

What is ‘food noise?’ ASU researchers examine the implications of an ill- defined problem

By Mara Busch, ASU News
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In recent years, researchers have noticed the sudden emergence of the concept of "food noise" being used in popular discourse.

Google Trends [tracking of the term](#) by an [ASU linguistic anthropologist](#) found very little interest before 2023, followed by very rapid growth. But where did this concept come from? And what does it even mean?

Food noise can be defined as intrusive, persistent, preoccupying and unwanted thoughts about food.

In a new [article](#) recently published in the journal *Appetite*, researchers from Arizona State University's [School of Human Evolution and Social Change](#) examine the conceptual, methodological and ethical considerations of the sudden and rapid rise of the concept of food noise and identify pathways forward to advance research on the concept.

The effort is part of an [ASU-led collaboration across seven countries](#) to understand the lived experiences of new-generation peptide drugs like GLP-1s, expanding in both medical and cosmetic use.

"The so-called problem of food noise suddenly emerged as part of public discourse with the advent of these new and highly effective drugs," said anthropologist [Alexandra Brewis](#), Regents and President's Professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change and lead author of the study. "Most people have only encountered the term recently, yet it seems to resonate with what a lot of GLP-1 users are experiencing."

"One of our core concerns is that telehealth companies are marketing food noise as something that should be fixed with lifetime medication," she said. "But that is happening before any clear scientific knowledge about exactly what food noise is or what really needs to be fixed. We seem to have leapt straight from anecdote to clinical decision-making, which is clearly not in the best interests of consumers."

The rapid emergence of public discussion and the marketing of clinical solutions around food noise implies that science is well behind, Brewis explained. In light of this, authors of the study are working with a team of nutritionists at [The Pennsylvania State University](#) that first identified the construct of food noise in scientific terms.

The joint team is working to clarify the current concerns while also creating pathways for future research.

One of the concerns the authors raise in the article is understanding the implications of defining food noise as a medical diagnosis. That is, when does normal thinking about food end and a clinical problem begin?

"Anthropologists understand that newly naming what might be quite normal human experiences as problems has two serious potential negative effects: It can lead to unnecessary medical treatment. It can also change how people view themselves, redefining what they didn't even notice before as pathological and problematic," Brewis said.

To this end, the international team of researchers is working to improve the measurement of food noise, including a better understanding of how it may be experienced differently in various cultures and how this might affect the capacity to measure the concept meaningfully.

Undergraduate students in ASU's [Culture, Health and Environment laboratory](#) will help with the first crucial step of building a reliable and valid scale measurement through assisting with initial data collection this fall.

Additionally, in bringing together leading teams of social scientists who already study weight and eating in different languages, the global collaboration is clarifying issues in the translation of the concept as the phrase spreads rapidly and across cultures without a clear definition.

For example, in the English language, "noise" tends to have a negative connotation, but that is not always the case in other languages, Brewis explained.

The collaboration includes [Cindi SturtzSreetharan](#), President's Professor in the school and co-author of the study, an expert on how language around bodies and weight varies cross-culturally.

"There are crucial questions we do not have adequate answers for as yet on the nutritional science side as well," Brewis said. "Is food noise really different from other known phenomena like cravings? How common is it? When is reducing food-related thought helpful, and when could it be harmful?"

"Future studies need to include people who use GLP-1 medications and people who don't, people from different cultures and languages, and possible approaches beyond medication. The real question isn't simply how to make food noise quieter. It is understanding when that quieting is helpful, for whom, and with what consequences."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



New research from ASU's Center for Global Health in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change examines the sudden rise in the concept of "food noise," arguing more clarity is needed on the topic before it is integrated into clinical use. Photo courtesy of Canva

Text image(s)



Team members from Arizona State University, University of Sao Paulo and The Pennsylvania State University in May 2026, working on the improvement of food noise measurement tools. Photo courtesy of Alexandra Brewis