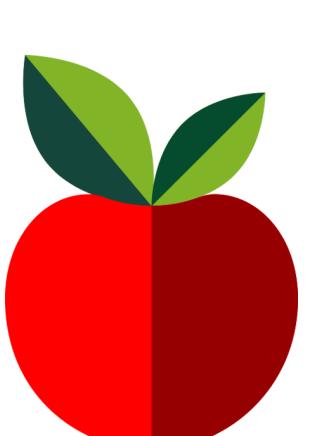
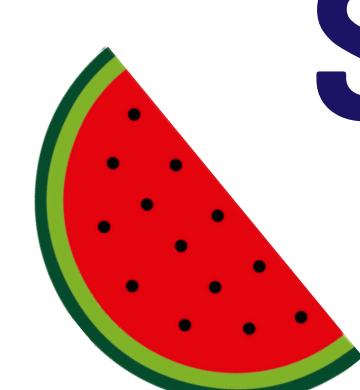


BREAKING BARRIERS TO HEALTHY EATING: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON CANTEEN SERVICES AND ADHERENCE TO MEDITERRANEAN DIET



AUTHORS

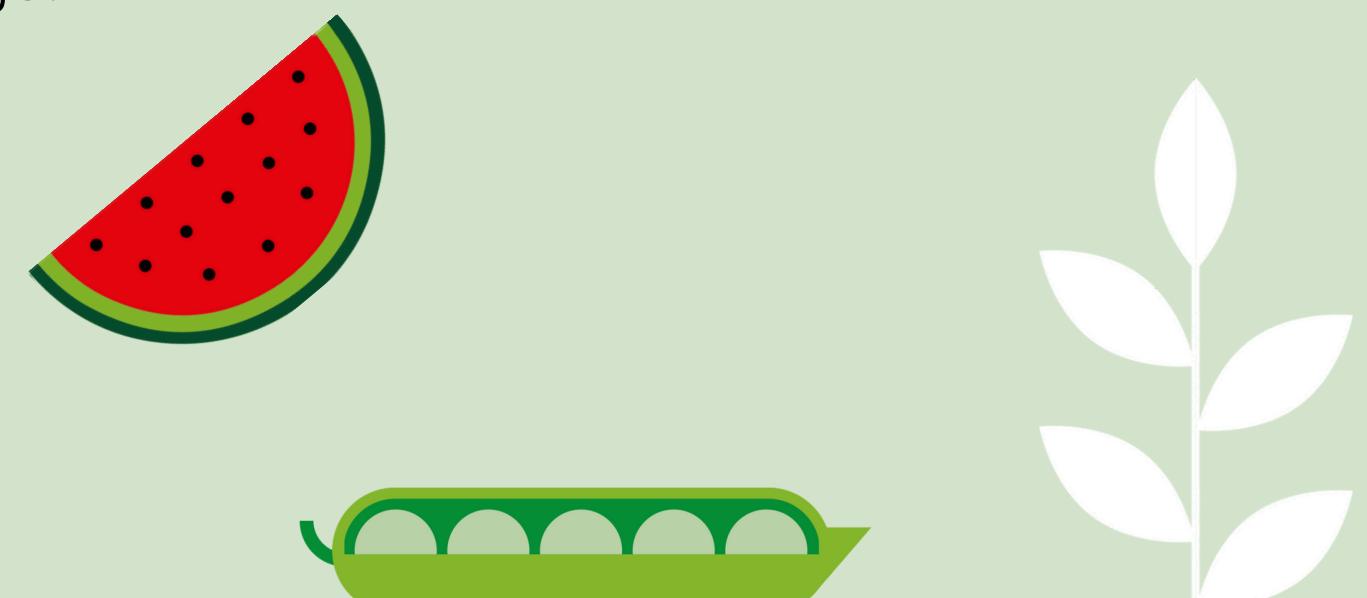
Inês Manuel Brito (CIS, Iscte-IUL), Cristiane Souza (CIS, Iscte-IUL), Ada Rocha (FCNAUP, GreenUPorto), Cláudia Viegas (ESTeSL, IPL, H&TRC), Sandra Gomes (IPAM Porto, UNIDCOM, CETRAD), Mafalda Nogueira (IPAM Porto, UNIDCOM, CETRAD), Beatriz Neto (ESTeSL, IPL), Beatriz Monteiro (IPAM Porto), Leonor Silva (Iscte-IUL) & Marília Prada (CIS, Iscte-IUL)

INTRODUCTION

- The integration of nutritious eating practices, particularly those advocated by the Mediterranean Diet, is **associated with enhanced quality of life and improved academic outcomes** among university students [1]. However, healthy food options in university settings are frequently limited [2].
- Several studies have been dedicated to understanding the eating habits of young people, with a particular focus on adherence to the Mediterranean diet. [3] observed that the **majority had a moderate adherence to the Mediterranean diet**. These results are in line with other research [4] and national data indicating that **only 26% of the Portuguese population has high adherence to the MD** [5].
- The possible decrease in adherence may be related to the **gradual replacement of traditional eating patterns with more westernised habits**, a phenomenon observed in several European countries [6]. In addition, **individual food choices influenced by trends** such as restrictive diets, skipping meals and frequent consumption of processed products, snacks and soft drinks can negatively impact diet quality [7].

OBJECTIVE

This research aimed to explore university students' perceptions of both **traditional Portuguese dishes that align with the Mediterranean Diet** and **newly developed Mediterranean-inspired recipes** co-created with a professional chef. It sought to understand factors that influence acceptance, perceived barriers, and preferences related to these meals, to guide strategies to promote healthier and more sustainable dietary practices in university canteen settings.



METHODOLOGY

66 university students

35 received course credit

31 were compensated with a 15€ voucher

recruited through **social media platforms** (i.e., Instagram, WhatsApp) and a **snowball sampling method**

Focus group discussions were conducted with a **maximum of 8 participants per session**, each lasting approximately **90 minutes**

consistently **moderated by the same researchers** to ensure standardisation

semi-structured script, addressing topics such as students' eating habits, their experiences and perceptions of university canteen services, their knowledge and adherence to the Mediterranean diet, and their perceptions regarding its implementation in academic settings.

Inclusion Criteria

be **full-time university students** enrolled in daytime classes

have **resided in Portugal** for a minimum of two years

be **fluent in Portuguese**

GENERAL RESULTS

Table 1. Students' Main Perceptions of Traditional Mediterranean Diet-Inspired Portuguese Dishes

Themes	Sub-Theme	N	Examples
General Positive Reactions	Visual appealing	9	"I love looking at what I'm doing and being super colourful. So that also has an influence"
	Inclusion of vegetables	5	"I think one of the characteristics that would make me choose it is if it had vegetables or salad."
	Feeling of homemade meal	3	"They convey the idea of dishes that are more homely and that we perhaps eat more at home. Yes, these are dishes that I like"
General Negative Reactions	Personal preferences	2	"I wouldn't choose any, because of the salad and vegetables."

Table 2. Students' Perception of Mediterranean Diet Dishes Developed by a Chef

General Positive Reactions	Visual appealing	11	"They all look good"
	Opportunity to try new dishes	4	"It was also a great way to introduce people to food they didn't know"
	Innovative	3	"I think I'd end up choosing them too, because they're a far cry from what we normally eat here in the canteen."
General Negative Reactions	Personal preferences	4	"It's just that there are a lot of things I've never got used to eating, so I can't eat them"
	Very evident vegetables	4	"Oh, because there are lentils, you can't disguise that either."
	Not usual dishes	3	"People don't know what it is, I don't know if they would choose to try it and then starve if they didn't like it."



DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

- Visual appeal** was consistently identified as a key driver of students' positive perceptions of MD dishes. This finding aligns with previous research emphasising that the **visual presentation of food plays a significant role in taste expectations and intention to consume** [8]. In university settings, appealing food presentation may be especially important in promoting healthy choices.
- Personal preferences were cited as both an obstacle and an advantage to accepting MD dishes. This is consistent with literature on food choice behaviour, which emphasises the **strong role of individual taste preferences, habits, and previous experiences in shaping dietary decisions** [9]. Preferences for or against certain ingredients (e.g., vegetables) often override nutritional or cultural considerations [10].
- Although most young people appear to be in good health, **poor adherence to MD can lead to cumulative metabolic problems over time** [11], emphasising the importance of encouraging healthy eating habits in this age group [12]. Given that eating habits established during academic life tend to persist, it is crucial to reflect on their possible implications for long-term health [13].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is financed by national funds through FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., under the project "PRIMA/0009/2022"

REFERENCES



PROJECT'S WEBSITE

