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## Exploring the Social-symbolic Meaning of Eating Habits in the Czech Republic and Ukraine

Renata Hrubá<sup>a\*</sup> and Nataliya S. Tanklevska<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Marketing, University of Economics, Prague, Czechia, W. Churchill sq. 4, 130 67, Prague 3, Czechia

<sup>b</sup> Department of Economics, Kherson State Agrarian University, Kherson, Ukraine  
[qhrur00@vse.cz](mailto:qhrur00@vse.cz); [ntanklevska@gmail.com](mailto:ntanklevska@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to empirically assess whether the social-symbolic meaning of eating habits is constructed within cultures. The analysis is based on the sociological approaches of Bourdieu's theory. To answer the question, data from an on-line survey (n=319; carried out in the Czech and Ukraine) are compared using multi-sample measurement model. Results indicate the effect of social structures on individual perceptions and practices through habitus. The differences rely on the revitalization of local food, food arts, and market in Czechia. These findings have several marketing and advertising implications.

**Keywords:** food-related lifestyle; traditional food system, consumer behavior; habitus concept

**Subject classification codes:** M31, Q18, P36

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## 1 Introduction

The concept of the consumer society has recently attracted researchers from several disciplines (Firat et al., 2013), it is broadly acknowledged that the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from products' attributes but also from their symbolic meanings (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1994; McCracken, 1988) and a symbolic meaning could be a degree of discretion in choosing among symbolically significant and culturally differentiated styles of commonly used food.

The objective of the study is to empirically assess the role of social interaction in communities related to modeling the existence of a stable cross-market construct in Ukraine and the Czech Republic. The present work should lead to a model that supports (1) an understanding of how social-symbolic meanings of eating habits are constructed within cultures, and (2) science with a model to identify key characteristics of food related lifestyles that distinguish consumers in different social environments. In the future, social and healthy lifestyle changes could improve the prevention of non-communicable disease. Additionally, this study might allow a reworking of how the boundaries between food, art, and culture are defined through social relations rather than in a fixed geometrical space.

## 2 Literature review

### Social Symbolism and Self-Symbolism

Lifestyle could be defined as socially meaningful categories (Englis and Solomon, 1995) and, social interaction in communities, because the idea of lifestyle in the field of marketing is generally applied to finding out how consumers use food and eating to obtain life values (Grunert et al., 2011), as a result of the products' characteristics, due to their mediation of the functions of the symbolic meanings of products. This function operates in two directions; outward to construct the social world (Social-Symbolism), and inward to construct our identity (Self-Symbolism) (Elliott, 1997). Various types of studies have been published related to understanding the degree to which differentiated lifestyle choices among a diversity of products' characteristics use a food related lifestyle concept (FRL) (Grunert et al, 1997; Brunse, 1995).

However, research related especially to food purchase behaviour examined that the social aspect of meal preparation of the whole family, the usage situation, social events, and the consequences of using food products on social relationships were correlated (Grunert et al., 1993). Social eating norms are currently being increasingly discussed to encourage healthier eating and it is surmised that social influence processes play a key role in human habitus. Therefore, almost all forms of human interaction involve interdependent processes, and these function at a variety of levels – cognitive, interpersonal, and cultural (Forgas and Williams, 2016; Nook and Zaki, 2015).

### How the boundaries between food, art, and culture are defined more through social relations

There is another additional cultural capital such as art consumption and symbolic violence; that is central to Bourdieu's work. As Bourdieu explains, the habitus involves structured structures, generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices – what the worker eats, and especially the way he eats it, etc. and habitus make differences (Bourdieu, 1987; 96). As a result, the habitus may be employed in literary theory to understand environmental conditions or structures that influence individual theories.

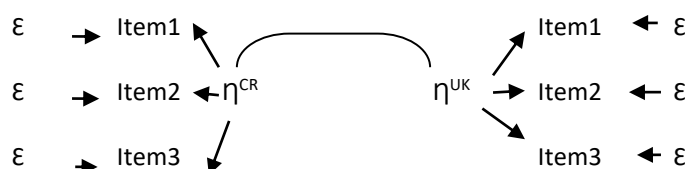
Moreover, challenges and opportunities for rural areas becomes locally oriented, e. g., a local market food system, the increasing demand for organic, local, and tradition foods and products, and naturalness. The social influence on sustainable consumption was highlighted by Salazar et al. (2013) and was confirmed by Costa et al. (2014). This is a first step in ultimately achieving awareness of food arts and community farming (Hemmerling et al., 2015; Hall, 2015; Kloppenburg et al., 2000). Those features allow a re-definition of how the boundaries between food, art, and culture are defined more through social relations rather than as a fixed geometrical space. This might consider making the habitus concept more able to comport itself with changing social configurations. In summary, a comparative analysis of the dimension of FRL including meal preparation, the usage situation, social events, and the consequences of using food products on social relationships is relevant to a better understand of the social influence of eating and considering the habitus concept (Bourdieu, 1996).

In the present work, the latent variables for each country were used as the independent variables and the social and personal elements of FRL for country as the dependent variables. The results of these analyses were then compared across the models to determine how social-symbolic meaning of eating habits are constructed within cultures. The relationship model used is formulated and better explained in Figure 1:

$$FRL_g = f(\text{the environmental conditions}), \quad (1)$$

where  $FRL_i$  represented by the social and personal elements of FRL for each country.

FRL represented by the social and personal elements of FRL for each country. The exogenous variables are the environmental conditions or structures used to understand a habitus. For Bourdieu, social agents are “virtuosos” who know the script so well that they can elaborate and improvise upon the themes that it provides and in the light of their relations with others (Bourdieu, 1977; 79).



**Figure 1.** Illustrative example of reflective measurement models and for testing their invariance  
Social-symbolic meaning of eating habits within countries for each domain. Source: authors' own research.  
Note:  $\eta$  means latent variable for each country,  $\epsilon$  means error term; CR means Czech Republic, UK means Ukraine.

### 3 Materials and methods

#### The sample

In this study, we used data collected through an online survey. Only a summary of the methods is provided, as the full list of study participants and the location of this study were reported by Hrubá and Tanklevska (2020).

Also, the Czech Republic represented the beginnings of the development of the local market food system and the increasing demand for organic food (Michelsen et al., 1999) product. Demand for organic foods both market - local oriented and export-oriented is increasing in Ukraine (Kolomytseva, 2018; Karasova 2014). This study was conducted with a sample comprised of undergraduate university students.

#### Items

The purpose of the study was to analyze three FRL domains included in the adapted FRL instrument (Brunsø and Grunert, 1995) (see Table 1 in the Appendix). The response for each of the items were rated on a 4-point scale: "Agree"/"somewhat agree"/"somewhat disagree"/"disagree", (adopted from FRL concept). Data from the survey in Czechia ( $n=196$ ) and Ukraine ( $n=123$ ) were used in the analysis.

#### Analysis and results

The data was checked for missing values. Descriptive statistics were then computed and a reliability test performed in relation to the FRL items and scales.

Reliabilities will be analyzed by finding Cronbach's alpha scores for the dimensions after Exploratory factor analysis (in the Table 2 in the Appendix). After they are rotated to apply the default orthogonal varimax rotation, any item with a maximum loading factor of 0.5 was considered to contribute significantly. Based on the factor score of dimensions of the adapted FRL concept the sample was used for the proposed confirmatory factor model for 3 domains. Generally, items or dimensions with poor reliabilities were eliminated, items were arguments to keep them were believed to be important for validity reasons and exploratory relevance for the consumer food lifestyle, were kept (a similar was used by Grunert et al., 2011). The analyses and subsequent tests were stratified by country. According to goodness of fit statistics it has been suggested that the fit of the model to the data is only moderate and may benefit from modification. Finally, the confirmatory factor analysis at model for tested invariance approach has been applied to examine factor structure, factor loading, and error measurement equivalence for the question: how are social-symbolic meaning of eating habits constructed within cultures and what identifies key characteristics regarding their food-related lifestyles that distinguish consumers with different social environments (the p-value testing parameter of each item of equality across countries is presented in Figure 2). In other words, to conduct comparisons of structural relationships across multiple populations, measurement in variance was used. This is important to ordered categorical data (Baumgartner and

Weijers, 2019). Table 3 presents selected goodness-of-fit statistics of the 3 reflective measurement models for each country and invariance of the Confirmatory factor analysis. Stata, version 16.0 was used.

## 4 Results and discussion

### The Social-symbolic meaning of eating habits within the Czech Republic and Ukraine

From a theoretical point of view, Bourdieu focuses on symbols as a means of distinction of the structure of the social world (Hallett, 2003); he highlighted the effect of social structures on individual perceptions and practices through habitus. According to Bourdieu theory the effect of social structures was created through the testing parameter of equality across countries, where the null hypothesis that the parameter estimates were constrained to be equal across the countries is valid, a significant test rejects the hypothesis that each individual constraint is valid (Stata, 2019). Significance has been found for 5 of items (see significant value in the Figure 2). There is relatively large difference of symbolic meanings in habitus between countries. Specifically, in the meal preparation domain. On the other hand according to the four levels of cross-cultural comparability (Gruneret et al., 1992), they highlighted that it can be distinguished: minimal cultural comparability (the matrix of factor loading have the same pattern); weak cultural comparability (the matrix of factor loading is equal); strong cultural (the matrix of factor loading; the covariance matrix of the factor scores are equal); weak cultural identity (the matrix of factor loading; the covariance matrix of the factor scores; the covariance matrix of the error terms are equal). Only the items MPI3, DSS1, DCS5 indicate weakly cultural identity.

So how social-symbolic meaning of eating habits are constructed within cultures? For both countries those attributes as symbol of convenience and social relationship have different self-symbolic meanings.

In the empirical view, the various major Social Symbolism and Self Symbolism cultures have distinctive food-related habits in countries (Foster, 2002; Imai et al., 2009; Elliot, 1997), coupled with a tradition of food symbols. Another aspect is a unity of symbolic tradition associated with the foods the Ukrainians and Czechs eat. Individual symbols do communicate status, but the social value of symbols can change through interactions (Solomon, 1983). This is challenging within countries for three reasons:

Firstly, given that the local food system will become increasingly important (Mihaela, 2015) and is perceived as an alternative food networks that includes Farmers' markets (organisers of farmers' markets) characterized by "alternative economic spaces" (Leyshon et al., 2003; Zagata and Boukalová, 2012) within the food system (Beckie et al., 2012) observed in certain regions of Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand (Donald, 2009; Lawson et al., 2008; Hall, 2013). Despite this the Farmers' Markets have a different association than in Ukraine, because in Ukraine it has a long-term direct sales from Farms tradition.

Secondly, the different meaning in this study depends on convenience, involvement in cooking, and the social relationship to the food with varying symbolic meaning in countries. Many food-related trends are thus still dramatically different in both countries. For instance, allowance of perception of convenience in Ukraine has been explored in the Quest for Convenience report (Nielsen, 2018). In Ukraine food is mostly prepared at home. According to the knowledge by Grunert et al. (2011) the greater frequency of dining in restaurants can be associated with an increase in income and a lack of time that accompanies economic development. Another marketing report confirms this and the varied characteristics of habits related to eating meals or snack outside of the home (Nielson, 2016;18; Onyshenko, 2018). The reform era has also seen explosion in Ukraine's cities and an explosion in the number of small private grocery stores, offering tradition, local foods and beverages and on-line shopping (Nielson, 2016).

Thirdly, the social sciences have been examining this relationship (social influence), and its significance. They have generally failed to see that consumption is a thoroughly cultural phenomenon, which is it highlighted by McCracken (1988) or the approach by Bourdieu theory of social stratification (1979, 94). This correspondent with various studies, which find a positive relationship between social norms and the intention to purchase organic or sustainable food products, or between social norms and the attitude towards organic food products (Aerstsens et al., 2009). Some studies rely on the identity characteristics of sustainable consumers (Costa et al., 2014). For instance, Bartels and Rainders (2010) found that social identification with organic food consumers is a significant explanatory variable for organic food consumption. Other studies try to examine whether the consumption of organic food is used to signal social identity and to understand the extent of the social value of organic food (Costa et al., 2014); they found through qualitative data that organic food has a social value for participants. Gotshi et al. (2009) confirm that norms and values learned at home have an effect on attitudes towards organic products and show that norms and values learned at home have an effect on attitudes. The importance finding is related to formation of attitudes towards organic, which is relevant for our results - the Market for organic products has grown in both countries (Willer, Lernoud, 2019, Ostapenko et al., 2020; Kutarenko, 2014), direct

sales, short food supply chain in the Czech Republic (Konečný et al., 2016, Margarisová et al., 2018) specifically the results of this study indicate that social events with family and friends has stable symbolic meaning, and a marketing strategy defined by symbolic meaning would focus on the effect the social structure of habitus (Bourdieu, 1979; 74) and would be focused on the perception of arts and ethics. Also benefits are often associated with the foods ability to provide eating and socializing (Ueland et al., 2011).

Czech Republic		Confirmatory factor analyses fort tested invariance			Ukraine	
Item	$\alpha$		P>chi2		A	Item
MPI1	1***	Meal preparation scripts	0,012*	Meal preparation scripts	1***	MPI1
MPI2	0,15***		0,011*		2,26***	MPI2
MPI3	1,15***		0,69		2,19***	MPI3
MPC1	0,18***		0,000***		1,66***	MPC1
MPC2	0,31†		0,0002***		1,49***	MPC2
USE1	1***	Usage situation	0,1150	Usage situation	1***	USE1
USE3	0,86***		0,1237		0,94***	USE3
USE5	0,6***		0,8876		0,70***	USE5
DSS1	1***	Desired consequences	0,66	Desired consequences	1***	DSS1
DSE1	0,58*		0,45		1,41***	DSE1
DCS4	2,73**		0,33		2,43**	DCS4
DCS5	2,36***		0,17		2,28***	DCS5
DCS6	3,05***		0,0023**		1,82*	DCS6

Source: authors 'own research

Note: † p<0.10; \*p<0,05; \*\*p<0,01; \*\*\*p<0,001.

**Figure 2.** Confirmatory factor analysis – invariant, established by the best fit model - Social-symbolic meaning of eating habits within countries

**Table 3.**

Selected goodness-of-fit statistics of the 3 models after modification and CFA (one model per domain ) for each country

	CFA - invariant			Czechia			Ukraine		
	MP	US	DC	MP	US	DC	MP	US	DC
LR (df)	140,320 (10)	10,457 (4)	97,99 (18)	6,74(4)	0 (0)	6,14 (4)	3,25(4)	0(0)	7,807 (4)
RMSEA	0,207	0,101	0,107	0,059	0,094	0,052	0,00	0	0,088
CFI	0,897	0,963	0,706	0,989	0,955	0,987	1	1	0,963
TLI	0,876	0,945	0,674	0,972	0,904	0,969	1,09	1	0,907
CD	0,884	0,731	0,725	0,958	0,691	0,781	0,84	0,738	0,723

Source: authors 'own research,

Note: CFA - invariance means Confirmatory Factor Analysis for tested invariance; LR means Likelihood ratio; RMSEA means Root mean squared error of approximation; CFI means Comparative fit index; TLI means Tucker-Lewis index; CD means Coefficient of determination.

### Limitation and future directions

One limitation of this study is that we could not establish confirmatory factor model for tested the invariance of the dimension "social event – regulatory eating with family". Future studies should be focused on this dimension. Second limitation of this study is that our sample had not a good representation of students from both countries.

## 5 Conclusion

In this study, we observed that similarity probably reflects the real situation within the changing lifestyles of today's society. Our observations are consistent with Bourdieu; the effect of social structures on individual perceptions and practices through habitus. The differences have been explained due to the revitalization of local food, food arts, and markets in Czechia. This feature allowed exploration for the first time of background information about how the boundaries between food, art, and culture are defined through social relations. This might lead us to consider making the habitus concept more able to comport itself with changing social figuration's and to theorize strategies over rules in the spontaneity of social action.

### Acknowledgements

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## Appendix

**Table 1.**  
FRL dimensions included in the adapted FRL instrument

<b>Meal preparation scripts – Involvement with cooking (MPI)</b>	
MPI1	I don't like complicated recipes when I'm cooking.
MPI2	I use a lot of ready – to eat food than more carefully prepared dishes.
MPI3	We use a lot of ready – to eat foods in our household.
<b>Meal preparation scripts – Looking after new ways (MPL)</b>	
MPL1	I look for ways to prepare new meats.
MPL2	I try recipes from other culinary traditions
<b>Meal preparation scripts – Convenience (MPC)</b>	
MPC1	I use a lot of finished food product (e.g. powder soups. conserve).
MPC2	I prefer ready to eat foods or frozen products.
<b>Usage situations – Social events (USE)</b>	
USE1	Regularly have a lunch with my friend.
USE3	Regularly have a dinner with my friend.
USE5	Regularly have a snack with my friend.
<b>Desired consequences – Self-fulfilment in food (DSS)</b>	
DSS1	I m interested in cooking an reception
<b>Desired consequences – Security (DSE)</b>	
DSE1	I only buy foods with clear information about origin of producers
<b>Desired consequences – Social relationships (DCS)</b>	
DCS4	When I have friends over to eat, the most important thing is that we are together.
DCS5	When I eat with my family, the most important thing is that we are together.
DCS6	Eating with friends or relatives is an important part of my social life.

Source: authors 'own research

**Table 2.**

Standardised factor loading's highly 0.5, factor scores and Cronbach's alpha for both countries

Factor in the dimension	Scores/ $\alpha$	Item				
		<b>MPI1</b>	<b>MPI2</b>	<b>MPI3</b>	<b>MPC1</b>	<b>MPC2</b>
<b>MPI CR</b>	70%/0,67	0,75	0,90	0,84		
<b>MPI UK</b>	61%/0,79	0,63	0,89	0,85		
<b>MPC CR</b>	70%/0,61				0,84	0,84
<b>MPCUK</b>	78%/0,67				0,88	0,88
		<b>USE1</b>	<b>USE3</b>	<b>USE5</b>		
<b>USE CR</b>	62%/0,69	0,83	0,81	0,69		
<b>USE UK</b>	61%/0,68	0,83	0,81	0,69		
		<b>DCS4</b>	<b>DCS5</b>	<b>DCS6</b>		
<b>DCS CR</b>	52%/0,64	0,855	0,79	0,76		
<b>DCS UK</b>	46%/0,56	0,80	0,79	0,71		

Source: authors' own research,

Note: the score means factor scores and  $\alpha$  means Cronbach's alpha.