Preparing and Experiencing Food During Life Events: Implications for Technology Supporting Social and Value Changes

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Abstract

Healthy eating is essential to overall well-being. Deciding what and how to eat often requires collaboration and coordination with others to develop routines and create enjoyable experiences. However, life changes like moving or unemployment can disrupt food routines and social dining. Current technologies often overlook these evolving changes and do not adequately support individuals in collaborating with others to adapt to these impacts. In this paper, we interviewed 18 participants who experienced various routine changes during life events. Findings highlight the need for tools to support individuals in adapting to food practices, facilitating social coordination, and mediating conflicts during transitions. We explore design opportunities that facilitate technology reconfiguration, value clarification and mediation, and social coordination, aiming to better support individuals in times of change, both for those who undergo life events and others who offer help with food practices. Our work offers design considerations for technologies that enhance healthy eating and food service, ensuring sustained support during life changes.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI**.

Keywords

Food, healthy eating, life events, transitions, value

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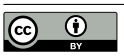

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1 Introduction

Maintaining a healthy diet is essential to support everyday activities, prevent chronic illness, and sustain overall health [68]. Food and eating are significant social experiences. The social experiences around planning, food purchase, and preparation, as well as eating, can have a profound impact on individuals' decisions on what and how to eat. However, these eating and meal preparation activities are often impacted by the everyday changes individuals experience. Some transitions people experience can be in a shorter time frame, of a matter of day (e.g., weekend or weekday) [76, 78]. Others can be at a longer time frame, of a matter of months (e.g., summer vs. school) [78]. People also experience changes on different scales, an example of large-scale change can occur in the context of life events, such as moving, career change, or bereavement [36].

When these changes happen, individuals often have to work with others to consider how to maintain, adapt to, or change routines to sustain their eating and food preparation activities. Changes occurring in social surroundings, such as family, friends, or local communities, also can influence individuals on what is important when making food-related decisions. For example, when a family member is sick, individuals taking up the caregiving role may need additional support for cooking or deciding what to eat.

However, most existing technology supporting healthy eating often is designed under the assumption that everyday behaviors and social environments remain stable without addressing the support individuals might need during these moments of change. They also do not account for the challenges that arise with the changes, such as when coordinating and collaborating with others to maintain healthy eating practices. A better understanding of how everyday changes influence the social experience of eating and food preparation is important for future technology to support individual needs during these changes. To understand how changes impact people's food practices, we sought to study moments when individuals are likely to encounter change during significant events that could lead to pivotal changes [5]. Because food-related technologies largely do not account for people's changing needs during transition periods, we take the approach of studying everyday practices independent of technology, which can help inform ways in which technology falls short and how they can be better designed (e.g., [21, 62, 65]). We focus on understanding the impact of life events on everyday

food practices when significant change might come about. In this research, we seek to answer these research questions:

RQ1. How do life events influence the social experience of food-related activities (e.g., food selection, preparation, making, and eating)?
RQ2. How do individuals respond to these changes to maintain their healthy eating practices?

To answer these research questions, we interviewed 18 adults in the United States who experienced various types of life events. We designed the study to explore eating and food preparation experiences across various everyday changes. Life events often influence food practices (e.g., moving can influence the social environment around eating), and multiple life events could create similar changes (e.g., living alone and the pandemic both decrease opportunities for communal eating and cooking). This indicates a need to study changes that people experience more holistically across different life events. Prior research on examining life events and transitions on social media has emphasized the need to understand individual experiences across contexts [13, 101]. Our research builds on and extends prior work by investigating how various types of life events impact eating and food preparation and provides a broader understanding of supporting holistic food-related experiences during times of change.

Our findings contribute to HCI research through an empirical understanding of the changes in values and social coordination people experience during life events. We show how life events change the social experience of eating and food preparation, and how individuals collaborate or coordinate with others in response to these changes. We also describe how people reconsider, prioritize, and negotiate what is important when making food decisions during life events. We contribute design considerations for how technology could better reconfigure its features and supports during periods of change, incorporating and surfacing changing values to facilitate transitions and collaboration between family members to navigate and mediate conflicting values and practices. This research has implications for designers of healthy eating behavior change and food service technologies, such as apps for coordinating meals and groceries. Understanding from this research about changes during life events can serve as a foundation for researchers and designers of behavioral intervention technologies aimed at sustained use, through periods of user's life that might involve life events.

2 Background

To situate our research, we first review food-related technologies that support individuals to prepare and experience food individually and socially. We then discuss prior work on individual experiences and food practices during life events.

2.1 Technology Supporting Food Practices and Experiences Individually and Socially

Food practices are defined as any human activities involving food, ranging from growing, planning, preparation, eating, sharing meals, and disposal [12, 46]. Food behaviors and associated practices are complex and multidimensional, ranging from which foods are purchased/prepared, how they are prepared, with whom they are prepared, to which foods are consumed and when, in what quantity, how frequently, and with whom [58]. Given the diversity of food practices, the way in which individuals engage in these practices can influence multiple facets of individuals' lives. Notably, food planning and preparation could lead to improvement of health conditions, such as by lowering blood glucose levels and improving the quality of nutrition that individuals intake [23, 97]. People make decisions about food-related practices based on numerous internal and social factors. Internal factors, such as values [14, 20, 54], beliefs [11], and emotions [22, 34], play a crucial role in building food practices. For example, positive emotions can affect food choices for breakfast drinks [34]. Additionally, social factors, including family time allocation [81], political order [20], and social norms [79], also have significant influence on individual food practices.

Previous research in HCI has shown benefits that technology and design can confer upon supporting different purposes of food practices, such as fostering healthy food eating [64, 82], supporting individual agency [17], promoting social connectedness through food [94, 99], and improving local food sustainability [19]. For instance, intelligent technology (e.g., systems recommending recipes based on items that users identify) can empower people to optimize and speed up activities related to food purchasing, planning, and consumption [3, 49, 77].

People also often make food-related decisions, cook, and eat with others. Increasingly, HCI research has started to examine social settings of preparing and experiencing food. In family settings, sharing what they ate with each other promoted awareness and helped individuals choose what to eat and how to eat it [32, 52, 84]. In particular, colocated family members often have better knowledge about each other's routines and preferences and can provide tangible support, such as providing healthy options for each other [52, 84]. In recent years, many families have adopted meal-kit services to pursue efficient cooking, healthy options, and fun explorations [8, 28]. Even when family members live apart from each other, many technologies have also been designed to support family bonding by cooking [45, 71] or enjoying food together [25, 26]. Beyond families, technologies have built on social connections to facilitate community-based food knowledge and experience. These technologies encouraged people to share stories and strategies and in turn, empower people to adopt food planning and preparation strategies that are culturally relevant [31, 75]. People also leverage their social networks to help with food sourcing and purchasing to overcome challenges [17]. Online communities and technologies leveraging crowdsourcing resources, on the other hand, help people to find inspiration, receive support, and identify strategies to choose what to purchase, cook, and eat [10, 16, 64].

While many technologies exist to help individuals prepare and enjoy food on their own and with others, individuals might need additional support during transitions. Existing food-related technologies often focus on establishing healthy routines and maintaining relationships, yet they lack consideration for evolving nature of food practices during period of changes, and how those changes manifest in relation to other people in one's life.

In this research, by examining how people adapt their individual and social food-related practices and what they value when making those changes during life events, we seek to highlight areas where food-related technologies could be better designed. We therefore ask: *RQ1. How do life events influence the social experience of food-related activities (e.g., food selection, preparation, making, and eating)?*

2.2 Life Events: a Period of Change and Transition for Individuals and their Food Practices

Life events transform and disrupt individuals' everyday lives. HCI and CSCW research has studied these events under the context of large, disruptive events that potentially upheaval individual lives [36], such as death (e.g., the loss of a loved one [55, 67]), health (e.g., illness [62]), and societal events (e.g., the pandemic [66]). When life events happen, people encounter new routines and changes [56, 66, 98]. Life events dissolve or form social resources and structure, requiring social reconfiguration. For example, the death of a family member alters the family structure, requiring other family members to take on the new role and responsibility that the deceased person used to take (e.g., a child becoming the oldest in the family after parents passed away) [2, 55]. Similarly, family members may adopt new roles toward healthy food practices and develop different expectations about healthy eating goals when existing members move away or new members join [73]. People also redefine their relationship associated with possessions, both technological and non-technological, during life events [88]. For example, when individuals form a new relationship, they merge or share their ownership of devices or accounts (e.g., password), while the dissolution of the relationship changes the ownership [18]. Many people also collaboratively cope with life events. They spend time with their close social networks or move to online spaces separate from their usual network of known ties to interact with others facing a similar experience [35].

Literature outside of HCI shows that life events lead to changes in identity and values. Life events often brought shifts in identities [39, 44, 48]. For example, when transitioning to a new job, such as from a clinician to an educator, people redefine their professional identity, experiencing loss of self-identity and negative emotions [39, 50, 95]. Life events also change value prioritization. When becoming new parents, new mothers often prioritize conservation values, stressing preserving traditional practices [51]. People also re-evaluate and adjust their priorities around food decisions, changing the kind of food they choose and how they acquire them [20, 70, 85, 86]. For example, after retirement, people sometimes devote more time to food consumption [91]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people prioritized the convenience of meal preparation over the price and nutrition when they considered food as scarce commodities [20]. New parents tend to purchase fresh food (e.g., vegetables) in comparison to highly processed products (e.g., snacks) [85].

Health and marketing literature has also explored technology use during periods of change. For example, people increase their online purchases to address the issues arising from life events [33]. During COVID-19, the use of children's technology during family meals increases along with the frequency of family mealtimes [38]. New parents, faced with the life transition of having a child, leveraged support from others (e.g., friends, elders, and religious groups), observed others with similar experiences, and read relevant literature (e.g., child care) to attain the necessary information [60, 74, 100].

The existing literature above might be raising issues related to food practices during a life event, such as COVID-19. However, the overwhelming food-related literature has not investigated what are commonalities around how people's practices are changing during a wide range of life events. In the broader HCI literature on life events, existing research often focuses on a singular life event, overlooking the fact that life events often overlap, creating complex challenges for individuals [27, 37]. This could limit our understanding of the broader patterns in how people respond to the challenges they encounter across their life span. In the context of food practices, we seek to understand the patterns of individual and social responses during a wide range of life events. Understanding this gap is important in designing systems that may effectively support individuals through common challenges that come up during periods of change. Therefore, in this study, we seek to examine the changes that people experience related to food activities and how they respond to them during a variety of life events. We therefore ask: *RQ2. How do individuals respond to these changes to maintain their healthy eating practices?*

3 Method

To understand how life events affect the social experience of food practices as well as how they respond to these changes, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals who experienced various life events within a year prior to the interview. Semi-structured interviews allow us to probe into the context of life events, the impacts of the life events, and individual as well as social experiences and responses around these events [24].

3.1 Participants

We recruited potential participants via social media, the university's mailing lists, and flyers posted to local communities. We limited our participants to those who were 18 years and older, lived in the U.S., experienced life events within one year, and were interested in eating healthy. We focused on people interested in eating healthy because they may be more likely to be mindful of their food-related activities and how disruptions affect them [40]. We purposefully selected participants for interviews based on their demographic information such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and types of life events experienced (collected from the screening survey) to increase the diversity of the participant pool.

Participants in our study consisted of 13 females and five males, with an average age of 38.9 (SD=17.2). Among 18 participants, 11 participants were White, three were Asian or Pacific Islander, two were Black or African American, one was Hispanic or Latino, and one participant was multiracial. Participants reported experiencing diverse life events, such as career-related (n=12), health-related (n=9), relocation-related (n=7), and (family) relationship-related life events (n=6). All participants mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic since the research was conducted during the pandemic. Table 1 shows detailed participants' demographics and their experienced life events [1].

3.2 Interview and Data Analysis

We started the interview by asking participants about life events and changes they experienced that impacted their routine and everyday activities. Then, we asked about the impacts these life events

[1]The reported experienced life events were categorized based on the Major Life Events Taxonomy [36].

created and the actions they did in response to these changes. We then focused the interview on probing participants about their food-related experiences, including what was important to them regarding food and food experiences, how those changed during their life events, and what strategies they took to cope with those changes. During the interview, we paid attention to probing participant stories and context around food experiences and changes. All interviews were conducted remotely using video conferencing tools, each lasting between 50 to 70 minutes. Each participant was compensated for their time with a $15 gift card. The study protocol was approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. We first conducted open-ended coding to identify codes aligned with the research questions, such as the type of life events, challenges, and responses to life events. Following this, we tried to align our codes for categories of life event-related with a-priori codes based on research by Haimson et al. [36], such as health, career, relocation, education, social, family relationships. However, we soon realized that participant life changes resulted from both the life events they experienced themselves (e.g., a participant started a new job) and the ones others in their social circle experienced (e.g., a participant's family member started a new job). We also found that social environment change created many associated challenges during life events (e.g., re-prioritizing values among collocated members). Therefore, we created new life event categories and codes to reflect these social themes. Finally, during our analysis, we also saw that multiple life events created similar changes and responses. Therefore, we conducted another round of bottom-up affinity diagramming to better reflect on these overlapping changes across life events.

4 Findings

We find that life events created opportunities and barriers to improving food practices while engaging with others. We describe how people changed practices of food planning, doing groceries, and experiencing making and eating food. Life events such as moving, getting married, family passing, and lacking childcare, created changes in who participants were connected with, who they could offer help to, or who they could get help from. Participants needed to change food practices in light of such social changes, delegate or take on responsibilities, or recreate how they experienced sharing food. When social circumstances changed, participants also had to reprioritize or change their values.

4.1 Changing food practices and experiences in light of social changes during life events

Many participants adjusted their food planning, preparation, and eating practices in response to changes in their social environment, such as marriage, being away from loved ones, moving, etc. We describe how participants changed food practices, based on whether they received support from others or not, delegated and shared food planning responsibilities with others, and created new ways of experiencing social connections through food. Some participants mentioned delegating food planning or purchasing tasks to technology-supported services, such as online grocery shopping sites, meal-kit services, or food delivery apps. However, they also highlighted the challenges of incorporating what they valued when using these tools during life events.

4.1.1 Adopting new ways to prepare food when household members change. Multiple life events, such as marriage or the change of residential space, led to changes in the members of the social environment (e.g. family members or housemates). With new members joining the same households, people needed to learn about their preferences and constraints as well as negotiate when those were different from their own. When household members left, sometimes that enabled people to make and enjoy food in their preferred ways; other times they lost support and had to find workarounds.

Changing practices to account (or not) for other's food needs. Participants needed to change their practices when starting to live with other people due to their preferences in how to prepare food and what food to cook. For example, P04 changed how he cooked after he was married and living together with his wife. When he was single, he only needed to think about what was easy to cook. After getting married, since his wife had more preferences about food flavor, they paid more attention to creating flavorsome dishes:

> *"When I started cooking, it was a lot more focused on efficiency. Cooking something that's relatively simple or doesn't require too many ingredients (...) with my wife [after marriage], we'll put celery and carrots and maybe some dried cranberries and some shredded cheese or cheese cubes to give it more flavor. So, do I think it's better? Yes. But I think if it were just me, I probably wouldn't make as much effort into doing that as I do now."* (P04)

Similarly, when P10 started to live with others in the same apartment, he needed to consider others' eating restrictions and preferences when he was cooking. P10 had to cook dishes different from what he got when living in the dormitory:

> *"When I was in the dorm, nobody was sharing food. (After starting to live during quarantining,) people had different eating restrictions (...) a couple of people are vegan. So most of the food we made was vegan during that time."* (P10)

On the other hand, sometimes people no longer need to account for other's food needs. Life events sometimes led to fewer people living together. For some participants, this reduced how they would prepare and select food. It gave participants more freedom because they did not have to account for other people's food-related needs. After P17 was divorced and her daughter moved out, she *"went from a household of three to a household of one."* When her household changed, she modified the quantity of food when grocery shopping: *"So my household changed, so I don't buy a lot of groceries."* These changes influenced not only what food she cooked but also how she cooked. For other participants, moving out from the family house involved only needing to plan, prepare, and cook for themselves. P05 changed her meal preparation in response to the move by starting to cook in batches: *"I'm only meal planning and prepping food for one person. So I do tend to make food in batches."* (P05)

Changing practices when support from others is lacking. Life events invoked social changes that resulted in getting less support from others. When P03 moved out from his parent's house to a university dormitory, they had limited access to a kitchen and car,

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Id	Age Range (years)	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Experienced life events				
				Career	Health	Relocation	(Family) Relationship	Others
P01	25-34	Female	Asian or Pacific Islander	Promotion		Residential relocation		Societal (COVID-19)
P02	35-44	Male	White or Caucasian	Job loss, Family member's job change				Societal (COVID-19)
P03	18-24	Male	Asian or Pacific Islander	Started college				Societal (COVID-19)
P04	25-34	Male	Asian or Pacific Islander	Job change			Marriage	Societal (COVID-19)
P05	18-24	Female	White or Caucasian	Started a new job		Started to live alone		
P06	55-64	Female	Hispanic or Latino					Societal (COVID-19), Lifestyle changes (new pet)
P07	18-24	Female	White or Caucasian		Brother's surgery, Father's heart attack	Residential relocation		Societal (COVID-19)
P08	18-24	Female	Black or African American			Friend moved away		Education (Shifted to online classes), Finance (Financial gain), House remodeling
P09	45-54	Female	White or Caucasian	Started a new job, Family member went back to school	Arm injury			Societal (COVID-19, Wildfires)
P10	18-24	Male	White or Caucasian	Started a new job	Covid infection	Residential relocation		Societal (COVID-19)
P11	55-64	Male	White or Caucasian		Surgery			Societal (COVID-19)
P12	65-74	Female	White or Caucasian	Retirement				Societal (COVID-19)
P13	65-74	Female	White or Caucasian			Temporarily relocation to support their grandchild	Became a grandparent	Societal (COVID-19)
P14	35-44	Female	White or Caucasian	Started a new job position				Societal (COVID-19), Education (Daughter's daycare closed)
P15	35-44	Female	White or Caucasian, Asian or Pacific Islander		Surgery			Societal (COVID-19)
P16	35-44	Female	White or Caucasian		Family member's addiction			Societal (COVID-19), Education (Daughter's school closed)
P17	45-54	Female	Black or African American		Covid infection, Surgery	Daughter moved out	Started a new romantic relationship, Became a grandparent	Societal (COVID-19)
P18	18-24	Female	White or Caucasian Career	Job change			Parents' divorce, Breakup	Societal (COVID-19)

which they normally used with his family. The lack of support resulted in less access to cooking resources and their shopping patterns changed. As a result, they could not cook or do grocery shopping as often:

> *"I think moving in (the dormitory) has definitely disrupted that in a lot of ways. Because I don't have access to a kitchen as often, or I don't have access to grocery shopping. (...) I cook way less, because we (the dormitory) have a kitchen, but I don't have a car so I can't go grocery shopping."* (P03)

4.1.2 Delegating food preparation and groceries required additional labor. Many life events, such as health issues, resulted in people delegating food preparation and grocery responsibilities to others, taking on responsibilities from others, or shifting responsibilities to services that would take on grocery shopping or food delivery. Such delegation activities sometimes required negotiation between family members to align perspectives on how grocery shopping should be done. Delegating required additional labor to explain to others their preference in food preparation and grocery choices. People who were delegated food tasks also needed additional effort to learn and align their understanding with others.

Delegating food-related responsibilities to family members. An example of delegating activities was when P11's neck surgery occurred. As the main cook of the family, P11 did most of the grocery shopping for their family. However, after neck surgery, he

could not lift heavy items from grocery shopping. Therefore, he enlisted help from his family members to carry the groceries:

> *" I had neck surgery (...) My inability to lift (heavy items) (...) So when I go shopping, I get small bags or I go with my other half. Or I go with one of the kids or I always ask the kids, "Get to the garage, please pick up the groceries."*" (P11)

When people delegated some of their own responsibilities to others, they had to do extra labor. P14 shared her roles by dividing their food-related tasks and delegating part of it to others. When P14's daughter's daycare shut down, she delegated groceries to her husband so that she could take care of their daughter. However, P14 still did food and grocery planning, which led to her having to plan ahead more:

> *"my household felt like, okay, we need to have one designated shopper who will go and do all of the grocery shopping. And so everything needs to be planned out ahead of time (...) so my spouse became the designated shopper, because of all the lifting and things that would need to be done to move so much stuff. And, so then I started having to plan ahead a lot, which was a little stressful."* (P14)

Taking on family member's food responsibilities. After P02 lost his job, he had to take over the role of food preparation because his wife had to start a new full-time job to support the family:

> *"She started working those hours, going in earlier and staying later. So I also became responsible for getting things ready for my son in the mornings and cooking dinner in the evenings and so forth, which are things that she previously did because I was not home."* (P02)

Taking on responsibilities involved learning how to do food preparation in a way that matched the preferences of the person they were helping. When P09 had an arm injury, her family members helped with part of the food prepping and cleaning. To do so, family members had to learn how to do food prep:

> *"When we got together for parties, I got a lot of help with the food prep [such as] putting stuff out and taking care of the dishes. My family learned to help me with that. Because if they don't, I might not be able to do things for a couple of days if my arm starts to hurt."* (P09)

Shifting responsibilities to food services. Sometimes participants shifted responsibilities they would normally do to food services. For instance, since P07 did not have a car, her parents took her grocery shopping before the pandemic. However, her parents stopped supporting her in grocery shopping when the pandemic occurred. She delegated her parents' roles to grocery delivery services in response to the reduced social support:

> *"My parents would always take us grocery shopping. But that ended because of the pandemic. They didn't want to see anybody. So, we would get grocery delivery."* (P07)

Similarly, P03 did not have access to grocery shopping after he moved to the dormitory. Since P03 did not have access to ingredients to cook, he delegated meal preparation tasks to restaurants and online meal ordering and delivery services. However, he thought by doing so, he lost control of ingredients and the type of food to choose from:

> *"I can choose what we're getting at grocery stores or local shops [when I live with my parents]. Whereas now since it's being cooked for me, I don't have the choice necessarily to say what goes into my food. I have the choices of the meals, but I can't control what's in that food. And generally speaking, because of the less amount of choices, that diversity has gone down way more."* (P03)

4.1.3 Celebrating, reminiscing, and building relationships through new food experiences. Some life events involve creating new relationships or losing existing relationships with others. In these situations, food experiences, such as enjoying and sharing food with others, became an important way for participants to build new connections and reminiscing about past ones.

Enjoying food when new social connections created opportunities. Some life events, such as a new partner and moving, led to connecting with new people that generated positive experiences related to eating food together. For example, when P07 had a partner, it led to her finding more joy in cooking. Growing up as the only vegan in the family, P07 was never able to share food with her family. Even though they ate together at the same time, family mealtime did not feel social to her. After having a partner who ate the same food as her, she got to cook together and share food with her partner, and mealtime became more social even though they did not necessarily eat at the same time:

> *"Cooking is super social because we do it together. (...) I've been vegan since I was a teenager. Being vegan, it's like if you're going to a restaurant with family, sometimes the only thing you eat is a side salad. So it doesn't really feel (social) when your family does not really share food. I share food with my partner because she is so willing to eat (vegan) food. But I feel like cooking is more of the social part just because our sleep schedules and eating schedules are so different." (P07)*

P07 thought that she got to build communal relationships after moving to her current place. She enjoyed the opportunities to share food and food activities with her neighbors:

> *"What's nice here is everybody grows stuff. And we often share it and pass it around with each other. It's a very small town community. (...) so we just really lucked out with our neighbors because we shared a driveway with one of our neighbors. She just dropped off like radishes at our door from her garden. One of the major differences (between the two places where P07 lived) is I didn't even know my neighbors when we (P07 and her partner) lived in an apartment complex [in the previous city]. (...) I didn't have any sense of community back in [the previous city]." (P07)*

Reduced in-person social interactions led to remote food experiences Some life events, such as the pandemic, relocation, and loss of family members, disrupted the food practices or the social environments that support the feeling of social connectedness. In

response to these disruptions, participants in our study adopted a variety of strategies to recreate connections.

Many participants adopted remote communication tools to maintain social interactions with others when life events restricted in-person interactions. P7, P9, and P13 all mentioned using video conferencing tools to communicate with their friends or family members after the pandemic started. For instance, because P13 and her friends valued their time eating together, they maintained their tea time routine online during the early phase of the pandemic:

> *"We still try to socialize, I'll say, during the height of the pandemic, before vaccines, we would meet with our friends for afternoon tea on Zoom. And they would be drinking wine and we would be drinking tea and we would socialize just like we would if we were together. So we really tried to maintain that." (P13)*

P09 mentioned inviting friends to her house and sharing food together were significant social activities for her. However, due to the pandemic, they could not interact with each other or share food during the gatherings. To continue supporting these social food practices, she decided to deliver food to others in person even though they could only eat together online:

> *"We actually delivered people the food. And then we had people sign up at different time periods. So it wasn't like 40 people on the same Zoom call. It was like three to five people and popped into the three of us. And then we'd eat that food with them." (P09)*

Recreating food experiences to cope with the loss of loved ones. Some participants invested in having food experiences they could enjoy during times of loss of connection because it helped them reminisce about the time with family. For example, P6 was not able to experience holiday gatherings and realized how important holiday meals with family recipes were to her cousins and her:

> *"holiday gatherings, Things are so focused on food. We have our grandparents' and great-grandparents' recipes that we're not cooking for a lot of people, we (P6 and her cousin) are not going to just make those for ourselves." (P06)*

P09 coped with the feeling of loss by recreating a similar atmosphere of food practices with others. When P09's father passed away, she could not share food experiences with her father anymore. She found that she started to eat food she used to eat with her father as a way to reminisce about eating experiences with her father:

> *"My dad and I were really big into eating ice cream together. He taught me to make this thing he called ice cream soup, where you basically just let the ice cream melt (...) I'm eating more peanut butter because he also really was big into peanut butter (...) I've probably started eating more ice cream than normal." (P09)*

Changing work practices to enjoy food with family. When a participant changed from a remote job to an in-person job, they started skipping meals. For instance, when P14 worked from home (during the pandemic remote period), her family and she started to build family mealtimes by preparing meals together for lunch. However, going back to work in the office constrained her spending mealtimes with her family, so she decided to skip lunch to be home earlier:

> *"Because we miss being at home, and sort of the flexibility that it had. So a lot of us are working through lunch and leaving earlier so that we can be with our families and try to get more time to do things like meal prep."* (P14)

Overall, life events reshaped the social compositions of our participants' environments, influencing food practices through an interplay among the composition of co-located members, responsibilities for food practices, and social connections around food practices. This highlights that changes in social dynamics can greatly influence food experiences, requiring individuals to adpat to challenges or opportunities presented by life events.

4.2 Changes in Values during Life Events

When life events occurred, participants reflected on their values and re-prioritized or updated them. Life events led to living, or separating from living with someone, which impacted how participants prepared their food or what foods they selected. Participants needed to either accommodate other people's values, change their own, or undermine their own values to accommodate new types of social situations. The values participants discuss related to eating healthy (e.g., nutrition, quality, or diversity), ease of cooking (e.g. food availability, convenience, labor), and community values (e.g. supporting local businesses). Life events triggered situations in which participants had to make decisions about food in light of interpersonal needs (e.g., social interactions, community support, family responsibilities), and structural-level considerations (e.g., ethics, social justice, and financial constraints).

4.2.1 Reconsidering values impacted food preparation and selection. Participants changed their values towards the types of food they ate during life events, such as changing living situations from having a housemate to living alone, during family deaths, and during grocery shortages during the pandemic. When living with others, participants had to make choices about what foods to eat and how to prepare them in line with their housemate's values, which changed when living alone. When food shortages occurred, participants took a different approach to doing groceries to keep their values. When family events happened, it triggered people to reconsider their values.

Reprioritizing values about what and how to eat. For instance, P02 wanted to eat diverse food. But when the COVID-19 pandemic started, he found it hard to source diverse food ingredients for the types of foods he would have liked to eat. As a response, he chose a different approach to doing groceries, by increasing the frequency of a meal-kit service subscription to increase the family food variety:

> *"We actually ended up getting more meals (from HelloFresh[2]) per week (...) The variety of foods, it gave us an easy way to pull in a variety of foods without having to necessarily grocery shop"* (P02)

Participants re-prioritized values when an event intersected with one of their other values. When P14 heard the news of a downward prospect for local businesses, she and her husband made it a priority to support local food businesses. They tried to dine at

[2]https://www.hellofresh.com/

local restaurants on a regular basis as part of supporting the local community:

> *"With the pandemic, we were hearing about (that) local restaurants and service people were becoming unemployed and losing business and shutting down, we started eating out once a week, like ordering takeout. And we did that (because) we want to support local businesses." (P14)*

A different way in which participants changed their values about their food choices was when an event triggered a reflection of their own practices. For instance, P07 started to be more aware of her own eating style and potential health risks after her father had a heart attack, choosing to value eating healthier more:

> *"My dad's heart attack also impacted (my eating style) because he's really overweight. And obviously, that's a huge risk factor (...) Since my dad's heart attack, I've been more focused on trying to be healthier. So, I don't want to go down that path myself."* (P07)

Balancing own values with those of others. Some participants decided on what to eat based on the preferences and values of other people they lived with. P08 enjoyed making her own food, but she was not able to do so because she was financially dependent on her mother, who did grocery shopping for her and decided what she ate. While living with her mother, P08 had to align what she ate with her mother's values for food, even if they were not her own. However, when she improved her economic stability, she started to do her own groceries, which in turn helped her decide what to eat, and made cooking for herself easier:

> *"(Previously) my mom did all the shopping so I would just basically eat whatever she made. But some of the stuff was stuff that I could warm up in the oven, like the spinach and pita cheese stuff, like the orange chicken. (Now) I could cook and I could control the portion size. (...) I had a big financial gain during the pandemic (…) I started buying my own groceries now (...) I'm being more independent (...) And I buy things that make it easier for me to cook."* (P08)

Similarly, when living with a roommate, P01 balanced her preferences for how to maintain her kitchen with her roommate's practices. P01 limited her cooking because she was worried about her roommate not taking care of her cooking appliances. After living alone, she was no longer constrained by her roommate, which enabled her to have more options for what to cook and how to go about cooking it:

> *"Prior, I lived with a roommate. So now (...) It's a lot easier to cook what I want, I was able to buy a lot more gadgets at home. Like in the past, I wouldn't have invested in things because roommates aren't the best about taking care of your things. So, I bought tons of food equipment. I bought an AeroGarden to plant herbs hydroponic device."* (P01)

Integrating values as a group. Participants aligned their values together with others when life events resulted in people living together, particularly as a family. Life changes such as marriage or events that require caregiving led to people living together, which created an opportunity to adopt or negotiate new shared values.

For example, P14 and her husband prioritized cooking and enjoying fresh food after they got married. Both of them did not have the opportunity to do so when they grew up. After they started their own family, they took the opportunity to adopt the agreed values and co-create new practices and the type of food experience they valued:

> *"I grew up in a working-class family that did not have time. So the things that they (my parents) did were the homemade canned stuff that tasted good. (...) Because my spouse had that (similar) upbringing, we had a rule, when we got married, (that) we wouldn't have a microwave because it's going to make us take that time away that we have to be together and to cook and to enjoy food."* (P14)

These aspects were shown when different groups merged and integrated their food practices due to the life events. When P13's two grandchildren's daycares were closed, she went to her son's residence to help him take care of his children, including cooking while he and his wife were working. P13 prioritized supporting her son through the disruption his family encountered (something she wished she had in the past).

4.2.2 Conflicts between food values and social values impacted what and how to eat. Participants encountered conflicts between food-related values (particularly choosing healthy food options) and social values (e.g. social experiences, desires to socialize). Such conflicts were a result of having to accommodate other people's values. Participants chose different strategies to deal with conflicting values: some compromised on their own values, and others adopted new strategies to meet their own and other people's values.

One participant, P14, traded off her daughter eating healthy, to balance caregiving, work, and her daughter's preferences. When P14's daughter's daycare was shut down due to potential COVID-19 exposure, she had to make food for her daughter. However, even though she valued healthy eating, she found it difficult to balance what their daughter wanted to eat, caring for a child at home, and her busy work schedule. She ended up purchasing processed foods in anticipation of the times when her daughter would have to be home during the work week, just because that might be what her daughter was more likely to eat:

> *"We end up buying a lot of processed stuff for her as a backup, just in case she doesn't like the thing we're making. (...) Because even when we have what we think is a healthy meal for us, she says no, (so) a lot of times these are frozen, processed things that we normally wouldn't get."* (P14)

Participants had to balance conflicting values around food choices when interacting with others and had to adopt strategies to cope with those conflicts. P10 sacrificed his own values around eating healthy with his values of socializing with other people. When starting a new job, he joined his coworker for lunch and realized that they ate fast food every day even though P10 seldom ate fast food on his own. Since he wanted to maintain the working relationships, he started to eat fast food with his colleagues every day even though that was not the type of food he preferred:

> *"They are really into fast food. So every day, we pick some spot. It's usually like Taco Bell, or Arby's, or Wendy's*

like that sort of thing, is pretty much the daily lunch. So that's been new for me because, before this summer, I didn't really eat a lot of fast food. And now I've been eating it like Monday through Friday, once a day." (P10)

In contrast to acclimating to others' values, other participants found strategies to balance their own values to those of others. P17 helped prepare meals for her daughter after she had a baby. Since her daughter had different food preferences (e.g., deep-fried food versus baked food), P17 chose to separate meals for her daughter instead of forcing each other to eat the same thing:

"(I cook) pretty much whatever she wants, I typically don't eat the fried stuff anymore because I'm trying to maintain the weight. If I'm cooking her and her fiancé some meals, I'm eating something different. Mine is more baked chicken in salads." (P17)

Participants also experienced conflicts in managing food with values of maintaining social relationships, when the purpose of the food experience changed due to a life event. P08 and her friend usually went to familiar food places, however, since her friend moved away, whenever she came back to visit, they thought it was more fun to try new food places together rather than revisiting the usual places for them. The friend's life event of moving, created tension in P08's food preferences, with her desire to have social experiences:

"I used to actually get sushi with one of my friends, we would go out and get sushi. Now, since she moved (...) whenever we hang out, whenever she comes to town, we don't want to get the same things we used to get when she was here. So we start to go somewhere new." (P08)

Some participants had to confront values with family members' practices about how they did groceries. When a life event happened to P09, she delegated her grocery shopping to her husband. However, she did not like her husband's way of choosing groceries: *"Because I guess they weren't raised with this is how you do grocery shopping ... learned things about how you pick things, how you price things, coupons. So all that stuff, they apparently didn't learn any of that."* (P09).

In this section, our data shows that changes and conflicts in values around food practices become salient during life events. These life events often prompted participants to update, reprioritize, and reflect on their values. They had to accommodate the values of others, employing different value-related strategies to manage values conflicts and build shared practices. This indicates that improving awareness of changes in individuals' and others' values and managing value conflicts is crucial in managing food practices during life events.

5 Discussion

Our findings show that participants underwent changes in their social environments that influenced their eating and food preparation activities when life events happened. They also had to work with others to respond to these changes. Life events create changes in values or the need to negotiate with others on what is important in making food decisions. Our findings show opportunities to reconfigure technologies, support people in identifying their changing values, and enable them to better communicate what is important when working with others during life events.

5.1 Life events as triggers for technology reconfiguration

Many life events trigger changes in the social compositions of individual environments, including changes in co-located members and food responsibilities (see 4.1.1 and 4.1.2). Life events like moving to a new location, getting married, a housemate leaving, or bereavement, change the number of people who may prepare, make, and eat food together. In turn, they influence how individuals coordinate food activities and how they communicate and negotiate these changes with others around them. Other life events like caregiving or health conditions create temporary constraints that require delegating food responsibilities, such as grocery shopping and cooking. However, existing technologies supporting food activities, such as grocery shopping, recipes and restaurant searching, and food deliveries, do not account for these changes impacting how users may conduct food activities.

Reconfiguring technologies in anticipation of life events. To better accommodate life event-triggered changes in food activities, technologies can better understand the context of changes and offer support for reprioritization, reset, and adjustment. For example, some transitions are anticipated and can span across a period of time, such as when P03 moved to college, a time when many teenagers establish their own food-related routines and goals [45]. In transitions like this, technologies could take on educational and reflective roles to facilitate individual reflections on these changes [5] and support them to adjust their preferred ways of conducting food activities. For example, recipe apps can support parents with rising freshmen children to initiate conversations about cooking appliances and produce selections in preparation of the transition, when such conversations may not arise naturally without the context of anticipated transition [96]. During the transition, these apps can also help remind first-time food preparers of the knowledge and skills they learned. They can also suggest examples or search terms on social media that teenagers can get inspiration on what to make. These apps can also keep track of such transition activities and help teenagers reflect on their changes and create new routines [92].

Reconfiguring technologies during unexpected life events. Some life events involve a temporary change of routines that could later be reversed, such as when P14's young children are home without daycare. These transitions are unexpected and require individuals to adapt quickly to new situations. In these cases, technologies, such as grocery shopping or recipe searching apps, could help parents reprioritize their temporary but urgent needs, such as focusing on food that is easy to access and make during this time. However, to enable this, parents may put extra effort into considering their preferences and constraints and inputting this consideration into these technologies to receive tailored support. To address this challenge, technologies may support individuals to record and reflect on their decisions, preferences, and lessons learned during these unexpected changes. With this, technology could not only reduce the cognitive burden of parents but also proactively support a smoother transition into new and temporary routines when unexpected changes

occur again. In the scope of transitions, there is a need to understand how technology can support people with changes from their intended future and planned activities, to what might be possible during the constraints of the disruptive situation that is occurring.

5.2 Integrating, clarifying, and prioritizing the changing values

When life events happened, participants adopted new values, such as pursuing better healthy habits or developing more agency in food preparation. This often results in having to decide between multiple values simultaneously – some are directly intertwined with food practices (e.g., P07 wanted to eat healthier after her dad's diagnosis), while others are peripherally related to food practices (e.g., P14's family wanted to support local communities). As the literature suggests, values – what is important in people's lives [29] – are often inferred by preferences – what is desirable [93]. In this discussion, we use them interchangeably to discuss the implications of people's food-related decisions.

We see an opportunity to explicitly integrate changing values – in regards to what is important in people's lives [29] – into technology design. To support the understanding of individual values, one approach is to draw from the behavioral therapy concept of *value clarification*, "*a counseling approach devised to help people clarify and actualize their priorities, goals, and values*" [47]. By incorporating value clarification into technology, people experiencing life events could identify their underlying values impacting food planning and preparation practices, assess if their current food practices align with their values, and pursue them based on their assessment. For example, when living situations change, such as after P04 was married, food flavor came up as a desirable and important aspect of eating choices. In P04 and his wife's case, they spent more time creating flavorful meals. However, for many people who also care about efficiency or have time constraints, such a situation (e.g., engaging in elaborate cooking) might not be possible. Meal planning technologies could adopt the value clarification technique to support these decision processes. Technology can help users clarify what they value (e.g. aspects of healthy eating versus efficient eating), what trade-offs they have to and are willing to make, and what additional options are available to complement the trade-offs they make. Then these apps could suggest options, such as alternative recipes or pre-cooked mealkits, depending on user values and constraints. Similarly, a food ordering technology that incorporated values of healthy eating and supporting local businesses (e.g., supporting P14's family to trade off conflicting values), could surface that information when a person is ordering – the user could select to order from a local restaurant but compromise on how healthy a food might be, or the other way around.

Just-in-Time Adaptive Interventions (JITAI) [41] can be a potential approach to support individuals in navigating these evolving and potentially conflicting values. Some life events can be inferred through data readily accessible through technology, such as where [9, 90] and when [69] individuals conduct food activities. For example, by collecting someone's location and frequently visited restaurants, systems could potentially infer an individual, such as P07 and P10, may have moved to a new location and deliver tailored, contextually relevant prompts or resources to support integrating, clarifying, and prioritizing the changing values. However, these inferences could also easily include imprecise information [53], overlooking factors that are more difficult to access, such as social environment (e.g., P08's friend moved out of town), or transitions that span over a long period of time (e.g., from P02's unemployment, his wife's work hour extension, to his picking up food preparation tasks). Nevertheless, such moments could serve as an opportune time for technologies to prompt further context of changes (e.g., social environment or goal changes) and provide individualized suggestions that help navigate changes and reflect on their choices. In P07's situation when she enjoyed building community relationships and sharing food and produce with neighbors, recipe apps and meal planners could tailor their content and encourage P07 to explore Community Supported Agriculture options or local farmer's market and suggest meals based on these new, local food sources.

Design that externalizes (e.g., visualize) the relationship between personal value and situations (e.g., care priorities and health conditions) had shown promises in helping people to better understand the connections and support value-aligned changes [80]. In the current research context, visualizing values and food-related activities could potentially help people identify and elaborate on what is important to them and identify areas that they would like to act on and reflect on while making informative decisions. It could also encourage them to look across activities that potentially compete for resources and envision outcomes that are more aligned with their values. For example, some food delivery services already provide options that support community values beyond food content (e.g., supporting local business vs. chain restaurants) [15], future technologies could help people further scaffold and reflect on these choices, providing options or substitutions that can accommodate potentially conflicting preferences or values. Moreover, prior research on life events often emphasizes the need to recreate meaning during the process of creating new routines (e.g., creating new family rituals [73] or supporting new forms of relationships [56]). With these value clarification activities, technology could encourage people to reflect on what is important to them, possibly producing positive outcomes such as increased psychological well-being [30, 87].

5.3 Support collaboration and coordination during time of changes

Life events often trigger situations in which people consider needs beyond their own (e.g., collocated family members), but negotiating and trading off these values can be challenging. Some life events participants in our study experienced are unexpected and abrupt (e.g., P09 had injuries impeding the ability to shop and the pandemic led P10 to live with others with different preferences unexpectedly). In contrast, other events are planned, such as moving in with a new roommate or marrying someone (e.g., P04) [59].

Life events often created constraints on participants' time or preferences about how and what they want to cook and eat. This increased conflicts around values each individual held and within a group (e.g., P14 struggled between making homemade foods and preparing processed foods to ensure her child ate healthy while

managing her busy work schedule; P04 had to forego cooking efficiency when preparing foods and spend extra efforts on flavorful food).

In these moments of transition, individuals and groups often require additional support to better navigate and reconcile these value conflicts effectively. Technology can play an important role in mediating value conflicts by communicating about values with others in their social circles. For example, family-centered technology, such as SPARCS [7] and TableChat [52] have the opportunity to infer individual and family values through everyday photos, food journals, and food-related activities. They could also provide context-based prompts to encourage family members to have a conversation about what is important to them. Tools that facilitate value communication between patients and providers [4] could help people align perspectives when they might not share the same value or weigh the values in the same way. Digital storytelling platforms that support the scaffolding and sharing of individual values can allow individuals to communicate their values by sharing their stories with others [57, 83]. Building on these examples, meal planning technologies, such as meal planners, grocery shopping apps, and meal-kit services, could incorporate these techniqueues within user flows and allow users to clarify and algin their perspectives with others who are preparing or experiencing meals together.

Life events also often create situations when participants need to delegate food-related tasks. For example, when the pandemic started, P09 delegated the grocery shopping task to her husband. When individuals, like participants in our studies, delegate these tasks for the first time due to life events, they may find out that others offering help did not share the same values or food practices. This misalignment of individuals' values created additional labor on the side of the person needing help (e.g., having to create a detailed and long grocery list) because they had to explain their preferences. Similarly, people who offer help also have to learn new preferences and incorporate these changes into their routines. The issue of added labor when asking for and coordinating help is known in the context of getting support for chronic disease management [89]. Caregivers or people assuming family tasks also often need to acquire new knowledge or skills and situate technology use in new contexts after life events happen [18]. Consistent with prior work, we found that even people with close connections, such as family members, need assistance in offering support that aligns with an individual's preferences [1, 43, 89].

We see opportunities for technology to lower the burden of delegating and offering help with food preparation. Prior work showed that calendars can help surface routines and preferences of families [61, 72]. Research on family caregivers also emphasizes the need to help summarize, articulate, and disseminate information work to support better family coordination [63]. In the context of food preparation, research shows people perform various tasks, such as observing, checking, and showing tasks, when cooking together [71]. Future technology could support documenting and summarizing these tasks as well as redistributing and handing off them when delegations are needed. Drawing on this work, technologies like grocery shopping apps could track previous grocery or food preparation patterns and surface them to families as a way to build shared awareness around what to buy and what recipes to cook. Technologies could also incorporate features that facilitate understanding of others, such as reasons for the shopping goals [6] and a shared record [42], which would help both parties to communicate and understand the goals and values behind food-related decisions. Such features could also be useful when individuals delegate food activities to services, such as grocery and food delivery, and allow people to regain control over values and preferences around what they purchase and eat.

6 Limitations

This study has several limitations. Although we strove to recruit diverse participants, our participant sample skewed towards women, younger adults, and whites. Their backgrounds may influence the types of life events they experience, social environments they are in, strategies adopted, and values they considered. Therefore, our findings may not describe the experiences of a broader population as well as a wide spectrum of life events across different groups.

Their backgrounds may also affect with whom and how they collaborate and coordinate in a group. Individuals have established the relationships within their social networks. Depending on these relationships, their collaboration and coordination style may be different during changes. Therefore, our findings may not fully account for social practices of individuals based on types of relationship they have developed.

We recruited participants interested in healthy eating, therefore our findings related to food practices and coordination are oriented towards practices that still helped people maintain healthy eating. The overall goals of the participants were towards healthy eating. Therefore, their concerns, rituals and practices, and the way they changed had a central point around maintaining or compromising on healthy eating. For people who do not have this priority, certain changes, such as lack of time, expertise or resources, might not create as much of a disruption from existing food practices.

This study also explores how individuals navigate various life events rather than focusing on a singular event, as life events often overlap or occur simultaneously [27, 37]. As a result, this paper may not capture the unique patterns of changes that are only shown in individuals experiencing a singular life event. Further research may be needed to explore the distinctive patterns of changes and challenges in food practices and food-related values with different individual life events.

7 Conclusion

Our research provides a nuanced understanding of how life events influence food practices, how people respond to these changes, and design spaces that can be critical in supporting people to maintain healthy eating practices. In particular, our findings show how life events influence the social experiences of eating and food preparation and how individuals respond to changes by collaborating and coordinating with others. We also describe how people navigate food decisions and activities by reconsidering, prioritizing, and negotiating what is important on their own or with others during life events. There are multi-folded design opportunities to expand the support when people experience changes in their everyday lives, by recognizing these changes as triggering moments to reconfigure

technology use, clarifying and prioritizing values to support food-related decision process, and facilitating additional work required in collaboration and coordination during life events.

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