Examination of the value system and food preferences in the institutional catering market in light of primary research carried out in Békés county

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Summary findings, conclusions, recommendations

In my present paper I try to characterise the differences present at the level of food preferences by means of examining the value system as, in my opinion, differences in the value system are reflected in concrete product choices and thus also in food selection. By using factor and cluster analysis I have proven that consumer groups formed alongside the value system also differ regarding food consumption viewpoints.

Furthermore, in my paper I also aim to characterise food preference as a determining factor of modes of daily eating. Based on the results, I have concluded that the impact of time-related preferences on food selection can be felt in consumers' opinions, but cannot be regarded as dominant. In the system of food selection viewpoints, internal and external criteria related to quality still play an important role, while factors linked to price have a definite priority. Based on the results of the research I have also concluded that the order of preferences typical of food consumption determines the ranking of institutional catering alternatives.

Introduction

In the past decades there has been such a multi-level modification in the social-cultural environment of our country whose impact could be felt on food consumption by generating changes in the preferences of the customs of food purchase as well as food preparation.

One of the most important changes is the growth of the employment of women working either in full-time or part-time that resulted in the decrease of the time spent on cooking.

Regarding the cultural factors it is important to mention the modifications in the system of values and value preferences-especially the greater emphasis put on the role of time as a value-forming criterion on the one hand and the greater role of the symbolic content of food consumption due to which food consumption has become the means one self-expression besides meeting the purely physiological needs *(Lehota, 2002)*.

Taking the social factors into consideration, relevant information is the tighter and stronger connection between food consumption and spending one's leisure time. By examining the assessment of time and the consumer/food consumer behaviour in this relation, we can state that the relation to time can be defined as a secondary segment criterion and a crucial factor in the present-day Hungarian society regarding the fact whether the effect of the trend of acceleration or that of slo-

wing down prevails in the way of life of the individual.

I think the relation to time is also reflected in the individual food consuming habit by affecting food preparation and food buying as a more preferred factor. The difference between the groups of old and new consumers can be defined on the basis of many criterions among which I would highlight the relation to time and I wish to characterise the differences shown concerning this factor.

According to *Mária Törőcsik*, the prominent figure of trend research in Hungary, the most characteristic difference in the old and new consumers' habits can be noticed in the time dimension *(Törőcsik, 2003)*. Time sensitivity has a greater and greater effect on the consuming and within it food consuming behaviour of the individual by generating higher demands in trade and services. As a matter of fact, the new generation of consumers do require instant rewards, non-stop opening hours as well as the possibility of buying consumer goods at one place. To meet these demands, this has resulted in generating the growth in the significance of One Stop Shopping *(Agárdi – Bauer, 2000)*.

As time is one of the most scarce means for the new consumers *(Lewis – Bridger, 2000)* they give a higher priority to it than to money that basically influence the content of the consumer basket of the individual.

All this is reflected in the greater demand for convenience products. According to the survey of ACNielsen carried out in 2005, 40 out of 100 Hungarian city dwellers regard convenience the most important factor when it comes to choosing a shop or consumption. One of the incentives of retail trade turnover can be the greater demand for convenience *(ACNielsen, 2005)*.

This statement is also reflected by the survey covering 11 EU member states whose conclusion is that the consumption of convenience, leisure and functional products is making the biggest headway at the beginning of the 21st century besides healthy food, bio-products and the meals of ethnic cuisines *(Balogh – Panyor, 2002)*.

I think the changes mentioned above will result in the appearance of new consumer needs and a new segment, the time-sensitive/time-conscious consumer group. To meet the demands of this group there are new opportunities offered in the already saturated food consuming market.

The methodology and background of the research

One of the bases of my research was that the individual's lifestyle was reflected in their food consuming habits and the differences shown in the value system affected the selection of a concrete product and service.

In my research I aimed to examine the impact of time as a value-forming factor on the level of food preferences. I had the hypothesis that among the selection between catering alternatives typical of working days the individual's food preference also plays an important role.

In my primary research I surveyed 300 inhabitants of Békés county with the help of a (pre-tested) standardised questionnaire. During the data processing I received 277 questionnaires that could be assessed by using SPSS 11.5 statistical programme package.

In my questionnaire I examined the catering solutions typical of individual food consumption and working days. As I had presumed that the individual's lifestyle was reflected in their food consuming habits, I examined the lifestyle typical of the individual from two aspects: on the level of the value system and the leisure time structure.

The results of the research

The demographic feature of the sample

The proportion of females and males in the survey is 58% and 42%, respectively.

Regarding age, the representatives of the age groups 20-35 (132 persons) and 36-50 (120 persons) were in equal number in the sample. Regarding qualification, those with a secondary education were over-represented in the sample with a proportion of 78%.

Regarding earnings, almost half of the interviewees earned HUF 61-100,000 a month followed by those earning less than the average net of HUF 60,000 per month (28%) and finally those who had a monthly net income of HUF 101-150,000.

Regarding the place of living typically (83%) city dwellers are represented in the sample.

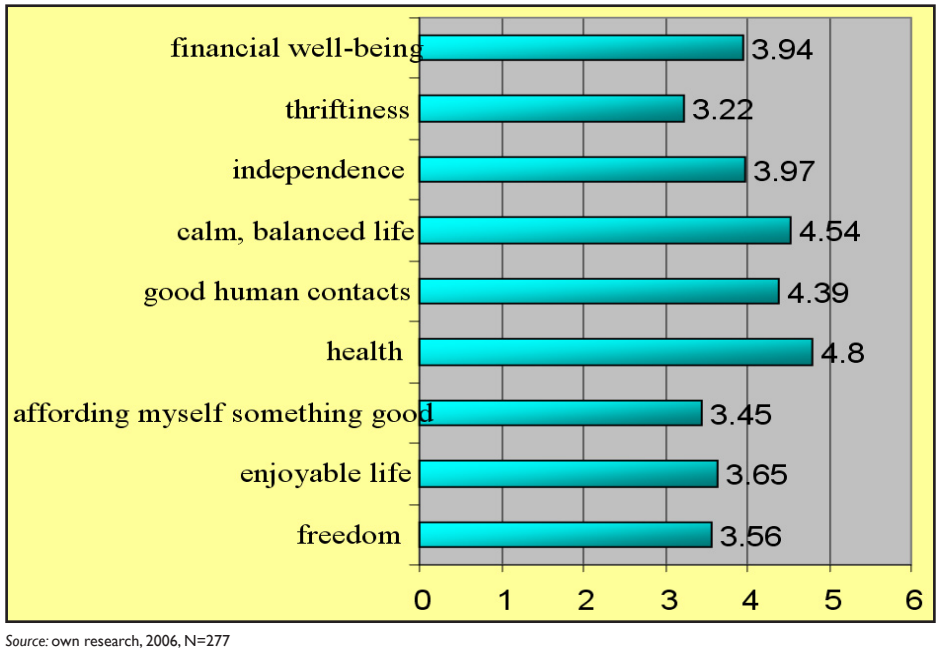
Characterising the structures of value systems

As I think the structure of the preference of food, consumer cannot be separated from the value ranking system of the individual, it was important to map the structures of value systems. By means of surveying with questionnaires and based on the Rokeach value structure successfully used in sociological research using some of its elements I examined the value system of the respondents.

Regarding the average of the ranking assigned to the value factors still the dominance of the traditional values can be noticed based on the responds of the sample members, who regarded the calm, balanced life, health and good human contacts the most important.

Figure 1

The ranking of value factors in order of importance
(1=not at all important, 5=the most important)



Source: own research, 2006, N=277

To get to know which values form a correlated unit according to the esteem of the interviewees, I carried out a factor analysis. Rotation was made by Varimax method, KMO index result was 0.68 and the results explained 58% of the cumulated variation. As a result, I had three distinguished factor groups, which are: (F1) „the group of hedonistic values", „the group of traditional values", (F2) and finally (F3) „the group of values in connection with financial well-being". Among the value categories involved in the analysis under the term 'independence' I mean financial independence and it was assigned to the group entitled "values in connection with financial well-being" although based on its factor weight it could also have been fitted with the traditional value category.

Table 1

Factor analysis of values

Values	Factor weight of factors		
	Hedonistic values (F1)	Traditional values (F2)	Values in connection with financial well-being (F3)
freedom	0.798	0.095	-0.031
enjoyable life	0.744	-0.115	0.045
affording myself something good	0.646	-0.145	0.456
health	-0.056	0.764	-0.053
good human contacts	0.074	0.726	0.042
calm, balanced life	-0.160	0.710	0.270
independence	0.385	0.417	0.489
thriftiness	-0.051	0.074	0.812
financial well-being	0.202	0.118	0.757

Source: own resource, 2006, N=277, KMO index=0.68 varimax rotation, explained cumulated variation 59%

In my opinion the priorities present in the consumer's value system are reflected on the level of selecting a concrete product or food. To prove this hypothesis, cluster analysis was carried out on the basis of the results of the factor analysis based on value factors. In the groups created as a result of the above-mentioned analysis I also examined what differences can be shown in the points of view of their food consumption.

As a result of the cluster analysis carried out on the value factors three well-separable segments could be created. According to the result of the variance analysis a significant deviation cold be detected in the case of all the three factors between at least two clusters.

Cluster 1 is "those longing for tranquillity and lovers of traditional values" (94 persons) who esteem calm, balanced family life, good human contacts and thriftiness more important than average.

Segment 2 is "value seekers" (103 persons) who ranked everything to be more important than the average.

Cluster 3 is "pleasure-seeking hedonists" (87 persons) for whom exciting, enjoyable life and affording themselves something good had priority over the other value factors.

I presume that segments created alongside the value system also differ regarding the preferred factors while choosing food. To prove this, I analysed the food consumer preference ranking on the whole sample as well as in the case of the groups created on the basis of the three value systems.

Food consumer preferences on the whole sample and in the case of the segments created on the basis of the three value systems

When getting to know the food consumers' preferences, not only the points of view of food buying but also those of food consumption and food preparation were involved in the factors to be ranked. Based on the average value of the rank assigned to these factors the following order was formed in the case of the whole sample: the most preferred point of view is "the taste and the smell of the food", followed by its "vitamin content" and "variety" as well as the criteria of being "cheap".

The dominance of the outer and qualitative features in food consumption was also backed by the results of former research results *(Horváth et al., 1998)*.

Despite the fact that experts note the necessary time for food preparation is becoming a more and more important criterion, the respondents thought it was the least important. The opinion of the sample is in accord with the result of the national survey done by GfK, which puts the importance of the tastiness of food into the foreground instead of the rapidity of its preparation *(GfK, 2006)*.

The result of my research also proves that it is not the usual practice for domestic consumers to enjoy restaurant services in order to save on cooking time. One of the reasons for this is that the proportion of eating out only takes up not more than 8% of the expenses spent on food in Hungary lagging behind the typical 40% characterising Western Europe *(Food Service Trend, 2006)*.

The result of my examination expresses that the effect of time-related preferences on food choice can be felt in the consumer opinions but they cannot be regarded dominant. The criteria that can be linked to the inner and outer criteria of quality as well as price are predominantly given priority.

Table 2

The criteria of food selection according to the whole sample as well as the three segments

	Lovers of tranquillity and traditional values	Pleasure-seeking hedonists	Value seekers	Sample average
Taste, smell	4.39	4.82	4.53	4.49
Freshness	4.41	4.95	4.52	4.40
Vitamin-mineral content	3.11	3.77	4.11	4.05
Variety	3.61	4.21	4.00	3.93
Cheapness	4.01	3.59	3.91	3.85
Nutritive value	2.73	3.82	3.80	3.72
Appearance of food	2.72	4.17	3.62	3.59
Place of eating	3.01	3.89	3.32	3.31
Necessary time for preparation	3.91	2.23	3.31	3.29

Source: own research, 2006, N=277

Significant differences could be traced in the food consuming points of view typical of the three groups.

In the case of *"those longing for tranquillity and lovers of traditional values"* the preference of time necessary for food preparation appeared. This criterion can be important for those who often cook for their family members so the time necessary for cooking also plays a role in food selection. The role of "thriftiness" was also dominant in the value system of this group. It is reflected in their food selection as they ranked the criterion of "cheapness" above the average.

"Value seekers" ranked all factors to be more important than the average in food selection. In the case of the order of factors influencing food selection, like in the case of value factors, it was typical for all the members of this group to overestimate all factors.

"Pleasure-seeking hedonists" turned out to like tasty, varied and substantial foods. For them it was more important than the average that the appearance of food should be attractive. In their value system the importance of enjoyable life and self remuneration was shown and it is also reflected in the system of the pints of view determining their food consumption.

To sum it up, we can conclude that the clusters formed alongside the value system can be described by well-characterised food preference ranking that suit the basic values. In my opinion the statement that basic values determine and influence individual food consumption and the order of criteria considered by the individual when selecting food proved to be true.

Ways of eating on working days

The impact of the role of time on food consuming habits can best be grabbed form the point of view of eating out, especially in the examination of the structure of different service methods belonging to this area as well as the extent of expenditure. As my objective is the examination of the role of eating at the workplaces, I analysed the frequency and cost of consuming food taken from home on working days by comparing it with other eating alternatives outside home. The time spent on cooking can best be saved by eating out.

As a result, we can state that the members of the sample typically take food consumed at the workplace from home and use the canteen and buffet there only once a month. I think the preference of food taken from home to institutional catering alternatives that can substitute cooking can be explained by price sensitivity.

Price played a decisive role in the points of view system typical of food consumption in the sample whose effect could also be felt on the choice of the ways of eating. The same holds true for the criterion of "good taste, smell". The preference of home-made food suited to own taste can also be explained that for the sample the criterion of good taste and good smell had the highest priority when choosing food besides being economical.

If we have a look at the system of catering alternatives typical of working days we can see that among the eating-out catering alternatives canteen, restaurant and buffet are the most frequently visited places. Canteen can be a favourable solution primarily due to its low prices, buffer offers quick catering possibilities to meet the demands of meals during the day. Restaurants ensure the consumption of tasty meals in pleasant surroundings for those frequenting it in lunchtime.

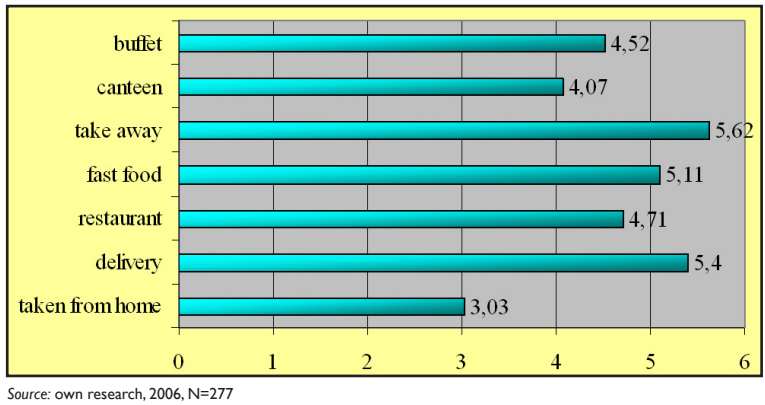
When comparing the structure of food consuming points of view and ways of eating typical of working days we can see that taste, freshness, variety and low price are the most important factors in food selection and these factors can also determine the choice of the place and method

of eating. The preference of the cheapest alternative, i.e. the consumption of food taken from home proves the dominant role of price sensitivity together with the most frequent use of canteen services ensuring the consumption of the cheapest hot meal. The preference of the choice of the buffet can be explained by the growing number of meals between the main ones also typical of the Hungarian food consuming market. Restaurant, the third most frequent catering alternative among the eating-out catering alternatives on working days pushed the choice of the fast food restaurants and cafeterias to the background that also proves the leading role of "taste" and "variety" in the order of food consumption preference.

Figure 2

Ways of eating on working days

(average of the frequency of use, 1= daily; 6=never)

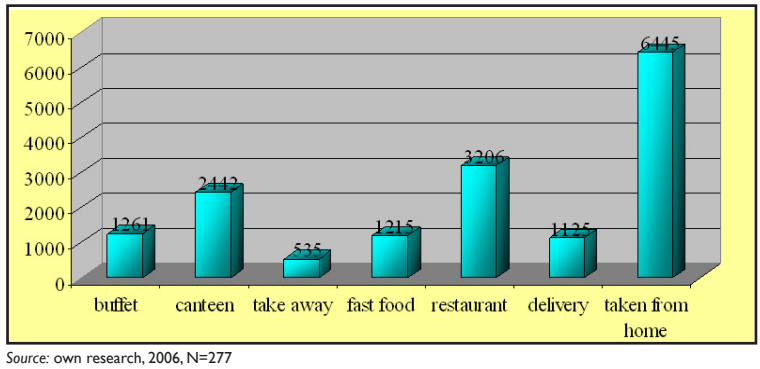


Source: own research, 2006, N=277

Besides the frequency of use, it is also important to know how much one spends of their revenue on certain ways of eating so I also examined the average monthly extent consumers spend on food brought from home and on eating out at the places of work. I received the following data: 6445 Ft are spent monthly on food brought from home. Among the alternatives of institutional catering most of the respondents' budget was spent on restaurants (3206 Ft) as well as on canteen food (2442 Ft). The least money (535 Ft) is spent on cafeterias that also were the least frequently visited one.

Figure 3

Average amount of money per month spent on eating out on working days (Ft)



Source: own research, 2006, N=277

The extent of spending is in accord with the frequency of use of the single solutions: most money is spent on food taken from home by the respondents. Based on the level of spending, it is followed by the restaurant, canteen and buffet.

When compared to the frequency of use there is smaller difference between the institutional catering alternatives regarding spending: canteen came first regarding frequency of use and overtook restaurant but when taking the level of spending into consideration, it is lagging behind. This can be explained by the difference of price between the two services: the visitors spend less on the canteen as a service suitable for consuming one of the cheapest hot meals than on the classical restaurant less frequently visited and with higher prices.

To sum it up, we can state from the results that the members of the sample spend the most on food taken from home and they use it most frequently that can be explained by high price sensitivity. Besides, there is need for alternatives replacing cooking but their extent cannot be dominant yet either on the basis of the frequency of use or the level of spending.

In Western Europe the turnover of the food service sector grew twice as fast (by 5% per year) between 1999-2001 than the market of food trade. According to the experts, this growth will be continuous and by 2010 it will have a share of 43 % of the food trade of Western Europe *(Food Service Trend, 2006)*.

The *domestic proportion* of eating out is still lagging behind the international data and can amount to as high as 8-10%- based on the estimates of the experts but its role and proportion from food consumption is expected to grow. It is also proved by the data of the CSO (Central Statistical Office).

On a domestic level the growing tendency of eating out of the expenditures spent on food can be noticed after *(Mikesné, 2004)*. The shift from the bottom was also helped by the fact that the office blocks of the multinational companies operating in Hungary and employing a huge number of people basically have a kitchen and a restaurant. The increase of lunch vouchers exempt from tax over the rate of inflation also supported the development and spread of domestic institutional catering together with the fact that recently more and more places of work undertake the extra costs of hot meals. There is a growing demand for cheap and fast hot meal services on working days.

Table 3

Data of food consumed inside and outside home 1989-2001

Name	Percentage of consumption						
	1989	1991	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001
total spending on food	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
from it: *- consumed at home*	92.6	93.1	94.0	94.1	93.4	92.0	91.7
-eating out	7.4	6.9	6.0	5.9	6.6	8.0	8.3

Source: Mikesné, 2004

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