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VALUES AND BARRIERS TO "LESS BUT BETTER" EATING: UNDERSTANDING FOOD SOBRIETY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how basic human values and perceived barriers jointly shape food sobriety, defined as the intentional pursuit of "less but better" eating through reduced quantities and higher quality, ethically coherent food choices. Drawing on Schwartz's theory of basic human values and a qualitative study of 18 semi-structured interviews, the analysis identifies a cluster of values, hedonism, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism, that support or constrain sober food practices. The findings show that food sobriety is anchored in a redefined hedonism centered on simple, high-quality foods, in health-oriented security, in traditional norms of "cooking just enough", and in concern for close others, local producers and the environment. At the same time, "less but better" eating is hindered by multi-level barriers: price premiums and limited availability of suitable products, ingrained habits and emotional eating, and strong social norms equating generosity and hospitality with food abundance. The study refines the conceptualization of food sobriety as a value-driven form of sustainable consumption and highlights the need to address structural and social constraints if moderate, high-quality and responsible eating is to become both feasible and socially legitimate.

Keywords: Food sobriety; Human values; Barriers; Sustainable food consumption; Qualitative research.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Food systems occupy a central position in contemporary debates on environmental, social, and health challenges (Willett et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2020). Everyday eating is increasingly recognized as a leverage point for sustainable lifestyles (Steffen et al., 2015; Guillard, 2022). Beyond questions of nutritional adequacy, consumer food practices reflect tensions between abundance and moderation, convenience and responsibility, and short-term gratification versus long-term well-being (Guillard, 2022).

Recent research often addresses sustainable food consumption through behavioral focuses such as organic, local, or seasonal choices, reducing animal product intake, and minimizing food waste (Grunert, 2011; Sánchez et al., 2021; Stancu et al., 2016; Vermeir et al., 2020). However, the emerging concept of "food sobriety" provides a comprehensive lens for rethinking consumer-food relationships (Guillard, 2022; Kouas, 2025). Food sobriety is defined as an intentional pursuit of "less but better" eating, intentionally reducing food quantity and unnecessary products while emphasizing quality and simplicity, aligning practice with personal

values (Guillard, 2021; Hémar-Nicolas & Hedegaard, 2023; Kouas, 2025). While most studies address specific drivers such as environmental concern or health, few analyze how consumers themselves articulate the dual aspiration to "consume less and consume better" in their daily life (Grunert, 2011; Murray et al., 2020). Food sobriety bridges concerns related to waste, health, pleasure, social justice, and ecological impact in a unified orientation (Guillard, 2022; Kouas, 2025).

Personal values provide a powerful framework for understanding why some individuals adopt "less but better" eating while others do not (Schwartz, 1992; Steg & de Groot, 2012). Drawing on Schwartz's theory of basic human values, recent scholarship finds that values such as security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism exert strong influence on food choices and sustainable behaviors (Schwartz, 2012; Ismagilova et al., 2020; Blake et al., 2023). Research across cultures also demonstrates that value dimensions like conservation and self-transcendence motivate consumers to prioritize safe, socially responsible, and environmentally friendly food (Schwartz, 2012; Reisch et al., 2021; Blake et al., 2023). In food sobriety, these values are salient for individuals who choose to reduce highly processed food, avoid waste, support local products, and prefer simple, home-cooked meals (Kouas, 2025).

Nevertheless, the literature highlights that values alone do not suffice to explain uneven adoption of food sobriety (Vermeir et al., 2020). The persistent "attitude-behavior gap" reveals that pro-sobriety values often coexist with limited behavioral change, due to numerous barriers such as perceived high prices, lack of time, limited offer, habit, social norms, or skepticism towards "green" claims (Vermeir et al., 2020; Garnett et al., 2019). Reviews emphasize that these barriers act at multiple levels, from individuals' perceptions to social and market structures, constraining transitions towards sustainable diets (Murray et al., 2021; Garnett et al., 2019). Only a handful of studies have directly addressed the articulation between basic values and the perceived barriers to "less but better" daily consumption (Blake et al., 2023).

To address this research gap, the present article analyzes how values and barriers interact in shaping food sobriety. This qualitative study, based on 18 semi-structured interviews with consumers, examines: (1) how basic human values support "less but better" eating and (2) how consumers describe the barriers that slow, block, or complicate its pursuit.

The objective of this study is to examine the joint influence of basic human values and perceived barriers on food sobriety, conceptualized as "less but better" eating. Specifically, the research aims to identify the basic human values that support the pursuit of more moderate and high-quality food consumption, and to describe the main barriers that slow, block, or complicate this approach in everyday life.

2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptualizing Food Sobriety

Sobriety has been conceptualized by Guillard as a broader logic of deconsumption and "less but better" consumption, in which individuals voluntarily reduce volumes while seeking more meaningful, responsible and resource-efficient ways of living (Guillard, 2022). In this perspective, sobriety is not limited to food but applies across domains such as goods, services and everyday practices, and is closely linked to zero-waste and deconsumption approaches that

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promote more reflective and responsible consumption (Guillard, 2022). Building on this general understanding, food sobriety can be defined as the application of the sobriety principle to eating practices, emphasizing "less but better" food consumption by reducing quantities while increasing quality (Guillard, 2022). In this sense, food sobriety corresponds to responsible food choices that prioritize quality over quantity, a preference for fresh and minimally processed products, and the integration of ethical, social and environmental concerns into everyday eating (Kouas, 2025)

This perspective resonates with broader calls for demand-side solutions to environmental crises, which argue that meaningful reductions in consumption volumes are indispensable complements to technological and efficiency improvements (Creutzig et al., 2018; Andrade & Vieites, 2025). Rather than framing restraint as deprivation, food sobriety highlights selective, mindful choices that balance nutritional adequacy, sensory pleasure, and ecological responsibility over time.

Conceptually, food sobriety converges with several established notions in the sustainable consumption literature. First, it connects to voluntary simplicity, defined as a conscious choice to live with less and to derive satisfaction from non-material sources rather than from continuous acquisition (Elgin & Mitchell, 1977; Etzioni, 1999; Alexander & Ussher, 2012). Like voluntary simplicity, food sobriety questions dominant consumerist logics, but it narrows the focus to everyday eating practices, including portion sizes, frequency of consumption occasions, and the symbolic role of food in social life. Second, it aligns with deconsumption and sufficiency approaches, which call for absolute reductions in resource use and environmental pressure through "enoughness" rather than "more but greener" (Liu et al., 2017; Barnett et al., 2023). In this sense, sobriety goes beyond "green" product switching (e.g., buying organic snacks instead of conventional ones) to interrogate the necessity, frequency, and volume of consumption itself.

Sobriety, as discussed in sufficiency and energy debates, refers to a cross-cutting principle that promotes a deliberate and structured reduction of resource use across domains such as energy, mobility, housing, and digital services, in order to stay within ecological and social limits (Dubuisson Quellier, 2023; NégaWatt, 2022). Building on this broader understanding, food sobriety can be defined as the application of this sobriety principle to eating practices, focusing on "less but better" consumption in terms of quantity, quality, and ethical coherence. This perspective resonates with research on minimalism, conceptualized as the intentional reduction of possessions and purchases at the lifestyle level to free cognitive, temporal, and financial resources for intrinsically meaningful activities (Kang et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2025). Minimalism and sobriety share a rejection of excess and a focus on deliberate, value consistent choices, while food sobriety specifically anchors these principles in everyday eating (Martin Woodhead, 2021; Lloyd & Pennington, 2020). In practice, this may involve, for example, reducing the number of weekly meat based meals, avoiding impulse purchases of ultra processed foods, and prioritizing simple, home cooked dishes made from seasonal ingredients, which also brings food sobriety into close dialogue with anti-consumption research on voluntary rejection, reduction, or delay of consumption for ethical, environmental, or identity related reasons (Lee et al., 2009).

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Finally, food sobriety can be situated within the broader paradigm of sustainable consumption as defined by the use of products and services that meet needs while minimizing resource use, emissions, and waste over the life cycle (Liu et al., 2017; Andrade & Vieites, 2025). Compared to many sustainable consumption initiatives that focus on product substitution (e.g., plant-based alternatives, eco-labels), sobriety insists on confronting the volume effect: eating less, wasting less, and simplifying menus to reduce environmental burdens at the source (Barnett et al., 2023). It thus invites a re-evaluation of abundance as a social norm in food culture and opens space for "light" forms of eating that maintain or even increase hedonic and relational value while reducing ecological footprints.

2.2 Values as a foundation for food sobriety

Personal values are widely recognized as deep, trans-situational principles that guide attitudes and behaviors, and thus constitute a relevant entry point for understanding why some individuals are more inclined to adopt sober food practices than others. Schwartz's theory of basic human values identifies ten broad value types (e.g., universalism, benevolence, security, conformity, tradition, hedonism) organized along higher-order dimensions such as self-transcendence versus self-enhancement, and conservation versus openness to change (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). These values are conceived as motivational goals that transcend specific situations and influence a wide range of behaviors, including consumption choices and environmental actions. Research on responsible and sustainable consumption shows, in particular, that self-transcendence values (universalism, benevolence) tend to be positively associated with pro-environmental and prosocial behaviors, whereas self-enhancement and materialist orientations are more often linked to higher consumption levels and less sustainable lifestyles (Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008; Larsen et al., 1999; Ladhari & Tchetgna, 2015).

In the food domain, these values may shape how individuals interpret and enact food sobriety. Universalism, which stresses concern for nature and the welfare of others, can support preferences for food practices that reduce environmental impacts and promote fairness, such as favoring local, seasonal or less processed products. Benevolence, centered on the well-being of close others, may underpin efforts to provide balanced, moderate meals that protect household health without relying on excessive quantities. Conservation values such as security, conformity and tradition can have ambivalent effects: security may encourage moderation and control in eating for health reasons, whereas certain traditional or normative expectations of abundance (e.g., generous portions as a sign of care) may conflict with sobriety principles. Hedonism, typically associated with pleasure and enjoyment, does not necessarily oppose food sobriety, but invites a redefinition of pleasure around the "better" rather than the "more", for instance by seeking sensory satisfaction in simple, high-quality foods instead of in volume or variety.

Because values operate as relatively stable priorities that individuals use to justify and evaluate their behaviors, they provide a useful framework for analyzing how "less but better" eating is constructed, legitimized or resisted in everyday life. In this study, Schwartz's value theory is therefore mobilized as an interpretive lens to examine the role of specific values, such as hedonism, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism, in supporting or constraining food sobriety. The empirical material is used not only to identify which values are salient when participants talk about sober food practices, but also to explore how these values

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interact with perceived obstacles and contextual factors, thereby linking motivational underpinnings to concrete practices and tensions.

2.3 Barriers to Food Sobriety

Although personal values can support the adoption of sober food practices, prior research on sustainable consumption shows that a wide range of obstacles can hinder the translation of intentions into action. Andrade and Vieites (2025) propose a comprehensive conceptual model that organizes obstacles to sustainable consumption into three broad categories: market-level, individual-level and societal-level barriers. Market obstacles refer to the characteristics of the products and services available in the marketplace, such as higher prices of sustainable options, lower availability or salience, and perceived trade-offs in functional or hedonic quality. Individual obstacles relate to psychological factors such as limited consideration of sustainability attributes during decision-making, weak perceived impact of one's actions, entrenched habits and cognitive biases, while societal obstacles capture the influence of social norms, status dynamics and cultural expectations that may discourage sustainable choices even when market and individual conditions are favorable.

This framework is particularly relevant for food sobriety, understood as a specific form of sustainable consumption in the food domain. At the market level, price premiums for fresh, local or minimally processed products, the relative convenience and ubiquity of ultra-processed foods, and the lower availability of portion-controlled alternatives can all discourage "less but better" eating patterns (Gerhardt et al., 2020; Bronnenberg et al., 2025). At the individual level, automatic routines in shopping and cooking, emotional attachment to certain indulgent foods, and the tendency to underestimate quantities or food waste can make it difficult to align everyday practices with sobriety principles, even when consumers express favorable attitudes towards sustainability (White et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2023). At the societal level, norms that equate generosity and care with abundant tables, as well as status signals associated with certain foods or brands, may create social pressure to maintain or display abundance, thus conflicting with moderation and simplification of meals (Farrow et al., 2017; Sparkman et al., 2021).

Andrade and Vieites (2025) also emphasize that these obstacles can be addressed through two broad types of opportunities that are minimization tactics, which aim to directly reduce or remove barriers (e.g., making sustainable options more accessible, convenient and affordable), and circumvention tactics, which seek to work around persistent obstacles by reframing offers or leveraging other motivations. In the case of food sobriety, minimization may involve policies or retail practices that lower the cost and increase the visibility of foods compatible with sober eating, or that make smaller portions and simpler menus easier to adopt. Circumvention may consist in framing sober meals as pleasurable, modern or caring, thereby mobilizing hedonic and relational motives in favor of moderation rather than abundance (Chernev & Blair, 2021; Sun et al., 2021). In this study, Andrade and Vieites' framework is used as a diagnostic lens to structure and interpret the obstacles to food sobriety that emerge from the qualitative data, while leaving room for context-specific nuances and for the role of personal values in mitigating or amplifying these barriers.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

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3.1 Research design and approach

Given the exploratory nature of food sobriety and the aim of understanding how values and perceived barriers shape sober food practices, a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews was adopted, in line with prior work on food sobriety and responsible consumption (Kouas, 2025). This approach is consistent with interpretive research in consumer behavior, where in-depth interviews are widely used to capture meanings, routines and tensions embedded in everyday practices, rather than to measure predefined variables (White et al., 2019). The study therefore follows an interpretive perspective focused on how individuals construct and make sense of "less but better" eating in their daily lives.

3.2 Sampling strategy and participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to reach consumers able to reflect on their food practices and their relationship to moderation, quality and responsibility, which is consistent with sampling strategies commonly used in qualitative research on sustainable and responsible consumption (Kouas, 2025). The sampling sought variation in socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, educational level and employment status) and in reported interest in sustainability or responsible consumption, in order to capture diverse configurations of values and barriers. Recruitment combined personal networks, snowballing and contacts through community or social media groups related to food and everyday consumption, as recommended in recent qualitative studies on consumer sustainability practices (Schnack & Gan, 2024).

A total of eighteen interviews were conducted, which is consistent with qualitative research in consumer behavior aiming for depth rather than statistical representativeness (Kouas, 2025; Schnack & Gan, 2024). Interviews were pursued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when additional interviews no longer yielded substantially new insights regarding the values associated with food sobriety and the perceived barriers to its adoption (Guest et al., 2006).

3.3 Data collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with eighteen Tunisian consumers. The interview guide was inspired by previous research on food sobriety and sustainable consumption (Guillard, 2022; Kouas, 2025). It first invited participants to describe their everyday food practices, including how they plan, shop, cook, eat and manage leftovers, then explored the meanings and values they attach to "eating well", moderation, quality and responsibility, and finally examined the perceived difficulties, tensions and constraints they face when trying to eat "less but better", with particular attention to economic, practical and social barriers highlighted in the sustainable consumption literature.

3.4 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a common and robust approach in qualitative studies of consumer sustainability (Kouas, 2025; Barnett et al., 2023). In a first step, open coding was used to identify recurrent themes related to food practices, values and perceived barriers, staying as close as possible to participants' own words and allowing categories to emerge inductively from the material (data-driven coding). In a second step, these

initial codes were reviewed, refined and grouped into higher-order themes through an iterative process of comparison within and across interviews, with specific attention to how themes relating to "less but better" eating, underlying motivations and difficulties cohered into broader patterns (Schnack & Gan, 2024; White et al., 2019).

The coding process was thus iterative and comparative, involving several rounds of revisiting the data, adjusting category boundaries and examining relationships between values, practices and barriers, in line with qualitative analysis standards in consumer research (Schnack & Gan, 2024; White et al., 2019). To enhance the credibility of the analysis, a portion of the data was double-coded and/or the coding scheme was discussed with another researcher, and disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached (Guest et al., 2006).

The study complied with ethical principles for qualitative research. Participants were informed about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time, and provided informed consent before each interview. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by removing identifying information from the transcripts and by reporting the findings in a way that prevents the identification of individual participants

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Values associated with food sobriety

The identification of values associated with food sobriety draws on Schwartz's theory of basic human values, which offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how deep motivational principles guide consumer behavior in sustainable and responsible consumption contexts (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). Schwartz is used because this theory offers a robust, widely validated framework to conceptualize and organize personal values, and because several of the values it identifies (e.g., universalism, benevolence, security, hedonism, tradition) are directly mobilized in prior research on responsible and sustainable consumption, which makes it particularly relevant for understanding food sobriety.

In this perspective, values are defined as socially desirable, trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in people's lives and provide a shared language to talk about what is important in social interaction (Schwartz, 2006). The theory is distinctive in that it identifies a set of universal human values, empirically validated across cultures, which strongly influence attitudes and behaviors, including those related to sustainable and ethical consumption (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003; Steg et al., 2012). Schwartz (1992, 2012) distinguishes ten basic values, organized along two bipolar dimensions, openness to change versus conservation, and self-enhancement versus self-transcendence, typically represented in a circular structure that highlights compatibilities and conflicts between values. This conceptualization allows for a deeper understanding of consumers' underlying motivations, beyond immediate cost–benefit calculations.

In the context of food sobriety, this approach is particularly relevant because it makes it possible to capture the ethical, ecological and social values that underpin "less but better" eating practices. By adopting this theoretical lens, the analysis seeks to explain how universal values such as hedonism, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism shape

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the way consumers define, justify and implement sober food practices. This choice is consistent with methodological recommendations that call for integrative approaches combining motivational and contextual factors to study sustainable consumption behaviors (Steg et al., 2012). The results show that several of the values that emerge inductively from participants' narratives map closely onto Schwartz's value types, which provides a robust basis for interpreting food sobriety as a value-driven phenomenon rather than a purely situational adjustment.

4.1.1 Hedonism

Hedonism in Schwartz's framework reflects the pursuit of pleasure and sensuous gratification, rooted in basic human needs and the enjoyment associated with their satisfaction (Schwartz, 2006). The findings indicate that participants often associate food sobriety with a return to simple, authentic pleasures, particularly by emphasizing the sensory quality of food rather than its quantity. They describe seeking fresh and minimally processed products for their taste and taking pleasure in cooking at home with simple, local ingredients, thereby redefining "eating well" around quality and enjoyment rather than abundance. From a theoretical standpoint, these behaviors can be linked to hedonism, but in a form that is integrated into a sober approach: pleasure is derived from carefully chosen, high-quality foods and from the act of cooking, rather than from overconsumption.

This suggests that the pursuit of pleasure is not incompatible with thoughtful and responsible consumption; instead, it can be reoriented towards practices that align gratification with moderation and sustainability. Schwartz (1992) conceptualizes hedonism as a self-focused value, yet research shows that it can coexist with other-oriented values in concrete behaviors. Schlemmer (2015), for example, notes that pleasure-seeking individuals may express hedonism through more moderate consumption patterns and environmentally respectful choices, such as buying local products or adopting less resource-intensive mobility options. Similarly, Bardi & Goodwin (2011) argue that hedonism can harmoniously coexist with altruistic values in ethical and responsible behaviors, a pattern clearly visible in participants' sober food practices, where personal satisfaction and responsibility are tightly intertwined.

4.1.2 Security

Security, in Schwartz's model, reflects the need for safety, harmony and stability in society, in relationships and within the self (Schwartz, 1992, 2006). The results show that food sobriety is frequently perceived as a way to reduce risks associated with processed foods and to ensure a healthy diet for oneself and one's family. Participants describe limiting excesses, favoring organic or local products to avoid additives and pesticides, and being willing to pay more for foods they consider safe and of good quality. These behaviors illustrate how security manifests as a desire to protect health and family well-being, making the safeguarding of bodily integrity a central driver of sober food practices.

This interpretation is consistent with prior work showing that security values often motivate cautious, risk-averse choices, particularly in health-related domains. Maio and Olson (2000) argue that security can lead individuals to adopt more conservative or protective behaviors when they perceive threats, which fits with the preference for "safer" foods and the avoidance

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of highly processed products observed here. Schlemmer (2015) also finds that security is positively related to the intention to consume less, suggesting that concern for safety and stability can favor reduced, more controlled consumption patterns. In the present study, security thus appears as a major motivational lever for adopting sober food practices, by aligning moderation and product selectivity with the goal of protecting personal and family health.

4.1.3 Conformity

Conformity in Schwartz's theory refers to the restraint of actions and impulses likely to upset or harm others, or to violate social expectations or norms (Schwartz, 1992, 2006). The findings show that several participants' food choices are influenced by prevailing social trends and expectations, particularly those circulating through social media and advertising. References to platforms where "everyone talks about organic products" or where certain responsible practices are highly visible suggest that conformity to perceived social norms plays a role in adopting specific sober or "green" food behaviours. In this sense, the decision to buy organic or to reduce certain types of consumption can be partly driven by a desire not to deviate from what is presented as socially desirable or modern.

Bardi & Goodwin (2011) note that conformity is often reinforced in contexts where social norms are explicit and widely shared, which appears to be the case with the growing visibility of ethical and organic consumption in public discourse. The present results suggest that even when individuals adopt sober practices, these remain embedded in social and cultural frames that define what is legitimate and valued. Conformity therefore operates as a double-edged value: it can anchor individuals in unsustainable norms of abundance, but it can also support the diffusion of sobriety when more moderate, responsible practices become normative in certain social circles.

4.1.4 Tradition

Tradition in Schwartz's framework reflects respect, commitment and acceptance of cultural or religious customs and ideas that one's culture or religion impose (Schwartz, 1992, 2006). For some participants, food sobriety is described as a return to traditional practices that value simplicity, careful use of resources and avoidance of waste. They mention preparing traditional dishes in appropriate quantities, reusing recipes transmitted across generations and favoring simple ingredients, which they see as a way of preserving cultural heritage while limiting waste. These narratives illustrate a strong attachment to family food habits and to the idea that "one cooks just what is needed", linking sobriety to long-standing cultural norms.

Roccas and Sagiv (2010) emphasize that tradition is often expressed through ritualized practices deeply rooted in family and community histories, including food rituals. The findings support this view, suggesting that food sobriety is not only a matter of rational resource management but can also be experienced as a way of honoring and transmitting a cultural legacy. In this sense, sobriety becomes a way to reconcile contemporary concerns about waste and sustainability with the desire to maintain continuity with past generations, rather than a rupture with traditional food culture.

4.1.5 Benevolence

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Benevolence is defined by Schwartz as the value that focuses on preserving and enhancing the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact, such as family and close community members (Schwartz, 2006). This value emerges in participants' accounts through consumption choices oriented towards supporting local economies and small producers, as well as through concern for the well-being of close others. Respondents express a preference for buying from small farmers and short supply chains, seeing this as a way to "help" producers and enable them to make a living from their work, while at the same time consuming "less but better".

These behaviors are clearly aligned with the benevolence value, which is oriented toward collective well-being within the in-group. Schwartz (1992) links benevolence to the motivation to preserve and enhance the welfare of close others, and the present findings extend this logic to local economic actors and communities. Bardi & Schwartz (2003) show that benevolence values strongly influence prosocial behaviors, including in the domain of consumption choices, which is consistent with the observed tendency to favor local, small-scale actors even when this may require effort or higher prices. In this study, food sobriety is thus partly anchored in a benevolent orientation that seeks to align personal consumption with the support of socially and economically sustainable practices.

4.1.6 Universalism

Universalism in Schwartz's model refers to understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature (Schwartz, 2006). The data show that many participants adopt practices intended to limit the environmental impact of their consumption, often explicitly linked to sobriety: buying only what is needed, reducing packaging, favoring bulk purchases and reusable containers, and preferring local and seasonal products to reduce their ecological footprint. These behaviors reflect a clear concern for environmental protection and a sense of responsibility towards "the planet" and future generations.

This pattern is in line with research indicating that universalism is a key predictor of pro-environmental and sustainable behaviors. Schlemmer (2015) suggests that individuals who are open-minded, concerned about the collective good and sensitive to environmental preservation are more likely to adopt practices that reduce their consumption and environmental impact. Steg & de Groot (2012) similarly argue that universalism-related values play a central role in motivating pro-environmental behavior, as they orient individuals towards the protection of nature and the welfare of others beyond their immediate circle. In the present study, universalism is expressed through concrete sober consumption practices, such as limiting waste, avoiding unnecessary packaging and buying local, which simultaneously address environmental concerns and align with the broader logic of "less but better" food consumption.

These results support the decision to use Schwartz's value theory as a guiding framework, as the values identified empirically (hedonism, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, universalism) map closely onto the value types described in the model and help explain why some participants endorse or resist food sobriety.

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4.2 Barriers to Food Sobriety

The analysis also reveals a series of barriers that limit the adoption or maintenance of food sobriety, even among participants who express favorable values and intentions. These barriers resonate with the three broad levels identified in the sustainable consumption which provides a useful lens for situating the specific difficulties encountered in sober food practices (Andrade & Vieites, 2025). In the context of this study, barriers are understood as factors that make it harder for individuals to translate their "less but better" ideals into everyday routines, whether by constraining access to suitable options, reinforcing habits and temptations, or exerting social pressure towards abundance. Andrade & Vieites (2025) are mobilized because they offer a comprehensive, up-to-date conceptual model of obstacles to sustainable consumption that goes beyond individual factors and systematically integrates market-level and societal barriers. Since food sobriety is examined here as a specific form of sustainable consumption, their framework provides a relevant diagnostic lens to structure and interpret the obstacles emerging from the qualitative data.

4.2.1 Market-level barriers

At the market level, several participants point to economic and structural constraints that complicate sober food choices. First, the perceived higher price of products that fit their definition of "better" (e.g., fresh, local, organic, minimally processed) is frequently mentioned as a barrier, especially when household budgets are tight. This aligns with research showing that sustainability-oriented products often carry a price premium which can deter adoption, particularly among less affluent consumers (Gerhardt et al., 2020; Bronnenberg et al., 2025). Second, participants describe uneven availability and accessibility of such products, limited local offer, time-consuming shopping routines, or the dominance of ultra-processed, ready-to-eat options in nearby outlets, which makes it easier to fall back on convenient, less sober choices. These accounts echo findings that sustainable options are often less available, salient or convenient than conventional ones, thereby creating friction against more responsible consumption (Andrade & Vieites, 2025).

Taken together, these market-level barriers support the decision to mobilize Andrade & Vieites' framework as a diagnostic reference. The difficulties participants report with price, availability and convenience correspond closely to the market obstacles identified in their comprehensive model of sustainable consumption. In the case of food sobriety, these barriers are particularly salient because "less but better" often implies upgrading quality while reducing quantity, which can be hard to implement when "better" is systematically more expensive and less accessible in practice.

4.2.2 Individual-level barriers

At the individual level, the findings highlight the role of entrenched habits, emotional regulation through food and difficulties in exercising self-control as key barriers to sobriety. Participants describe long-standing routines in shopping and cooking, buying in bulk "just in case", preparing large quantities "to be sure there is enough", or relying on ultra-processed products when tired or busy, which are difficult to change even when they acknowledge the benefits of eating less and wasting less. This is consistent with evidence that habitual behaviors

and limited consideration of sustainability attributes often undermine the translation of pro-environmental attitudes into actual choices (White et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2023).

Emotional dimensions also emerge as a barrier: some participants report using food as a source of comfort or reward, particularly in stressful situations, which can lead to over-consumption or to the purchase of highly palatable, energy-dense products that conflict with sobriety ideals. This pattern reflects the broader literature on self-control, affect regulation and consumption, which shows that momentary emotional needs can override long-term goals such as health or sustainability (White et al., 2019). In this respect, the individual-level barriers identified in the data, automatic routines, emotional eating and self-control struggles, mirror the psychological obstacles described by Andrade & Vieites (2025), reinforcing the relevance of their model for interpreting the specific challenges of food sobriety.

4.2.3 Societal-level barriers

Finally, societal-level barriers are strongly present in participants' narratives, particularly through social norms of abundance and expectations linked to hospitality and care. Several respondents explain that serving plentiful food is considered a sign of generosity, respect and affection, especially when receiving guests or during family gatherings. In such contexts, reducing quantities or simplifying menus may be perceived as inappropriate or even shameful, which creates a tension between the desire to avoid waste and the need to conform to social expectations. These findings are consistent with work on social norms and status in sustainable consumption, which shows that people often adjust their behavior to what they perceive as socially desirable or identity-relevant, even when this conflicts with personal environmental concerns (Farrow et al., 2017; Sparkman et al., 2021).

These societal barriers illustrate that food sobriety is not only a matter of individual choice or market conditions but is also embedded in cultural scripts that associate "a good meal" with abundance and variety. The prominence of such norms in participants' accounts supports the use of Andrade and Vieites' tripartite distinction between market, individual and societal barriers as an interpretive grid. The social expectations and cultural obligations described here correspond closely to the societal-level obstacles they identify for sustainable consumption more generally. In the case of food sobriety, these norms can make it particularly difficult to "do less" without risking social disapproval, which suggests that any attempt to promote sober eating must take into account not only individual motivations and market conditions but also the symbolic and relational meanings attached to food abundance.

To provide an overview of how these themes are grounded in participants' narratives, Table 1 presents each theme alongside an illustrative quote and basic socio-demographic information for the participant concerned.

Table1: Themes related to food sobriety and illustrative participant quotes

Theme	Sub-theme	Illustrative quote
Values	Hedonism	"For me, food sobriety doesn't mean depriving myself. It means eating less but really enjoying it: a ripe seasonal fruit, good bread, a homemade dish. That's real pleasure."

		"I don't need a full table to feel satisfied. A simple meal with fresh, tasty products is much more enjoyable than several rich dishes I can't even finish."
	Security	"I'd rather buy fewer products but know exactly what's in them. If I can, I choose items with fewer additives, because my priority is to protect my children's health."
		"I avoid ultra-processed foods as much as possible. Eating more soberly, with simple ingredients, reassures me: I feel I'm really taking care of my body."
	Conformity	"On social media, everyone talks about organic and responsible products. When I see that around me, I feel that I also have to make an effort and adjust how I eat."
		"When I see friends posting their 'healthy plates', it pushes me to follow the trend too. I don't want to be the one who still eats 'like before'."
	Tradition	"In my family, we've always cooked just enough. My mother used to say: 'We cook what we need, not more.' For me, eating soberly is continuing that way of doing things."
		"Preparing my grandmother's recipes, with simple ingredients and the right quantity, is a way for me to respect our traditions while avoiding waste."
	Benevolence	"Consuming less but better also means, for me, choosing local producers. Even if I buy smaller quantities, I know the money goes directly to people who really need it."
		"I prefer to go to small farmers' markets. It's my way of supporting them: if we all buy a little less but more fairly, they can continue their activity."
	Universalism	"I try to buy only what I'm going to use and I avoid unnecessary packaging. It's my small contribution to reducing waste and protecting the environment."
		"Choosing seasonal and local products is also a way of reducing my ecological footprint. Eating more soberly helps me feel that I'm doing something concrete for the planet."
Barriers	Market barrier: Price and quality	"I'd like to eat 'less but better' all the time, but high-quality products are often more expensive. On a tight budget, it's not easy to maintain these choices every week."
		"Sometimes I have to choose between quantity and quality. I know the better product is more consistent with my values, but I can't always afford it."
	Market barrier: Availability/convenience	"Fresh, local products are not always easy to find near my home. On the other hand, processed foods are available everywhere and save me time when I'm in a hurry."
		"When I finish work late, the only option is the supermarket on the way home. The offer there pushes me more towards ready-made dishes than towards sober, simple cooking."
	Individual barrier: Habits and routines	"I'm used to cooking large quantities 'just in case'. Even when I try to change, I end up preparing too much because that's how I've always done it."
		"On paper, I like the idea of eating more moderately, but in practice my shopping and cooking habits are hard to change. I fall back into my routines very quickly."
	Individual barrier: Emotional eating	"When I'm stressed or tired, I tend to compensate with food. In those moments, I forget about sobriety and I look for comforting, rich products."

		"I know I should eat smaller portions, but when I feel low, I help myself again. Emotion often wins over my intention to be more moderate."
	Societal barrier: Norms of abundance	"When I invite people over, I feel obliged to prepare a lot of food. If the table isn't full, I'm afraid people will think I'm not generous or that I've skimped."
		"In my family, a 'good meal' means plenty of dishes and large servings. Serving less, even if it's better, can be seen as a lack of hospitality."
	Societal barrier: Fear of judgment	"If I change too much and serve lighter meals, I'm afraid my relatives will say I've become stingy or obsessed with dieting."
		"I sometimes hold back from applying what I believe about sobriety because I don't want to be judged or have to justify my choices at every meal."

5.0 DISCUSSION

The results indicate that food sobriety is deeply rooted in a system of values while simultaneously constrained by structural and social factors. At the motivational level, several of Schwartz's basic values clearly appear in participants' narratives, which confirms the relevance of a value-based reading. Hedonism, for instance, does not oppose sobriety but is reconfigured around simple and authentic pleasures: respondents describe "eating less" as acceptable, even desirable, as long as they can "eat better" by privileging fresh, tasty and home-cooked foods. This form of redefined hedonism is consistent with research showing that pleasure can be expressed through moderate and environmentally respectful consumption rather than through excess (Schlemmer, 2015; Bardi & Goodwin, 2011).

Security emerges as another central lever. Food sobriety is widely perceived as a way to protect health and reduce risks associated with ultra-processed products. The findings thus confirm that security can motivate cautious and conservative choices when individuals perceive threats, here related to additives, pesticides or over-eating (Maio & Olson, 2000). At the same time, conservation values such as tradition and conformity play an ambivalent role. On one hand, tradition supports sobriety when it translates into inherited practices of "cooking just enough" and avoiding waste, echoing work linking traditional food practices to careful use of resources (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010). On the other hand, conformity to social expectations can maintain norms of abundance or relay popular "trends", whether more sober (organic, local) or more consumerist.

Self-transcendence values, in particular benevolence and universalism, give a prosocial and environmental dimension to food sobriety. Benevolence manifests in concern for the well-being of close others and support for local producers, which aligns with evidence that benevolence values strongly shape prosocial consumption choices (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003). Universalism, focused on the protection of nature and the welfare of all, is reflected in practices aiming to reduce environmental impact, such as buying local and seasonal products, limiting packaging and cutting food waste. These findings corroborate studies identifying universalism as a key driver of pro-environmental behavior (Steg et al., 2014; Steg & de Groot, 2012). Overall, the convergence between the values that emerged inductively and Schwartz's value types justifies the use of this framework to interpret food sobriety as a practice strongly structured by a cluster of hedonic, security, conservation and self-transcendence values.

At the same time, the study shows that favorable values are not sufficient to guarantee the everyday implementation of food sobriety, because barriers operate at multiple levels. At the market level, participants mention high prices, uneven availability and the superior convenience of products that do not fit their ideal of "better" (fresh, local, minimally processed), which confirms price and accessibility obstacles documented in sustainable consumption research (Gerhardt et al., 2020; Bronnenberg et al., 2025). At the individual level, shopping and cooking habits, emotional eating and self-control difficulties reproduce the well-known gap between pro-sustainability attitudes and actual behavior (White et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2023). At the societal level, strong norms of abundance and hospitality make "doing less" socially costly, in line with work on the influence of social norms and status on consumption choices (Farrow et al., 2017; Sparkman et al., 2021).

The tripartite structure of barriers that emerges from the data, market, individual and societal, closely mirrors the model proposed by Andrade & Vieites for sustainable consumption, which confirms the relevance of their framework as an analytical grid for food sobriety. The main contribution here is to show how this architecture of barriers is specified in the food domain and how it interacts with values: some values (security, universalism, benevolence) can help individuals resist constraints and maintain sober practices, while others (conformity, certain expressions of tradition) may reinforce barriers by anchoring expectations of abundance. These findings suggest that interventions to promote food sobriety should both support favorable values, especially universalism, benevolence and a health-oriented form of security, and address structural and normative conditions by making sober-compatible options more accessible and affordable, by accompanying habit change, and by reshaping social representations of what counts as a "good meal".

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study refines the understanding of how food sobriety is grounded in personal values and positioned within sustainable consumption. It shows that "less but better" food practices are not driven solely by self-transcendence values such as benevolence and universalism, but also by conservation values such as security and tradition, which anchor sobriety in concerns for health, stability and cultural continuity. This dual anchoring nuance the common assumption that sustainability is necessarily associated with "progressive" or change-oriented values and highlights the need to consider how conservation and self-transcendence can jointly support sufficiency in food consumption.

The study also empirically grounds the notion of food sobriety as a specific form of sustainable consumption that combines reduction in volume, upgrading of quality, cultural continuity and care for others and the environment, thereby enriching conceptual debates on sobriety, deconsumption and sufficiency beyond the usual focus on energy and mobility.

Finally, by showing that the barriers to food sobriety align with a tripartite structure (market, individual, societal), the research confirms the relevance of multi-level models of sustainable consumption and demonstrates that value–behavior alignment must be analyzed in interaction with structural and social constraints.

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6.2 Managerial Implications

Managerially, the results indicate that food sobriety can be a powerful positioning axis, but only if firms and institutions align their offers and messages with the values and constraints highlighted by consumers. A first implication concerns the way "less but better" is framed. Rather than presenting sobriety in terms of restriction or sacrifice, marketers can leverage redefined hedonism by emphasizing taste, pleasure and sensory quality: campaigns can highlight the enjoyment of simple, fresh, seasonal dishes, the satisfaction of home-cooked meals, and the idea that true pleasure lies in quality rather than quantity. This involves working on product development (e.g., shorter ingredient lists, fresher and more local sourcing) as well as on storytelling that associates sober choices with authenticity, refinement and emotional comfort, not with frustration.

A second implication relates to health-oriented security. Many participants adopt sober practices to protect their own and their family's health, which suggests that firms and public actors can legitimately frame moderation, smaller portions and less processed products as forms of care and protection. Concretely, this can translate into reformulating products with fewer additives, clearer front-of-pack information, and ranges that make it easy to compose balanced, moderate meals. Communication should link these characteristics to concrete benefits (e.g., "protecting your children's long-term health", "reducing invisible risks"), thereby activating security in a constructive way. Retailers can support this by organizing shelves and in-store cues so that healthier, sober-compatible options are more visible and convenient than ultra-processed ones.

Third, the importance of benevolence and universalism points to opportunities to connect food sobriety with support for local producers and environmental responsibility. Brands and retailers can develop or strengthen partnerships with small farmers and short supply chains, and make this visible at the point of sale, for example through dedicated corners, labelling, and narratives that show the human faces behind products. Pricing and packaging strategies can be aligned with "less but better" by offering smaller but higher-quality formats, bulk options that reduce packaging, and clear indications of environmental impact. Communicating on the social and ecological benefits of these choices, supporting local livelihoods, reducing waste and emissions, speaks directly to benevolence and universalism and helps consumers see food sobriety as a way of "doing their part" without necessarily spending more overall.

Fourth, the identified barriers suggest that managerial action must also tackle structural frictions. On the price dimension, firms can work on accessible sober offers, for example by developing entry-level lines that maintain high intrinsic quality (freshness, simplicity of ingredients) without positioning them as premium luxuries. Promotions can be shifted away from volume incentives ("buy two, get one free") towards offers that reward planning and moderation (e.g., discounts on smaller, high-quality packs, or loyalty points for waste-reducing purchases). On the convenience dimension, retailers and food service operators can design ready-to-use or ready-to-cook solutions that embody sobriety, simple recipes, pre-portioned fresh ingredients, smaller menus, so that time-pressed consumers are not systematically pushed towards energy-dense, ultra-processed options.

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Finally, the strong influence of social norms of abundance calls for symbolic and cultural work. Brands, retailers and public campaigns can contribute to redefining what counts as a "good meal" or "good hospitality" by showing tables that are visually appealing but not overloaded, highlighting conviviality, sharing and absence of waste as markers of care and generosity. Communication that normalizes serving appropriate quantities, reusing leftovers creatively, and valuing simple, seasonal dishes can gradually shift expectations away from quantity as the main sign of love or status. In parallel, tools and content that help households plan, portion and store food (e.g., apps, recipe platforms, in-store advice) can support behavior change at the micro-level. Taken together, these managerial implications suggest that food sobriety can become a credible and attractive strategic direction if organizations simultaneously activate consumers' existing values, reduce structural barriers, and work to reshape the social meaning of abundance.

7.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged, which also open up avenues for future research. First, the findings are based on a qualitative sample that privileges depth of understanding over statistical generalization. While this allows for rich insight into how values and barriers shape food sobriety, it limits the ability to estimate the prevalence of these configurations in the broader population. Future quantitative studies could build on these results to develop and validate measurement scales for food sobriety and to test, on larger samples, how specific value profiles (e.g., combinations of security, benevolence, universalism and tradition) predict different patterns of sober food practices and barriers.

Second, the data are situated in a specific socio-cultural and economic context, which may influence both the salience of certain values (e.g., tradition, benevolence towards local actors) and the strength of particular barriers (e.g., price, norms of abundance). Comparative cross-cultural research would be useful to examine how food sobriety is constructed in other contexts and to explore whether the same value clusters and barrier structures emerge elsewhere.

A third limitation concerns the temporal and self-reported nature of the data. Interviews capture participants' narratives and justifications at a given moment and may be affected by recall bias or social desirability, especially on topics such as waste, health and environmental concern. Longitudinal and mixed-method designs, including diaries, observations or digital traces of purchasing and food management, could provide a more dynamic view of how food sobriety practices evolve over time and how stable the role of values is in the face of life events or contextual shocks.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This article set out to explore how food sobriety is constructed and enacted in everyday life, and to identify the values and barriers that shape "less but better" eating. The findings show that food sobriety is not a marginal or purely prescriptive concept but a lived practice, anchored in a rich system of values and negotiated within concrete constraints. Participants describe sobriety as a way of reconciling pleasure, health, cultural continuity and responsibility towards

others and the environment, by reducing volumes while upgrading the quality, meaning and fairness of their food choices.

By mobilizing Schwartz's value framework and recent work on barriers to sustainable consumption, the study demonstrates that food sobriety is supported by a specific cluster of values, hedonism, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism, while being constrained by multi-level barriers at the market, individual and societal levels. This dual perspective highlights that "less but better" eating cannot be reduced to individual goodwill or information, but depends on the alignment between deep-seated motivations, structural conditions and social norms. Theoretically, this work refines the understanding of sobriety as a value-driven form of sustainable consumption, and empirically grounds it in concrete practices and tensions. Managerially, it suggests that promoting food sobriety requires leveraging existing values, reducing structural frictions and reshaping the symbolic status of abundance, so that moderate, high-quality and responsible eating becomes both feasible and socially legitimate.

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