influence the formation of their social identity and attitudes toward eating together. The theory explains that our self-image and behavior are determined to a large extent by our membership in social groups. In the university context, this can impact our eating habits and attitudes toward eating together.

Role of Social Capital and Social Identity:

The transition in attitudes towards communal dining reflects the adoption and utilization of social capital among NU students. Communal dining practices serve as opportunities for freshmen to build social connections and establish their social capital within the university community. As students progress through their academic journey, they use their social capital and remain within their close circles, prioritizing efficiency and convenience in their dining habits. Initially, the pursuit of shared dining experiences is driven by a desire for social integration and connection. Over time, however, students report a gradual shift towards valuing solitude or the company of select individuals for meals, indicating a transformation in social identity. To sum up, such changes reflect broader trends in the prioritization of time, convenience, and the nature of social interactions by showing the relationship between commensality practices and the construction of social identities within the university setting.

Chapter 4: Changing Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Commensality

This chapter explores the changing perceptions and attitudes toward communal dining among NU students over time. Through interviews with senior students, the study uncovers shifts in students' priorities and preferences regarding communal dining practices.

Shift in Priorities

Many respondents note a change in their attitude towards communal dining, with sharing meals becoming less of a priority than in their first year. As mentioned during the interview: “It’s more effective to eat alone since now there’s not much time to gather with friends for every meal.”

This quote reflects a shift in dining preferences and priorities among students, moving towards individualism and efficiency over communal dining experiences. As students adapt to university life and establish routines, communal dining loses its significance as a means of socializing and making new connections. The narrative also acknowledges the shifting priorities and responsibilities that come with seniority. Because students progress through their academic journey, they must balance communal engagement and the demands of their studies, internships, and personal development. While communal dining remains a beloved aspect of university life, senior students prefer eating together with close friends rather than new people. In other words, students prioritize strengthening old connections while having a meal.

Another important aspect was that some students prioritize healthy food in their senior year. Therefore, they cook by themselves, which means there are fewer touch points with friends or professors in public food places. By choosing to cook their meals, students reduce their reliance

on public food places, which leads to fewer opportunities for social interaction and engagement with friends or professors in communal dining settings.

Individual vs. Communal Dining:

Senior students express a preference for individual dining experiences, citing convenience and time management as key factors. Some respondents find eating alone more enjoyable, as it requires less energy and concentration compared to dining with others. However, communal dining with close friends remains a cherished activity for many students, highlighting the enduring social aspect of shared meals. In other words, such changes reflect broader trends in the prioritization of time, convenience, and the nature of social interactions.

Impact of Social Identity and Adaptation:

The shift in attitudes towards communal dining reflects changes in students' social identity and adaptation within the university community. As students become more accustomed to university life, their social circles become more defined, leading to a preference for strengthening existing relationships rather than forming new ones through communal dining. Students report a gradual shift towards valuing solitude or the company of select individuals for meals, indicating a transformation in social identity.

The Significance of Commensality in Student Life:

In the first year, communal dining often catalyzes social integration and connection-building among new students. It provides a platform for first-year students to meet and interact with their peers by improving social bonding through commensality (Giacoman, 2016). However, as

students progress through their academic journey and transition into senior year, the significance of communal dining may shift. While still crucial for socializing and maintaining connections, senior students may prioritize other aspects of university life, such as academic pursuits, internships, and personal growth. Nevertheless, communal dining remains valuable as a space for relaxation, socialization, and cultural exchange, offering seniors moments of respite and opportunities to reconnect with their peers amidst their busy schedules. Thus, the significance of communal dining has evolved over the years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a qualitative analysis of student experiences has illuminated how living conditions, university facilities, social dynamics, evolving perceptions, and the practicalities of time management and convenience significantly influence students' attitudes toward shared dining. The study revealed a trajectory from an initial openness to communal eating, driven by the desire to build social capital and integrate into the university community, towards a more selective approach in later years, underpinned by changes in social identity and practical considerations.

The significance of these findings is based not only on their contribution to the academic discourse on commensality but also on their practical implications for understanding how social relationships and identities are expressed through eating practices within the university context. This research underscores the role of physical spaces, such as dormitories and campus facilities, in facilitating or hindering commensality, and highlights the complex interplay between individual preferences, social norms, and institutional structures in shaping communal dining experiences.

Social Dynamics and Evolution

The study reveals a dynamic evolution in students' attitudes towards communal dining throughout their academic journey. From freshmen eager to make new connections to seniors prioritizing efficiency and individual nutrition, students' perceptions of communal dining undergo significant shifts over time. These changes reflect adaptations in social identity and the utilization of social capital within the university community as students transition from building new connections to strengthening existing relationships. Commensality means not only as a way of sharing food for social interaction but also as a crucible for social identity formation, reflecting and reinforcing group identities within the university.

Implications for Campus Communities:

The insights gained from this study have implications for campus communities and student support services at NU. Understanding the factors influencing students' communal dining practices can inform the development of initiatives to develop inclusive and vibrant campus communities. By improving existing social capital and providing conducive environments for communal dining, NU can enhance students' social integration, well-being, and sense of belonging.

Further Study

Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural contexts could elucidate the cultural variations in communal dining dynamics and their implications for community-building. Future

studies could benefit from a more extensive and diverse sample encompassing students from various academic disciplines, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. This broader sample would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how cultural norms, dietary preferences, and social dynamics influence communal dining practices. Because this capstone project was based on undergraduate students, the sample was limited to this category of students. Therefore, the sample can be expanded among Graduate and PhD students because their experiences can differ depending on their workload.

Comparing the attitudes towards communal dining among students from different universities or educational systems could offer valuable comparative insights. Researchers can identify contextual factors that shape students' attitudes and behaviors toward shared meals by examining how communal dining practices vary across institutions.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact higher education, future studies could explore how the pandemic has influenced communal dining practices among students. Investigating the long-term effects of the pandemic on social interactions, dining preferences, and campus culture would provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of communal dining in post-pandemic university settings.

Implementing targeted interventions promoting positive communal dining experiences could be a fruitful area for future research. Researchers can assess their effectiveness in fostering social connections, promoting healthy eating habits (Domaneschi, 2012), and enhancing overall student well-being by testing different strategies, such as community dining events, educational programs, or campus dining initiatives.

In conclusion, there is vast potential for further research in communal dining among university students. By addressing these areas of inquiry, researchers can contribute to a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and psychological factors that shape students' attitudes toward shared meals and inform the development of initiatives to promote positive dining experiences on university campuses.

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