

Advancing Sustainable Food Consumption: A Bibliometric Analysis of Practice Theory in Food Studies

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ABSTRACT

The application of practice theory to food studies has gained remarkable momentum over the past two decades, offering a powerful framework to move beyond individualist accounts of behavior toward systemic understandings of consumption. Despite this growing relevance, research in this area remains dispersed across disciplines and lacks a consolidated overview of its intellectual evolution. This article addresses this gap through a bibliometric analysis of 189 documents indexed in Scopus between 2008 and 2025. Using the Bibliometrix R-package, the study maps publication trends, identifies leading authors and journals, and examines the thematic structure and conceptual evolution of the field.

The results highlight three major intellectual trajectories. First, sustainability-oriented practices have emerged as motor themes, underscoring how practice theory has been mobilized to address pressing environmental and health challenges. Second, practice theory itself shows evidence of theoretical consolidation, increasingly recognized as a mainstream explanatory lens in food consumption research. Third, several peripheral and emerging themes, such as alternative proteins, sustainable food systems, and cultural consumption, are identified as promising yet underexplored domains. These findings reveal a field that is both conceptually robust and open to innovative interdisciplinary extensions.

The contribution of this study is threefold. It consolidates a fragmented body of literature, providing a systematic overview of its intellectual foundations. It clarifies research gaps, pointing to opportunities for advancing theory, methodology, and global inclusivity in practice-oriented food research. Finally, it offers actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners by framing food practices as leverage points for sustainability transitions. In doing so, this article positions practice theory as a central framework for addressing the intertwined challenges of sustainable consumption, food security, and public health.

Keywords: Practice theory; Food practices, Sustainable consumption; Bibliometric analysis

INTRODUCTION

Food practices have increasingly become a focal point in contemporary research, reflecting their profound implications for sustainability, health, and social life. In an era marked by global environmental challenges and rising public health concerns, the ways in which people shop, cook, eat, and dispose of food are no longer viewed as merely personal choices, but as socially embedded routines with systemic consequences. Understanding these practices is thus critical for addressing pressing issues such as food waste, sustainable consumption, and nutrition security.

Practice theory has emerged as a prominent framework in the social sciences for analyzing everyday human behavior. Rather than focusing on individuals' attitudes or macro-structural forces, this perspective considers practices, routinized configurations of activities, as the central unit of analysis. Reckwitz (2002, p. 249) defines a practice as "*a routinized type of behavior consisting of interconnected elements: forms of bodily and mental*

activities, things and their use, and background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion, and motivational knowledge”.

Subsequent scholars, most notably Shove et al. (2012), have expanded upon this triadic model of competencies, materials, and meanings, highlighting the relational and dynamic nature of social life. From this standpoint, behaviors are not merely expressions of individual preference, but rather, they are the outcomes of shared social routines that are shaped by infrastructures, technologies, and cultural norms.

The shift toward practice-based approaches has had a significant impact on food studies. Scholars in this field argue that food-related behaviors cannot be fully understood through individualist models of rational choice alone. Instead, eating, cooking, and shopping are analyzed as practices embedded within broader socio-material contexts (Warde, 2005; Halkier & Jensen, 2011). This approach shifts the focus from “Why do individuals choose certain foods?” to “How are food practices reproduced, transformed, and interconnected with other practices?” (Plessz & Wahlen, 2020). By reframing food consumption as a practice, researchers highlight the complex interplay of infrastructures (e.g., supermarkets and kitchens), competencies (e.g., cooking skills and nutritional knowledge), and meanings (e.g., cultural norms surrounding health and hospitality).

Practice Theory has proven especially insightful in the realm of sustainable food consumption and production. This perspective clarifies how sustainability is either promoted or hindered through everyday routines such as shopping for, storing, cooking, and disposing of food (Spaargaren, 2011; Southerton, 2013). For example, Shove (2010) shows that sustainability transitions require technological innovation and transformations in everyday practices and their socio-material arrangements. Recent empirical work continues to explore this dynamic. Innocent et al. (2023), for example, map sustainable food practices as interconnected networks. They distinguish central practices, such as purchasing and preparing sustainable products, from peripheral ones, including anti-waste behaviors and home food cultivation. Their findings underscore the importance of “connector” practices, those that bridge different domains, thereby revealing potential leverage points for accelerating sustainability transitions.

More broadly, Practice Theory is increasingly recognized as a comprehensive, integrative framework in the social sciences (Mesenhöller, 2025). Its growing adoption in food studies reflects a shift from individualized accounts of consumption to more relational and systemic perspectives. This shift has opened new lines of inquiry. For example, researchers are investigating how food practices are shaped by global supply chains (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014), how infrastructures such as refrigeration and packaging influence daily routines (Hand & Shove, 2007), and how social change emerges through the reconfiguration of interconnected practices (Watson, 2012). By foregrounding the role of food in everyday life, practice-oriented research provides a solid basis for designing interventions that target the socio-material conditions perpetuating unsustainable routines, rather than relying on nudging or information campaigns.

Despite these advances, the field remains fragmented. Studies on sustainable diets, food waste, and healthy eating practices often evolve in parallel, with limited dialogue across disciplines and contexts. Moreover, theoretical consolidation and global inclusivity remain partial, raising questions about the coherence, trajectory, and future of this research domain. A systematic bibliometric analysis can therefore illuminate the intellectual structure of the field, identify dominant and emerging themes, and map its conceptual evolution.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main publication trends and growth patterns in food practice research informed by practice theory?
2. Which journals, authors, and institutions have contributed most significantly to shaping this field?
3. What are the dominant conceptual clusters and thematic evolutions?
4. What research gaps and future directions can be identified from the bibliometric evidence?

By addressing these questions, the paper aims to consolidate fragmented contributions, provide a structured overview of the field, and identify promising avenues for future inquiry at the intersection of practice theory, food studies, and sustainability.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A literature review is a critical step in any research endeavor, as it provides a structured synthesis of existing studies, highlights knowledge gaps, and situates the research within its academic context (Hart, 1998). By examining prior work, researchers can identify key variables, methods, and theoretical frameworks, as well as trace the evolution and current trends of the field. This process ensures that the study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates while avoiding redundancy and fostering cumulative knowledge (Assoud & Berbou, 2025). According to Masmoudi (2024), this approach was selected because it helps researchers minimize subjectivity in the selection of publications for analysis (Sinkovics, 2016). Moreover, it allows for the identification of current trends within a specific research domain and offers guidance for future research directions (Guo et al., 2019).

Data gathering from Scopus

To carry out a meaningful bibliometric analysis on the theme of practice theory, we relied on document retrieval from Scopus, the largest multidisciplinary database available (Chadegani et al.2013). Compared to Web of Science, which indexes 35% of journals and 40% of articles, Scopus provides broader coverage, encompassing 59% of journals and 63% of articles (Echchakoui, 2020). In addition, Scopus is acknowledged for the rigor of its journal selection (Goodman, 2007), a feature that ensures access to high-quality and influential research outputs.

All bibliometric data were retrieved from the Scopus database on August 1, 2025, ensuring that the analysis reflects the most recent publications available at the time of data collection. The search query used is: (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Theory of Practice") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Social Practice Theory") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Practice Theory")) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Food practices") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Sustainable food practices") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Healthy eating practices") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Eating practices") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Consumption practices")).

Data analysis

The analysis was carried out with the Bibliometrix package in R, complemented by its web-based application Bibliophagy. According to Assoud & Berbou (2025), this approach, introduced by Aria & Cuccurullo (2017), provides a rigorous framework for importing, analyzing, and visualizing bibliometric data, enabling the assessment of research evolution, dissemination, and impact. By combining advanced analytical techniques with an intuitive interface, Biblioshiny facilitates comprehensive bibliometric exploration without requiring programming expertise, thereby making such methods more accessible to a broad range of researchers (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

RESULT

Main information

Table 1 presents the general bibliometric characteristics of the dataset. It reports the time span of publications, the number of documents and sources, collaboration patterns, and citation statistics. This offers a global overview of the structure and magnitude of research on food practice theory.

Table 1. Main information of practice theory in Scopus

Description	Results
Timespan	2008: 2025

Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	85
Documents	189
Annual Growth Rate %	19,27
Document Average Age	4,98
Average citations per doc	32,83
References	0
DOCUMENT CONTENTS	
Keywords Plus (ID)	494
Author's Keywords (DE)	998
AUTHORS	
Authors	379
Authors of single-authored docs	40
AUTHORS COLLABORATION	
Single-authored docs	43
Co-Authors per Doc	2,48
International co-authorships %	17,99

The corpus comprises 189 documents published from 2008 to 2025, with an annual growth rate of 19.27%, showing a field that is growing steadily instead of in short bursts of attention. The average age of documents (4.98 years) and relatively high average citations per document (32.83) together suggest a literature that is both recent and impactful, with knowledge still accumulating at pace. The database lists 85 sources, 379 authors, and 43 single-authored papers, with 2.48 co-authors per article and 18% international co-authorship, pointing to a collaborative yet not fully globalized research community.

The large pool of authors' keywords (998) and Keywords Plus (494) denotes a thematically rich field with broad vocabulary and multiple entry points for future inquiry. This trend suggests that food practice theory has transitioned from a relatively marginal perspective to a recognized and influential framework in the study of food, consumption, and sustainability.

Annual scientific production

Figure 1 illustrates the annual scientific production between 2008 and 2025. It highlights the temporal evolution of publications and provides insight into the growth dynamics and developmental stages of the field.

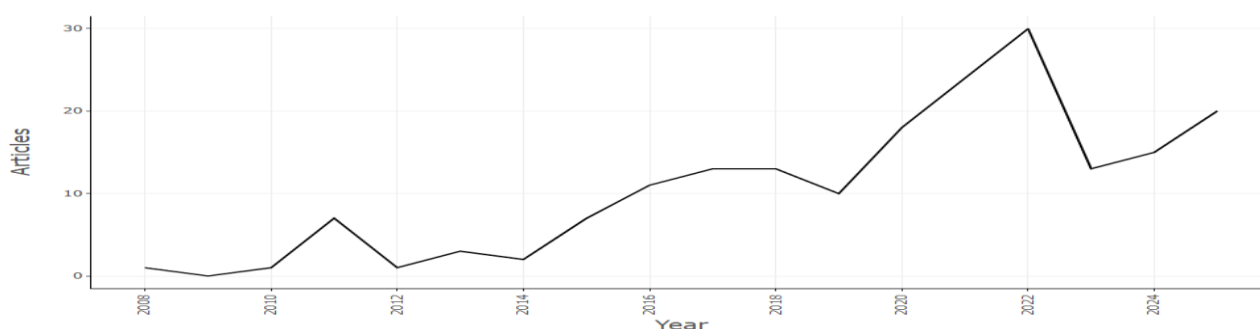


Figure 1. Annual scientific production

The production curve shows a steady and accelerating trajectory from 2008 to 2025, consistent with the reported 19.27% annual growth. This pattern typically characterizes a formative period with pioneering

theoretical work, followed by a take-off phase where empirical applications proliferate across contexts (household routines, sustainability interventions, food choice infrastructures), and a consolidation phase in which practice-theoretical approaches become standard frames in food studies. The persistence of year-on-year increases suggests that practice theory has moved from niche to mainstream explanatory framework for understanding food consumption, provisioning, and related sustainability transitions.

Sources Productivity

This section identifies the most relevant journals publishing research on practice theory. *Table 2* shows the number of articles, h-index, citation impact, and the year of first publication in the dataset, thereby indicating the main outlets shaping the academic discourse.

Table 2. Most relevant sources

Source	Articles	H_index	TC	PY
Journal of Consumer Culture	20	15	1411	2011
Appetite	11	8	280	2018
Sustainability	9	7	175	2017
Journal of Cleaner Production	8	7	1429	2015
Food, Culture and Society	7	4	80	2017
Agriculture and Human Values	5	3	74	2016
Cultural Sociology	5	5	86	2018
Environmental Sociology	3	3	24	2019
Journal of Business Ethics	3	3	186	2017
Sociology of Health and Illness	3	3	82	2015

The most relevant sources confirm the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Leading outlets include the *Journal of Consumer Culture* (20 articles, h-index = 15), *Appetite* (11 articles), and *Sustainability* (9 articles). In addition, high-impact contributions have appeared in *Journal of Cleaner Production* (8 articles, 1,429 total citations), indicating strong connections between food practice studies and debates in sustainable production and consumption. Journals such as *Food, Culture and Society* and *Agriculture and Human Values* reinforce the socio-cultural orientation of the field, whereas contributions in *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Environmental Sociology* illustrate the integration of normative and environmental dimensions into food practice research.

The diversity of publication venues underscores the permeability of practice theory across disciplinary boundaries, bridging sociology, cultural studies, environmental science, and consumer research.

Authors' production and citation

Table 3 lists the most productive and influential authors contributing to the field. It includes indicators of productivity (number of publications) and impact (citations, h-index), alongside the year of their first contribution, thus providing a picture of intellectual leadership and author networks.

Table 3. Most Productive and Impactful Authors

Author	H_index	NP	TC	PY_start
Spaargaren G	6	6	609	2011
Gojard S	4	5	144	2015

Plessz M	4	5	160	2015
Sahakian Md	4	4	397	2014
Schäfer M	4	4	222	2015
Dubuisson-Quellier S	3	3	122	2016
Dyen M	3	4	73	2016
Halkier B	3	3	75	2020
Jaeger-Erben M	3	3	185	2015
Sirieux L	3	4	73	2016

The author list highlights a European core (*figure 2*) of intellectual leadership (e.g., Spaargaren, Sahakian, Schäfer, Dubuisson-Quellier, Gojard, Plessz), whose work has shaped the empirical and conceptual agenda around consumption routines, socio-material arrangements, and sustainability transitions. Among the most productive authors are Spaargaren (6 publications, 609 citations) and Gojard (5 publications, 144 citations), while Sahakian (397 citations) and Schäfer (222 citations) demonstrate both productivity and citation impact. These authors have advanced the application of practice theory to food studies by focusing on consumption routines, social contexts, and sustainability transitions.

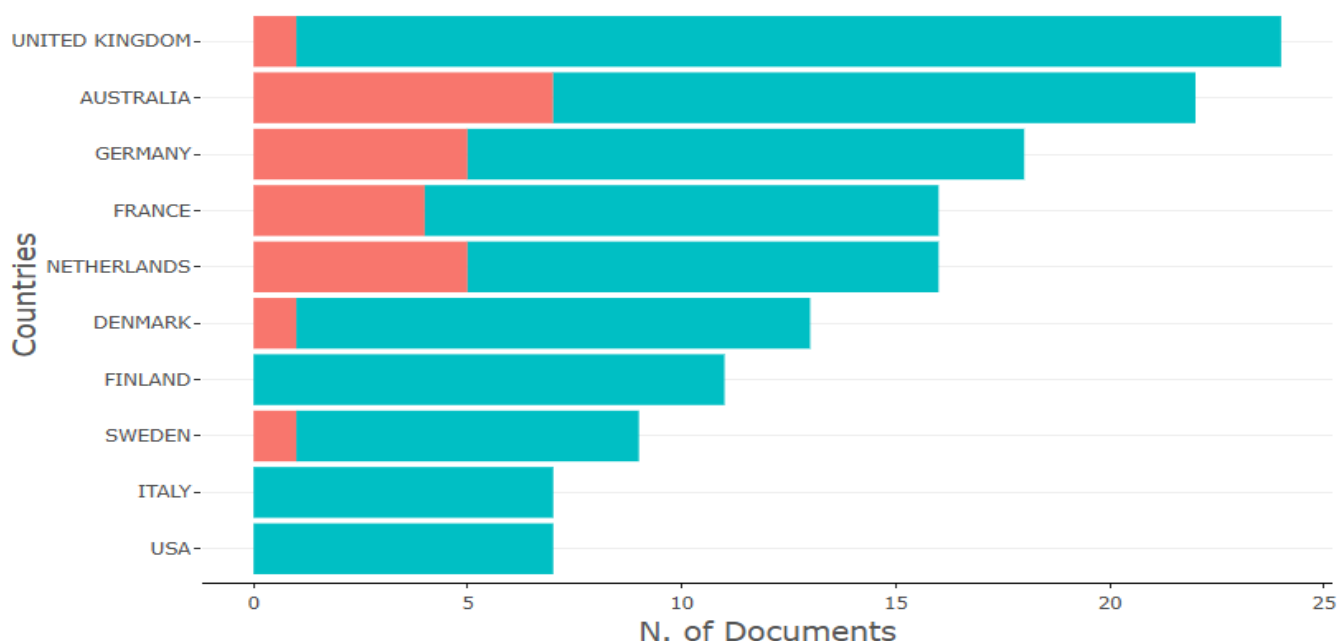


Figure 2: Corresponding authors' countries and their openness to international collaboration

Cited references analysis

Table 4 presents the ten most cited articles in the field of food practice theory, offering an overview of the contributions that have most significantly shaped scholarly debates. Analyzing the most cited works provides insight into the key conceptual and empirical foundations of the field, while also highlighting the research directions that have influenced subsequent studies.

Table 4. Most cited documents

References	Citation
Schanes, K., Dobering, K., & Gözet, B. (2018). Food waste matters- A systematic review of household food waste practices and their policy implications. <i>Journal of Cleaner Production</i> , 182, 978-991	1023

Spaargaren, G. (2011). Theories of practices: Agency, technology, and culture: Exploring the relevance of practice theories for the governance of sustainable consumption practices in the new world-order. <i>Global Environment Change</i> , 21(3), 813-822	388
Gram-Hanssen, K. (2011). Understanding change and continuity in residential energy consumption. <i>Journal of Consumer Culture</i> , 11(1), 61-78	341
Sahakian, M., & Wilhite, H. (2013). Making practice theory practicable: Towards more sustainable forms of consumption. <i>Journal of Consumer Culture</i> , 14(1), 25-44.	294
Magaudda, P. (2011). When materiality 'bites back': Digital music consumption practices in the age of dematerialization. <i>Journal of Consumer Culture</i> , 11(1), 15-36	232
McMeekin, A., & Southerton, D. (2012). Sustainability transitions and final consumption: practices and socio-technical systems. <i>Technology Analysis & Strategic Management</i> , 24(4), 345–361.	189
Jaeger-Erben, M, Rückert-John, J., & Schäfer, M. (2015). Sustainable consumption through social innovation: a typology of innovations for sustainable consumption practices. <i>Journal of Cleaner Production</i> , 108, 784-798	128
Twine, R. (2014). Vegan Killjoys at the Table—Contesting Happiness and Negotiating Relationships with Food Practices. <i>Societies</i> , 4(4), 623-639	113
Galvin, R., & Sunikka-Blank, M. (2018). Economic Inequality and Household Energy Consumption in High-income Countries: A Challenge for Social Science Based Energy Research. <i>Ecological Economics</i> , 153, 78-88	99
Moraes, C., Carrigan, M., Bosangit, C., Ferreira, C., & McGrath, M. (2017). Understanding Ethical Luxury Consumption Through Practice Theories: A Study of Fine Jewellery Purchases. <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i> , 145, 525-543	92

The most highly cited article is the systematic review by Schanes, & al. (2018), published in the *Journal of Cleaner Production*, which has accumulated over 1,023 citations. This study synthesizes the literature on household food waste, focusing on the social and material practices that generate waste and their implications for public policy. Its objective was to move beyond behavioral framings of waste towards a practice-oriented understanding, thereby offering a framework for designing more effective interventions. The influence of this work lies in its ability to connect everyday practices with governance challenges, making it a reference point for both academics and policymakers.

The second most cited contribution, Spaargaren (2011) in *Global Environmental Change* (388 citations), represents a theoretical milestone. The article aimed to demonstrate the relevance of practice theories for understanding and governing sustainable consumption in a globalized world. By integrating concepts of agency, technology, and culture, Spaargaren advanced practice theory as a powerful analytical tool for sustainability transitions. This work has been particularly influential in legitimizing practice theory as a mainstream framework in environmental social sciences and has served as a conceptual foundation for numerous empirical applications in the field.

The third most cited article, Gram-Hanssen (2011) with 341 citations, explored the dynamics of change and continuity in residential energy consumption. The study examined how routines, infrastructures, and social norms shape energy use, arguing that sustainable energy transitions cannot be explained solely through technological innovations or individual choices. Instead, it highlighted the importance of understanding energy demand through a practice-theoretical lens, where habits, competences, and material arrangements interact. This perspective has proven central to extending practice theory beyond food into other domains of everyday consumption.

Word cloud

Figure 3 displays a word cloud generated from the most frequent keywords used in the corpus. The visualization provides a quick overview of dominant research themes and peripheral concepts within food practice theory.



Figure 3. Word cloud

The word cloud visualizes lexical salience. High-frequency terms such as “practice theory”, “social practice theory”, “sustainability”, “sustainable consumption” and “food consumption” reveal the core conceptual nexus. The presence of a variety of lower-frequency terms indicates peripheral yet significant extensions, such as links to housing, culture, infrastructures, and everyday routines (planning, shopping, cooking, storage and waste management).

The lexical spread supports the claim that practice theory is being operationalized across multiple units of analysis (ranging from competencies and materials to meanings and social norms). The prominence of sustainability terms reflects the field’s central preoccupation with societal transitions via mundane practices.

Co-occurrence Network Analysis

Figure 4 presents the co-occurrence network of keywords. It highlights clusters of related terms, visualizing the conceptual structure of the field and showing how different research themes are interconnected.

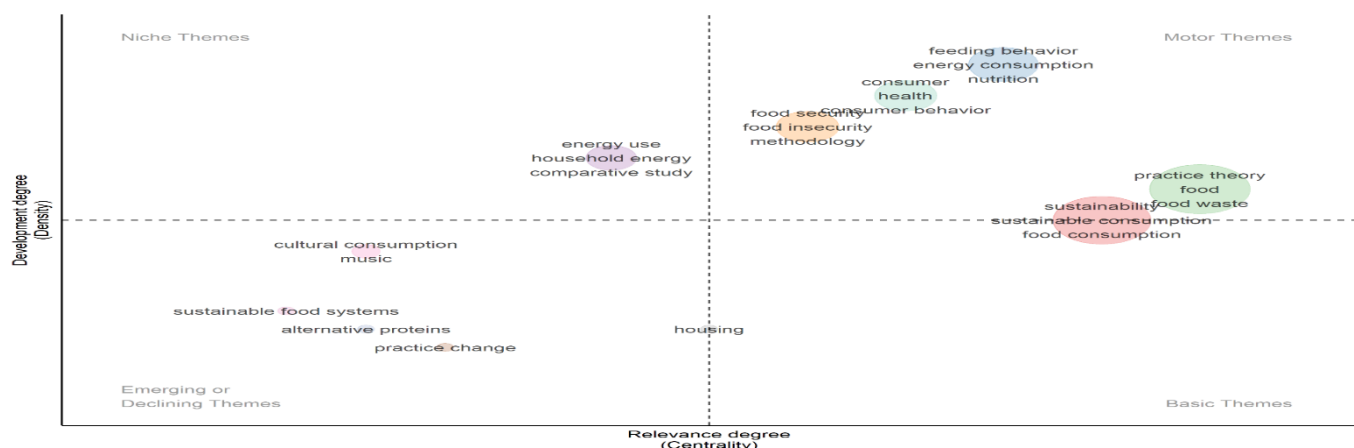


Figure 4. Co-Occurrence Network Analysis

The co-occurrence network reveals that “practice theory” occupies a central and dominant position, indicating that it is the primary conceptual hub in the literature. Four thematic clusters emerge around this core. The first of these brings together keywords related to everyday food practices, consumer behavior and policy concerns such as food waste, sufficiency and the circular economy. This reflects how practice-theoretical approaches are being used to address sustainability challenges. A second cluster focuses on sustainability and food systems,

incorporating terms such as “sustainable consumption”, “environmental impact” and “climate change”. This highlights the connection between consumption studies and broader, system-level discussions. A third, more peripheral cluster consists of psychological and nutritional terms, such as “diet”, “feeding behavior” and “human experiment”, signaling the presence of an individual-level, experimental perspective that remains relatively distinct from practice-based and system-oriented research. Finally, a small but visible cluster centered on the “sharing economy” and “collaborative consumption” points to an emerging interest in alternative economic arrangements.

Together, these clusters demonstrate the diversity of disciplinary approaches to food and consumption research, as well as the integrative potential of practice theory in bridging micro-level behaviors, everyday practices, and system-level sustainability concerns.

Thematic Structure and Conceptual Evolution

Figure 5 presents the thematic map of the field, which plots clusters of keywords according to their degree of centrality (relevance to the overall field) and density (internal development and coherence). This visualization provides a nuanced understanding of how different themes contribute to the intellectual landscape of food practice research.

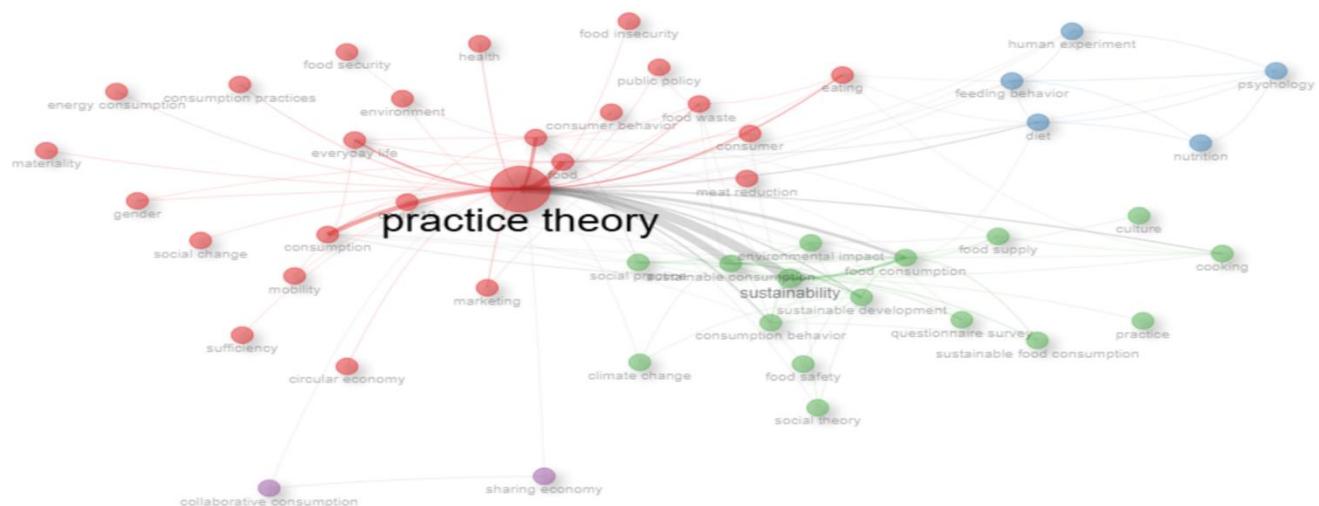


Figure 5. Thematic Structure

The map is divided into four quadrants, each reflecting a different stage of thematic development and relevance.

Motor Themes: The upper-right quadrant encompasses highly developed and central themes that act as intellectual drivers of the field. Keywords such as “feeding behavior”, “energy consumption”, “consumer behavior”, “nutrition”, “health” and “food security” indicate that practice theory has been increasingly mobilized to engage with both sustainability and public health agendas. These themes are not only theoretically mature but also well-connected to other areas of research, demonstrating their pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of food practice studies. They highlight the field’s dual concern with environmental transitions and human well-being, reinforcing its interdisciplinary relevance.

Niche Themes: Located in the upper-left quadrant, niche themes are well-developed internally but less connected to the broader field. In this analysis, themes such as “energy use” and “household energy” occupy this position. Their relative isolation suggests that, while methodologically sophisticated and conceptually refined, they remain peripheral to mainstream debates in food practice research. Nevertheless, niche themes often represent specialized research fronts that may later gain greater centrality as interdisciplinary connections expand.

Emerging or Declining Themes: The lower-left quadrant captures themes with both low density and low centrality, indicating domains that are either in decline or in the early stages of development. Here, topics such

as “sustainable food systems”, “alternative proteins” and “practice change” are situated. While their marginality could be interpreted as a lack of maturity, these themes also reflect cutting-edge explorations into alternative pathways for sustainability. For instance, the growing interest in alternative proteins may signal an emergent research agenda that has yet to achieve full recognition within the broader practice theory discourse.

Basic Themes: Finally, the lower-right quadrant identifies themes of high centrality but lower density, representing foundational concepts that are crucial for structuring the field yet still require further development. Notably, “practice theory”, “food”, “sustainability”, “food waste”, “sustainable consumption” and “food consumption” appear here. Their central location underscores their fundamental role as core constructs in the literature, anchoring the field’s conceptual coherence. However, their relatively lower density suggests that ongoing efforts are needed to refine theoretical and methodological tools, thereby strengthening their internal consistency and explanatory capacity.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

The thematic map (*figure 5*) also points to several underexplored areas that represent promising directions for future research. The positioning of “sustainable food systems”, “alternative proteins”, and “practice change” in the emerging or declining quadrant highlights the need for greater scholarly engagement with how novel food technologies, protein alternatives, and systemic transitions can be conceptualized through practice theory. These themes are of growing societal relevance yet remain marginal within the current intellectual structure, suggesting a gap between practical challenges and academic attention.

Similarly, the presence of “cultural consumption” and “music” in peripheral positions indicates opportunities to extend practice theory into lifestyle and cultural domains, thereby broadening its explanatory power beyond food.

The relative isolation of “household energy” also signals a need to build stronger connections between food practices and adjacent sustainability fields such as energy transitions.

Finally, while practice theory, “food consumption”, and “sustainability” appear as basic themes, their lower density reveals an ongoing need to refine theoretical and methodological tools to enhance conceptual clarity. Together, these gaps suggest that future research should not only deepen the core foundations of the field but also strategically expand into emerging and cross-disciplinary domains.

CONCLUSION

This bibliometric analysis has provided a comprehensive overview of how practice theory has been applied to the study of food practices, with particular attention to sustainable consumption, eating behaviors, and the socio-material organization of food systems. By analyzing 189 publications indexed in Scopus between 2008 and 2025, the study reveals a rapidly growing and thematically diverse field characterized by three major intellectual trajectories: the centrality of sustainability-oriented practices, the consolidation of practice theory as a theoretical framework, and the gradual emergence of peripheral yet potentially transformative domains such as cultural consumption, alternative proteins, and sustainable food systems.

The findings offer several important implications. Theoretically, the study consolidates fragmented contributions and highlights practice theory’s capacity to bridge individual behaviors with systemic sustainability challenges. It shows how the field has shifted from descriptive applications to more integrative and explanatory uses of practice-based approaches.

Practically, the results emphasize the potential of practice theory to inform interventions targeting infrastructures, competencies, and meanings rather than relying exclusively on individualist behavior-change models. This shift is crucial for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design effective strategies to reduce food waste, encourage sustainable diets, and promote healthier lifestyles.

Methodologically, the analysis underscores the value of bibliometric mapping as a tool for identifying intellectual structures, emerging clusters, and knowledge gaps, offering researchers a roadmap for further inquiry.

Nonetheless, the study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on Scopus data, while ensuring breadth, excludes relevant contributions indexed in other databases such as Web of Science, potentially leading to partial coverage. Second, bibliometric methods, by their quantitative nature, cannot fully capture the interpretive richness of qualitative insights into practices. Finally, the analysis reflects the dominance of European contributions, highlighting the need for more research from underrepresented contexts in the Global South.

Future research should therefore pursue several directions. Greater attention is needed to emerging themes such as sustainable food systems, alternative proteins, and practice change, which remain underdeveloped despite their societal urgency. Cross-disciplinary collaborations that link practice theory with nutrition, marketing, energy studies, and policy research could generate richer and more actionable insights.

Methodological pluralism, combining bibliometrics with ethnographic, longitudinal, or experimental approaches, would also strengthen the explanatory depth of the field. By addressing these gaps, scholars can further consolidate practice theory as a central framework for understanding food consumption and contribute to advancing both theoretical innovation and practical solutions for global sustainability transitions.

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