

Life Transitions and Events: Food Management Practices and Eating Behavioural Changes

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Abstract

The global food system is affected by a striking health paradox: while millions of people face hunger and malnutrition, the prevalence of overeating, overweight and diet-related non-communicable diseases continues to rise. However, specific Life Transitions and Events (LTE) may induce changes in eating habits. Although a substantial body of research addresses moments of change, no conceptual framework has clarified how LTE shape food management practices and eating behaviours. To this end, based on the Habit Discontinuity Hypothesis, a systematic literature review (SLR) of 77 articles was conducted. Drawing on the results, we propose a new *Life Transitions and Events Food Behaviour Framework* with the aim of better explaining how LTE enable shifts in various eating behaviours. Results can be useful from both theoretical and policy-making standpoints, providing insights to encourage healthier food behaviours and implement social campaigns at both private and public levels.

Keywords

Life transitions; Food behaviour changes; Habit discontinuity.

Track

Public Sector and Non-Profit Marketing

1. Introduction and Background

The global food system shows a striking health paradox: while millions of individuals suffer from food insecurity and undernutrition (713-757 million of hungry people in 2022), an increasing share of the population faces obesity and diet-related diseases (in 2022, 2.5 billion adults were overweight - 890 million of whom obese - accounting for 43% of adults, compared to 25% in 1990) (WHO, 2022). Indeed, agri-food systems are estimated to generate approximately USD 12 trillion per year in hidden costs, 70% of which are attributable to poor dietary habits and non-communicable diseases, which account for over 73% of global deaths (SOFA, 2025; WHO, 2022). In addition to this, the combined social and environmental impacts are estimated to result in an economic cost of USD 720 billion annually (SOFA, 2025). The magnitude of these impacts largely stems from individuals' unhealthy dietary choices, particularly the consumption of animal-based and ultra-processed foods (He et al., 2024). Paradoxically, from a social and environmental perspective, around 19% of food available to consumers is wasted (UNEP, 2024), despite persistent hunger and malnutrition, contributing 8–10% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Consumers drive 60% of this waste (UNEP, 2024), mainly affecting the most nutritious items due to poor food management practices and incorrect behaviours (Principato et al., 2024).

In light of what has been said so far, it is clear how urgent it is to invest in profound behavioural changes. However, promoting such transformations is not easy, as our behaviours, especially those related to basic needs like eating, are complex and strongly influenced by habits (Bazoche et al., 2023). The development of eating habits, in particular, is theorised to be driven by stimulus-response associations, yet their influence on everyday life is frequently underestimated (Verplanken & Roy, 2016). However, it is important to note that habitual behaviours may, under certain conditions, become susceptible to change. According to Habit Discontinuity Hypothesis, contextual shifts may create a “window of opportunity” for behavioural change by disrupting existing routines (Verplanken et al., 2008; Verplanken & Wood, 2006). Indeed, in the presence of contextual discontinuity, behavioural change is facilitated, as individuals tend to adapt automatically to new circumstances (Clark et al., 2016). It is therefore not surprising that behavioural change often occurs alongside major life transitions, which can represent moments of rupture marking a ‘before’ and ‘after’ (Thompson et al., 2011). Such changes can be classified as either biographical, linked to personal circumstances, or exogenous, arising from external transformations that affect individuals' lives (Whitmarsh et al., 2025). Although a substantial body of recent research addresses moments of change and their link to low-carbon behaviour (Whitmarsh et al.,

2025), no conceptual framework has yet explained how transitions and life events influence food management practices and eating habits. Accordingly, in order to fill the theoretical gap, this study presents a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify events that promote positive changes in these behaviours, as well as those potentially associated with negative changes, thereby advancing Habit Discontinuity theory and offering guidance for policymakers and businesses. Specifically, it seeks to address the following research questions: RQ (1): Do life transitions and events influence changes in food managing practices and eating habits and behaviours? RQ (1.1): Which type of life transitions and events influence changes in food managing practices and eating habits and behaviours?

2. Methodology

To address the research questions and achieve the study's objective, the analysis was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). A SLR was performed in September 2025 using three databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and EBSCO. The aim of this research was to examine behavioural changes in food management practices and eating habits associated with life transitions or events. To achieve this aim, the search terms were organised into two distinct groups to ensure that both areas of interest were captured: (1) terms specifically related to life transitions or events, either biographical or exogenous; and (2) terms related to food management practices and eating habits and behaviours. The first group is framed within the concept of "Life Transitions and Events (LTE)", which encompasses life changes, contextual shifts, or significant events. Such transitions have been described in the literature through several related concepts, including 'entry points' (Axon, 2017), 'turning points' (Beige & Axhausen, 2012), 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991), 'critical moments' (Giddens, 2020), 'transformative moments' (Hards, 2012), 'teachable moments', (Lawson & Flocke, 2009), 'moments of change' (Verplanken & Whitmarsh, 2021), 'habit discontinuities' (Verplanken et al., 2008), or 'context changes' (Verplanken & Wood, 2006). All of these concepts were included in the selection of keywords to reflect the terminological variety present in the literature. Similarly, to capture behavioural changes in food management practices and eating habits, synonyms and related terms were selected (e.g., "behaviour change", "habit discontinuity", "healthy/unhealthy behaviour").

After duplicate removal, 2,030 records were screened. Title and abstract assessment reduced these to 126, and the application of inclusion criteria (Whitmarsh et al., 2025) restricted the sample to 105 peer-reviewed journal articles. Full-text assessment produced a final sample of 77 articles from Scopus (58), Web of Science (17), and EBSCO (2). The

search covered English-language publications from 2010 to 2025, and these 77 studies constitute the evidence base for the present review.

3. Results and Discussion

The majority of studies employed a quantitative approach (56%), followed by qualitative (41%) and mixed-method designs (3%). As shown in Table 1, surveys (n = 43) and in-depth interviews (n = 29) were the most commonly used data collection tools (some studies used more than one instrument). Publication trends indicate a growing interest in the topic over time, with a steady increase in the number of studies and peaks in 2022, 2023, and 2025 (Figure 1), highlighting the novelty and emerging scientific relevance of this research area.

Table 1. Methodology: Tools

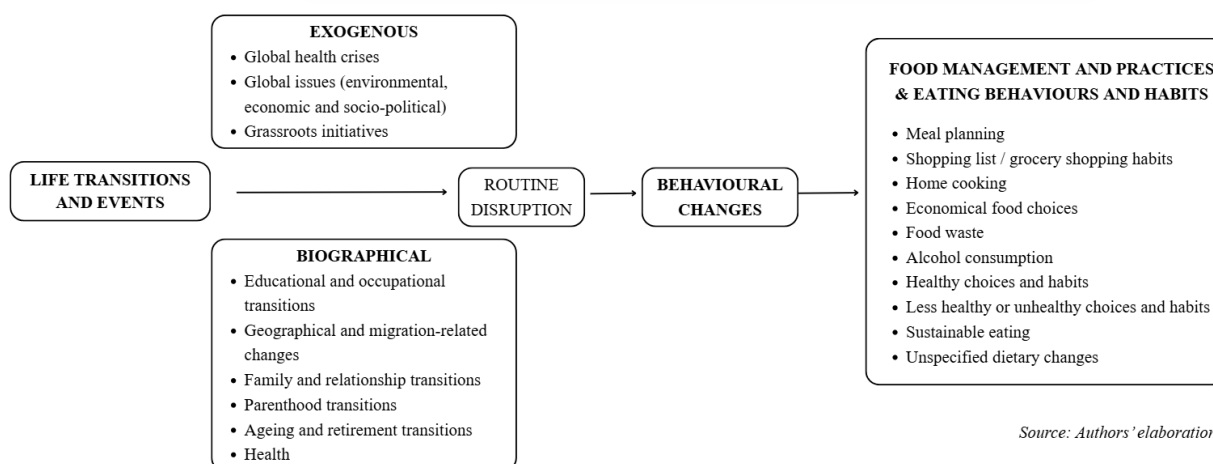
Methodology - Tools	N. article = 77
Interview	29
Focus group	4
Survey / Questionnaire	43
Ethnography	1
Conceptual Study	3
Diary	1

Figure 1. Annual trend (2010-2025) in publications



The reviewed studies examined how LTE affect eating behaviours and food management practices. Figure 2 presents the *Life Transitions and Events Food Behaviour Framework*, categorising transitions as biographical or exogenous, which often disrupt routines and prompt behavioural change. Reported outcomes include positive (49%), negative (33%), or

Figure 2. Life Transitions and Events Food Behaviour Framework



Source: Authors' elaboration

mixed (18%) changes, analysed across food management and eating habits to provide a concise overview of how LTE influence food-related behaviours and practices.

3.2 Findings from the literature

The analysis highlights the existence of LTE that act as enablers of specific eating. Based on the typology of transition, these behaviours can acquire either a positive or negative meaning. Different kinds of LTE catch the attention in the literature, and they can be divided into exogenous and biographical events.

3.2.1 Exogenous factors

Global health crises are the most frequently cited in literature as having an impact on eating behaviour. The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus – and the related shopping restrictions – has produced significant changes in socio-cultural life and interpersonal relationships, leading to some changes in dietary behaviours such as fewer animal products, household food waste reduction, home cooking and healthy food consumption (especially vegetables, fruits and legumes) (e.g., Năstăsescu et al., 2022). Particularly, the pandemic crisis may present a teachable moment for people affected by a specific disease, making them increasingly motivated to change health behaviours (Brust et al., 2021). However, more mindful eating has been accompanied by an increase in unhealthy behaviours due to emotional eating (Porter et al., 2022), resulting in food consumption, overeating, caloric intake and alcohol consumption increases, especially among adolescents (e.g., Năstăsescu et al., 2022).

Global issues (environmental, economic and socio-political) such as war or environmental disasters, are exogenous factors influencing eating behaviours. Specific restrictions in food accessibility induce a temporary adaptation affecting present-day food identities and ideologies. Memories of hunger and deprivation shape food choices, maximisation of ingredients, stockpiling, overeating, conspicuous consumption during special occasions and food taboos/avoidances and preference for certain foods over others (Conde - Caballero et al., 2021). This attitude is also expressed in later generations. Financial distress due to global issues is even associated with alcohol use (Buckingham-Howes et al., 2019).

Another exogenous factor is the grassroot initiatives, conceived as transitional events that can impact eating behaviour. Based on the literature, these initiatives have a positive effect on a dietary shift toward more sustainable consumption (Suski et al., 2024). Indeed,

educational programs seem to increase knowledge about nutrition, food variety, including more fruit and milk products in a dietary scheme (Cox et al., 2011).

3.2.2 Biographical

This section includes transitions that occur at the individual level.

In terms of education or occupation, relevant events are represented by entering university or gaining new job experience. The transition from high school to college represents a life-changing turning point with social and environmental determinants impacting both physical and emotional health. Pressure induced by emancipation and exam anxiety generate a negative cycle of food choices can occur, characterized by difficulty in finding healthy grocery foods and by social events that induce overeating (eating more often and eating more overall), drinking behaviour and junk food consumption (e.g., Liu et al., 2023).

The second biographical event that is considered a life transition is migration-related changes (relocation or immigration) that disrupt and reconstruct food routines in response to different environments. This change is associated with reduction of dietary diversity, weight gain related to the quantity and type of food consumed in response to cultural differences (Weisberg-Shapiro and Devine, 2015).

The family situation can represent a life transition or event when there is a change of state (i.e., from single to marriage or cohabitation). Improvements in diet quality were observed among those who experienced the transitions than those who remained single or had no children. Women who became married or had their first child appeared to be less likely to frequently eat takeaway food than those who remained single or had no children (Smith et al., 2017). Single people look for more convenience in their food preparation patterns, spending a larger share of their food budget on ready-to-eat meals. Marriage is linked to weight gain and emotional eating, likely due to lifestyle changes, while marital dissolution (separation/divorce) and widowhood was associated with weight loss, possibly from emotional stress (Maretalinia et al., 2025). The transition to parenthood represents a turning point for eating behaviour change with an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption (e.g., Moura et al., 2020; Verbeke & De Bourdeaudhuij, 2007), organic food, cooked meals, and a greater priority given to healthy meals. In response to discovering their pregnancy, women implement immediate changes to their eating behaviour and lifestyle (Atkinson et al., 2016); thus, developing a new mother identity contributes to healthier choices.

Ageing and retirement represent another crucial transition in healthy behaviour. As a reaction to late-life events (e.g., bereavement, retirement) and feelings of meaninglessness,

older adults can be affected by excessive alcohol consumption later in life (McInerney et al., 2025).

Regardless of age, people affected by disease developed more positive attitudes towards a healthy lifestyle and are more inclined to alter dietary behaviour, implementing positive changes in the months following the negative event (e.g., Douma et al., 2024).

Inhibitors are represented by habits of unhealthy diets, the dislike of healthy food, and the effort of preparing healthy meals (de Frel et al., 2023).

Life stressors, ranging from disease to work conditions and family situations, have varied effects. Stressful events contribute to unhealthy emotional eating, poor food choices, lack of meal planning and lower fruit and vegetable consumption (Cox et al., 2011).

4. Conclusion and Theoretical and Policy Implications

This study contributes from both a theoretical and a policy-making standpoint, providing insights into changing attitudes and behaviours concerning social issues. From a theoretical perspective, it extends the applications of the Habit Discontinuity Hypothesis, so far used primarily to explain pro-environmental and low-carbon behaviours, to the context of food management and eating behaviours, highlighting how LTE can influence these practices, an area that remains underexplored. From a practical and policy-making perspective, the results offer guidance for promoting healthier and more sustainable food choices, helping to address issues such as overeating, malnutrition, food waste and poor food practices, that may occur during LTE. In this context, opportunities arise for policies targeting specific LTE, like financial support and subsidies, local food initiatives, and community-based educational programmes, alongside the integration of behavioural science into public policies through the use of healthy defaults in institutional and educational settings.

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