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The proof of the pudding is in the eating

Design's potential in enabling societal changes towards sustainable eating habits, especially related to the impact of diets in climate change.

INTRODUCTION

Current diets and eating habits in the developed world are unsustainable[1]. Over consumption of meat and dairy has a negative effect on the health of both people and planet, highly contributing wih emissions leading to climate change[1]. Trends indicating the spread of obesity, malnourishment, rising costs for the health system, resource depletion and social inequalities suggest we are far from securing a sustainable future[2,1]. Dietary changes become crucial but are particularly challenging. Food is embedded with deep personal, social and cultural values, and moulded by different forces, actors and norms. Therefore, interventions require targeting key socio-cultural touch points[3] stressing lifestyle changes for improved health, as opposed to mere information dissemination. Awareness campaigns and labeling have not yielded the expected results[4] and even when high awareness levels already exist, actions and behaviours are still not positively affected[5].

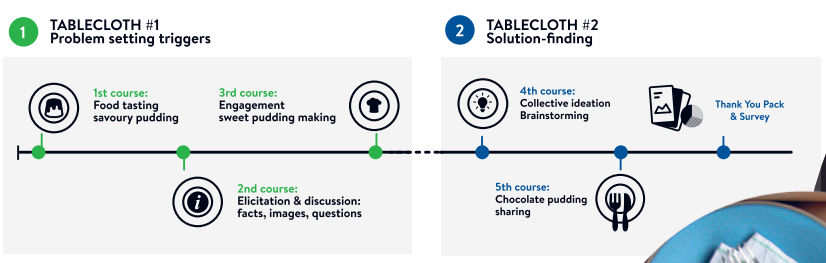
There is potential for social design interventions to address behaviour change[6,7] when designing for experiences[8], and in particular, for the exploitation of design-thinking and collaboration to address complex, multi-faceted, problems[9] such as a shift towards sustainable dietary habits[3,10].

HYPOTHESIS

Engaging consumers in experiences and settings that are socio-cultural and emotionally rich can empower them and motivate the adoption of dietary changes, specifically in reducing the consumption of animal products for increased personal and environmental health. Collaborative design approaches can facilitate bridge the gap between awareness levels and the actions and motivation needed to effectively adopt sustainable behaviour changes.

METHODS:

The socio-cultural complexity behind food and eating requires a multifaceted approach and methodology. The main research method consists of a workshop where participants are inmersed in a social and experientially rich activity that engages all senses revolving around a vegetarian menu in an informal dining context. The workshop is staged around 'courses' that act as elicitation and include: factual information, images, food tasting and cooking. The activity moves from problem setting (part 1) to problem solving (part 2) by sparking awareness, reflection, criticality and ideation. Creativity and collaboration are encouraged to give participants the opportunity to engage with the problems and propose different solutions and courses of action.



Top: Workshop structure and activities / Right: workshop kit - food not depicted

The qualitative data generated (conversations, tablecloth notes and illustrations, sticky notes) is compiled and organised to identify the main key areas of concern, challenges and solutions suggested. Additional qualitative and quantitative data is collected from a post-activity survey as a way to confirm key opinions and compare results with other published studies. At present, this research method is still being used to collect information from different groups and settings, however, each session delivers enough data to be analysed in isolation and still fulfills the main expectations for the activity. The body of information gathered will enable designers working towards sustainable dietary changes to generate empathetic and socio-culturally embedded responses with better potential for success. It will also enable to identify gaps where solutions are not being targeted, or where they are not being effective when helping consumers tackle the real challenges when trying to adopt sustainable dietary changes.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Awareness levels in terms of food and sustainability are high (or improved by materials) but do not lead to a desire in changing behaviour.
- Participants strongly feel policies and regulations need to be implemented.
- Personal actions are not felt to lead to larger scale impacts (low perceived consumer effectiveness).
- However, shared stories of effective behaviour change attest high personal value and perceived benefit.
- Participants are interested in taking part in socially rich activities (ie: dining clubs), acquiring cooking skills and increasing vegetable consumption.
- There is general interest in improving personal health, although the link between personal and environmental health is not clearly identified.

CONCLUSIONS:

When it comes to personal aspects of people's lives such as dietary habits, behaviour change is challenging. Scenarios that engage consumers in social and emotionally rich experiences represent a promising territory. Although the developed method has not proven to result in changes in participants' habits yet, it has been successful in generating engagement and openness to share personal experiences, motivated reflection and criticality on personal habits, and increased understanding. Findings confirm that further efforts need to be made to move consumers from awareness to action with a strong focus on lifestyle changes for health.

Findings suggest there is an opportunity for the generation or improvement of spaces and experiences that foster habits and skills while providing strong social support when adopting healthier dietary changes. Dining clubs and work setting cafeterias, represent potential spaces where people can interact, support and empower themselves to make otherwise challenging changes in the absence of further regulatory support facilitating better choices.

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