

Ethical, but pitiful: Exploring consumers' socio-evolutionary responses to stereotyped foods and their favorers

Harri Luomala

University of Vaasa, School of Marketing and Communication

Anne Matilainen

University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute

Marjo Siltaoja

University of Jyväskylä

Lähdesmäki Merja

University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute

Leena Viitaharju

University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute

Sami Kurki

University of Helsinki, Ruralia Institute

Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland [grant number 296726]

Cite as:

Luomala Harri, Matilainen Anne, Siltaoja Marjo, Merja Lähdesmäki, Viitaharju Leena, Kurki Sami (2020), Ethical, but pitiful: Exploring consumers' socio-evolutionary responses to stereotyped foods and their favorers. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 49th, (63650)

Paper from the 49th Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 26-29, 2020.



Ethical, but pitiful: Exploring consumers' socio-evolutionary responses to stereotyped foods and their favorers

Abstract:

Ingredients such as insects can evoke negative stereotypical meanings in consumers' minds, even though representing an alternative healthy and sustainable protein source. We offer a novel socio-evolutionary conceptualization that accounts for the drivers and outcomes of consumer responses to differently stereotyped foods and their users. Our S1 (N = 412) shows that roach (*Cypriniformes* fish species) foods are shrouded with negative stereotypical food meanings and that Self-enhancement values foster the most positive views. For S2, we collect more data (N = 400) to establish that consumers, observing users of various stereotyped foods, differentially exhibit emotions of admiration, pity, contempt and envy as well as the action tendencies of imitation, rejection and rivalry. The contribution of our research is to theoretically formalize and empirically demonstrate how evolutionary needs and socio-cultural factors work together to shape the meanings food products convey to consumers.

Key words: Food, Stereotypical meanings, Emotions

Track: Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

Ever-growing meat production and consumption has a detrimental effect on the climate and alternative protein sources, that possess a smaller carbon footprint, are badly needed (Hartmann, Ruby, Schmidt, and Siegrist, 2018). Examples of these include plants, insects and lake fish such as perch, roach, carp bream and tench. Unfortunately, consumers typically hold negative stereotypical beliefs about the sensory properties and convenience of use of freshwater fish (Badr, Salwa, and Ahmed, 2015). Yet, in taste tests, consumers can find food products such as tench pâté as highly palatable (Branciari et al., 2019). In other words, improving the reputation and brand equity of lake fish products offers a great sustainable future business potential.

In prior marketing and consumption research, the images conveyed by users of foods carrying stereotypical meanings have been explored. For example, organic food favorers are perceived as more altruistic, respected and honest (Luomala, Puska, Lähdesmäki, Siltaoja, and Kurki, 2020). Yet, these studies are mostly descriptive and suffer from under-theorization – staying mute on how and why stereotypical food meanings shape consumer behaviors.

We contribute to this literature by offering a novel socio-evolutionary conceptualization that more specifically explains the drivers and outcomes of consumer responses to differently stereotyped foods and their users. Next, we develop a socio-evolutionary framework to guide the empirical investigations. Second, we establish if roach foods are shrouded with negative stereotypical meanings and if context-dependent value orientations such as conservatism and self-enhancement shape them. Third, we analyze what socio-evolutionary emotions and action tendencies favorers of foods carrying distinct stereotypical food meanings evoke in observers. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

2. Development of a Socio-Evolutionary Conceptual Framework

Recently, calls for the deeper integration of socio-cultural and evolutionary perspectives to more fully understand human and consumer behavior have been voiced and initial attempts have appeared (Saad, 2017). Yet, there is a great need for a higher degree of conceptual formalization. Our socio-evolutionary framework for understanding consumer responses to stereotyped foods and their users (see Fig. 1) represents a step toward that direction.

The social and cultural meanings of shopping for, preparing, eating and disposing of foods have interested scholars for a long time. Here, we focus more directly on the meanings

various food products and their users convey. The ingredients, production methods and marketing efforts play a role in what meanings are activated in consumers' minds – they and other foodscape factors form a general socio-cultural context in which also evolutionary mechanisms operate (Fig. 1).

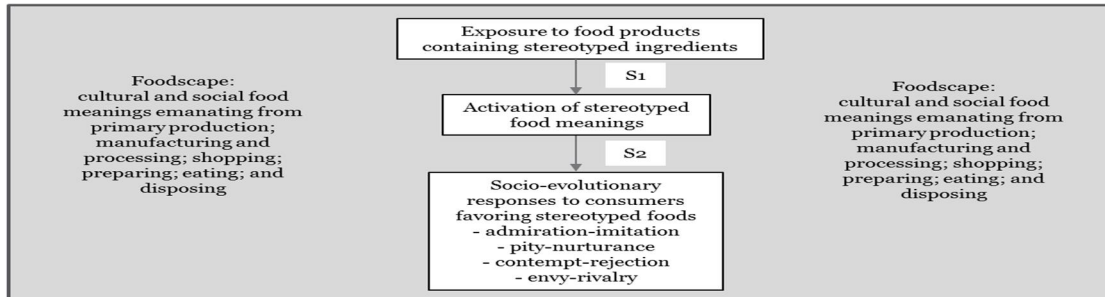


Figure 1. A socio-evolutionary research framework.

Favorers of products carrying stereotypical meanings can elicit emotions (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). We propose that socio-evolutionary theorizing offers ideas regarding why favorers of stereotyped foods stir up specific emotions (see Fig. 1). Admiration and envy are both the consequences of the activation of evolutionary need for status – to gain and maintain respect and prestige (Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013). In the case of admiration, an observer notes that another person is excelling in action that is socio-culturally valued – raising the likelihood of emulation to receive reputational benefits. In turn, the genesis of envy encompasses that an observer perceives being out-performed in a socio-culturally valued action alerting him/her to rival for more recognition by advertising one's performance in the valued action (Berman, Levine, Barasch, and Small, 2015).

In turn, the socio-evolutionary need for affiliation – to form and maintain cooperative alliances (Griskevicius & Kenrick, 2013) – pertains to the arousal of pity and contempt. If an observer notes someone failing in a socio-culturally valued action, then the likelihood of experiencing pity increases (Oveis, Horberg, and Keltner, 2010). A natural action tendency in this occasion is nurturance, for example manifesting itself in various forms of pro-social behaviors (Cavanaugh, Bettman, and Luce, 2015). As regards contempt, it is an emotion that occurs when someone is observed to display a socio-culturally disvalued behaviors thus challenging the prevailing moral codes of the community (Steckler & Tracy, 2014). The persons triggering the feeling of contempt tend to be rejected or socially excluded.

Our basic claim is that different stereotyped foods signal about the likelihood of their favorers to engage in socio-culturally (dis)valued actions. To illustrate, if favoring roach foods connects with negative stereotypical meanings (socio-cultural devaluation), then their

user will probably generate either pity or contempt in observers. In turn, these socio-evolutionary emotions can inspire nurturing and dissociating consumer behaviors in others.

3. Study 1: Are Roach Foods Shrouded with Negative Stereotypical Meanings?

As suggested, noticing that a fish food is prepared from roach can trigger negative stereotypical meanings in consumers' minds. Moreover, as theorized above, variation in socio-cultural contexts can play a role in this. Values have been used to operationalize them (Elenkov & Manev, 2005) and can also shape, for example, how organic food favorers are viewed by others (Luomala et al., 2020). These ideas motivated the first step of our research.

3.1 Survey questionnaires, measures and sampling

We started by conducting an online-survey (N = 412) to simply establish, if roach foods really are shrouded with negative stereotypical meanings in a North-European socio-cultural context. We used the TEMS-scale (Renner, Sproesser, Strohbah, and Schupp, 2012) to measure food meanings. We tailored it in two ways. First, we replaced the original guiding words "I eat what I eat, ..." with "To what extent, do you believe that an average person thinks that [specification of key ingredient] foods represent...". The third person-technique aimed at reducing socially desirable responding (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). Second, we used only two items to capture each stereotypical food meanings. For example, the items for the Ethicality included "...ethical eating" and "...environmentally friendly eating". Third, using the same third-person technique, we presented questions about the emotions and action tendencies roach food favorers instigate. However, we will return to the socio-evolutionary emotions and action tendencies not until we present S2. Lastly, participants' values (PVQ-21), gender, age, place of residence and household size were queried.

We developed two versions of the questionnaire. To see if roach foods carry negative stereotypical meanings, we needed a yardstick. Over the past years, chicken food products have become the norm choice in many Western societies. Consequently, we developed two versions of the questionnaire: one for chicken foods (N = 201) and the other for roach foods (N = 211). The sample was provided to us by a market research firm. The sample consisted of 62 % females and represented various age groups: under 25 (10 %), 25-34 (22 %), 35-44 (14 %), 45-54 (21 %), 55-64 (25 %) and 65 or over (8 %). The majority of respondents (72-74 %) lived in urban households of 2-5 persons. Participants responding to the chicken vs. roach food meaning questionnaires did not differ in terms of these characteristics.

3.2 Results

The reliability of roach food meaning constructs varied from .65 to .83 and for chicken meaning constructs from .32 to .75. Due to the low construct reliability, the Societal norms was measured using only the single item "... eating resulting from the sense of duty". Generally, the results show that roach foods stir up more negative food meanings than chicken foods do. However, they are associated with the stronger Naturalness, Ethicality and Societal norm meanings than chicken foods ($t = 2.86, p = .004$; $t = 5.84, p < .001$; $t = 4.60, p < .001$, respectively). The first rises from a more egoistic (cf. status) motivation and the latter two from a more altruistic (cf. affiliation) motivation (Kareklas, Carlson, and Muehling, 2014).

To initially explore if value orientations, as a proxy for a determinant of socio-cultural variation, shape the meanings attached to chicken vis-à-vis roach foods, we conducted a series of simple correlation analyses. We compressed Schwartz's 10 basic values into four broader value class constructs of Conservatism, Openness to change, Self-enhancement and Self-transcendence (see e.g. Costa, Zepeda, and Sirieix, 2014). The reliability of these constructs ranged from .60 to .74 in the chicken data and from .58 to .80 in the roach data.

The differences in positive correlations ($p < .01$) between the value class constructs and food meaning dimensions in the two data-sets indeed hint that socio-cultural variation is an influential force. Namely, in the roach data, 8 positive correlation prevailed between the Self-enhancement and meaning dimensions while only 4 could be detected for the Openness to change, 3 for the Self-transcendence and 1 for the Conservatism. In contrast, the chicken data reveals 5 positive correlations between the Conservatism and meaning dimensions, whereas 3 was uncovered for the Self-transcendence, 2 for the Openness to change and none for the Self-enhancement. Counterintuitively, it seems that consumers high on Self-enhancement values view roach foods most favorably. This probably pertains to their strong evolutionary need for status – they perceive, in their local socio-cultural context or bubble, favoring roach foods as a functional way to impress others, gain respect and increase reputation.

4. Study 2: Do Users of Foods Carrying Stereotypical Meanings Evoke Distinct Socio-Evolutionary Emotions and Action Tendencies?

Next, we set out to explore, if consumers observing users of various stereotyped foods differentially exhibit emotions of admiration, pity, contempt and envy as well as the action tendencies of imitation, nurturance, rejection and rivalry. To cover a broader spectrum of

ingredient-driven stereotyped food meanings, we decided to gather data also concerning insect and game meat (moose) foods. This was expected to add the variation in the key DVs.

4.1 Survey questionnaires, measures and sampling

The same questionnaire and measures as in S1 were used. Along the lines of Antonetti & Maklan (2016) and Ivens et al. (2015), the socio-evolutionary emotions of admiration (items admiration & respect), contempt (items contempt & loath), pity (pity & compassion) and envy (envy & jealousy) were gauged. One sample item includes: “To what extent do you believe that an average person feels *respect* towards a favorer of roach foods” (scale 1 = not at all, 7 = definitively believe). The single-item measures were developed for the consumer action tendencies triggered by the assumed chicken meat / roach / insect / moose meat users. An example item for imitation includes “When an average person have noticed that someone favors roach foods, to what extent do you believe that this will also make him/her to favor roach food products” (scale 1 = not at all, 7 = definitively believe).

The responses to the insect and moose meat questionnaires (Ns = 200, 199) were provided to us by the same market research company as in S1. As regards the background characteristics, the new study participants did not significantly differ from those of S1. The total sample consisted of 60 % females and represented various age groups: under 25 (8 %), 25-34 (23 %), 35-44 (17 %), 45-54 (18 %), 55-64 (24 %) and 65 or over (10 %). The majority of respondents (73-78 %) lived in urban households of 2-5 persons.

4.2. Results

The reliability of insect food meaning constructs varied from .68 to .89, and in the case of moose meat food meaning constructs from .59 to .87. The corresponding alphas for the emotion measures ranged from .76 to .87 in the chicken data; from .64 to .82 in the roach data; from .55 to .82 in the insect data; and from .44 to .67 in the moose meat data. Three single-item consumer action tendency measures produced face-valid results. However, the nurturance-item was apparently misunderstood. Thus, these results are not reported here.

When compared to chicken foods, insect foods fare better only in terms of the Impression management and Societal norms meaning dimensions ($t = -2.82, p < .01$; $t = -4.77, p < .001$, respectively). These results probably originate from the hype surrounding insect consumption at the time of data gathering. On the other hand, the moose meat food meaning findings mirror those of the roach foods in S1 in that the Naturalness and Ethicality meanings dimensions receive higher scores vis-à-vis chicken foods ($t = -6.09, p < .001$; $t = -4.19, p <$

.001). Moreover, there were less statistically significant differences – suggesting more favorable food meanings as compared to roach and insects. These results reveal that roach, insect and moose meat food meanings touch both the status and affiliation needs in different degrees and ways. This may lead to varied socio-evolutionary emotions and action tendencies.

Table 3 summarizes the results for socio-evolutionary emotions and observer action tendencies from the independent sample t-tests. As regards the emotions, 1) roach and insect food favorers are pitied more; 2) insect and moose meat food favorers invite more contempt and envy; and 3) moose meat food favorers are admired more than chicken food favorers. In terms of the action tendencies, 1) roach and insect food favorers impel less imitative and more avoidant consumer behaviors; and 2) moose meat food favorers drive more rivaling consumption action tendencies than chicken food favorers.

Socio-evolutionary emotions and action tendencies	Chicken vs. roach food users (Ms; t- and p-values)	Chicken vs. insect food users (Ms; t- and p-values)	Chicken vs. moose food users (Ms; t- and p-values)
A) - Admiration - Imitation	3.24 vs. 3.31; t = -0.48; p = .63 4.04 vs. 3.63; t = +2.68; p = .008	3.24 vs. 3.10; t = +0.91; p = .36 4.04 vs. 2.92; t = +7.56, p < .001	3.24 vs. 3.83; t = -3.98; p < .001 4.04 vs. 3.87; t = +1.12, p = .26
B) - Contempt - Rejection	2.39 vs. 2.56; t = -1.33; p = .18 2.38 vs. 2.65; t = -1.97; p = .05	2.39 vs. 3.64; t = -9.17; p < .001 2.38 vs. 3.15; t = -5.42, p < .001	2.39 vs. 2.65; t = -2.09; p = .04 2.38 vs. 2.48; t = +0.77, p = .44
C) - Pity - Nurturance	2.53 vs. 2.85; t = -2.44; p = .02 -	2.53 vs. 3.13; t = -4.54; p < .001 -	2.53 vs. 2.52; t = +0.06; p = .95 -
D) - Envy - Rivalry	2.02 vs. 2.19; t = -0.76; p = .45 3.10 vs. 3.30; t = -1.32; p = .19	2.02 vs. 2.27; t = -1.94; p = .05 3.10 vs. 3.88; t = -5.01, p < .001	2.02 vs. 3.21; t = -8.39; p < .001 3.10 vs. 3.61; t = -3.39, p < .001

Table 3. Socio-evolutionary emotions and action tendencies evoked by chicken, roach, insect and moose food users.

To interpret these differences, we also analyzed the correlations between the socio-evolutionary emotions and observer action tendencies. Generally, throughout the four datasets, we found the most consistent positive correlations ($p < .001$) between admiration & imitation (buying the same product); contempt & rejection (avoiding to buy the same product); and pity & rejection. The first two are in line with our theorizing and suggest that admiration drives imitative consumer behaviors and contempt avoidant ones. Next, we focus on making sense of the key observations emanating from Table 3.

As far as status needs are concerned, neither roach or insect food favorers are imitated to a great extent, but moose meat food favorers are admired – not very surprising in a North-European socio-cultural context (Ljung, Riley, Heberlein, and Ericsson, 2012). Moreover, both insect and moose meat food favorers are envied and trigger observer’s action tendency to do better than them in the arena of consumption ($r = 0.21$, $p = .004$; $r = .25$, $p < .001$,

respectively). In the case of insect food favorers, this may seem surprising at the first glance. However, insect foods were becoming more trendy at the time – telling of increasing socio-cultural valuation and relevance for status needs (cf. Hartmann et al., 2018).

Second, as regards the socio-evolutionary emotions and action tendencies underlying affiliation needs, both the roach and insect food favorers are pitied (the latter group are spited too) – their consumer choices are also avoided ($r = 0.46, p < .001$; $r = .35, p < .001$, respectively). Interestingly, moose meat food favorers, in addition of being admired and envied, create the feelings of contempt as well in fellow consumers. Of these emotions, admiration and envy seem to predispose observers to consume something that is considered even more prestigious ($r = 0.48, p < .001$; $r = .25, p < .001$, respectively) whereas contempt leads to avoiding consumption of moose meat products ($r = .32, p < .001$). These findings may relate to the fact that the moose meat is less commercially available to ordinary consumers as hunters and land-owners commonly either use it by themselves or distribute it in their parochial social networks to maintain their exclusive access to it (Ljung et al., 2012).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our results show how evolutionary needs and socio-cultural factors work together to shape the meanings ingredient-driven food products convey to consumers. Socio-evolutionary responses to roach foods and their users reveal that consumers recognize that favoring them represent a responsible and smart choice, but also that they currently lack status. Yet, high Self-enhancement-consumers are a promising target as they recognize the underlying status-signaling potential. In turn, favoring insect foods can render respect from others, but simultaneously consumers find it difficult to affiliate with them. Finally, moose meat foods show pro-social status symbolism, but also trigger envy and competitive consumer responses.

Our research generates a bunch of academic implications. First, tapping into consumers' socio-evolutionary responses to stereotyped foods and their favorers can produce more valid results than traditional survey requiring more cognitive processing. Once activated, specific emotions can influence behavior in unrelated situations independently of the conditions that gave rise to them. For example, compassionate or empathic responses toward roach food favorers can entice pro-social consumer behaviors (Grinstein, Hagvedt, and Kronrod, 2019).

Second, our data collection was restricted to measuring the socio-cultural variation through tapping into individuals' value orientations. It can also be gauged in terms of geographies – in rural (vs. urban) areas roach foods and their users can be viewed more positively. Finally, in

ideological bubbles such as in the “locavore tribe” (Reich, Beck, and Price, 2018) roach foods and their favorers could also receive more positive socio-evolutionary responses. At any rate, socio-cultural variation needs to be operationalized much more diversely in future studies.

Managerially, the biggest challenge in the roach (and insect) food marketing is how to transform the prevailing negative stereotypical meanings into something that is considered a socio-culturally valued vehicle to gain respect or to affiliate with others. To be associated with high status, pro-environmental behaviors should be associated as costly, effortful and visible and positioned as representing efficiency rather than curtailment (Uren, Roberts, Dzidic, and Leviston, 2019). One way to achieve this is to induce social comparison processes in roach food marketing communication to create compassion or envy that, in turn, may result in (in)conspicuous spending. Food retailers can employ in-store marketing devices (e.g. short videos on digital displays) to portrait roach food users – potentially activating store patrons’ status and affiliation needs. This may result in emulation or competitive altruism. Admirable endorsers could also be recruited to promote roach foods (Ivens et al., 2015).

References

- Antonetti, P., & Maklan, S. (2016). Hippies, Greenies, and Tree Huggers: How the “Warmth” Stereotype Hinders the Adoption of Responsible Brands. *Psychology & Marketing*, 33, 796-813.
- Badr, L., Salwa, O., & Ahmed, Y. (2015). Perceived barriers to consumption of freshwater fish in Morocco. *British Food Journal*, 117, 274-285.
- Berman, J.Z., Levine, E.E., Barasch, A., & Small, D.A. (2015). The braggart's dilemma: On the social rewards and penalties of advertising prosocial behavior. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 52, 90-104.
- Branciarri, R., Roila, R., Valiani, A., Ranucci, D., Ortenzi, R., Miraglia, D., Bailetti, L., & Franceschini, R. (2019). Nutritional quality, safety, and sensory properties of smoked tench (tinca tinca) pâté from Trasimeno lake, Italy. *Italian Journal of Food Safety*, 8, 143-148.
- Cavanaugh, L.A., Bettman, J.R., & Luce, M.F. (2015). Feeling love and doing more for distant others: Specific positive emotions differentially affect prosocial consumption. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 52, 657-673.
- Costa, S., Zepeda, L., & Sirieix, L. (2014). Exploring the social value of organic food: A qualitative study in France. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 38, 228-237.
- Elenkov, D.S., & Manev, I.M. (2005). Top management leadership and influence on innovation: The role of sociocultural context. *Journal of Management*, 31, 381-402.

- Grinstein, A., Hagvedt, H., & Kronrod, A. (2019). Aesthetically (dis)pleasing visuals: A dual pathway to empathy and prosocial behavior. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 36, 83-99.
- Griskevicius, V., & Kenrick, D.T. (2013). Fundamental motives: How evolutionary needs influence consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 23, 373-386.
- Hartmann, C., Ruby, M.B., Schmidt, P. & Siegrist, M. (2018). Brave, health-conscious, and environmentally friendly: Positive impressions of insect food product consumers. *Appetite*, 68, 64-71.
- Ivens, B.S., Leischnig, A., Muller, B., & Valta, K. (2015). On the role of brand stereotypes in shaping consumer response toward brands: An empirical examination of direct and mediating effects of warmth and competence. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32, 808-820.
- Kareklas, I., Carlson, J.R., & Muehling, D.D. (2014). "I eat organic for my benefit and yours": Egoistic and altruistic considerations for purchasing organic foods and their implications for advertising strategists. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 43, 18-32.
- Ljung, P.E., Riley, S.J., Heberlein, T.A., & Ericsson, G. (2012). Eat, pray, and love: Game meat consumption and attitudes toward hunting. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 36, 669-675.
- Luomala, H.T., Puska, P., Lähdesmäki, M., Siltaoja, M., & Kurki S. (2020). Get some respect – buy organic foods! When everyday consumer choices serve as prosocial status signaling. *Appetite*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2019.104492>.
- Oveis, C., Horberg, E.J., & Keltner, D. (2010). Compassion, pride, and social intuitions of self-other similarity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 618-630.
- Reich, B.J., Beck, J.T., & Price, J. (2018). Food as ideology: Measurement and validation of locavorism. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 45, 849-868.
- Renner, B., Sproesser, G., Strohbach, S., & Schupp, H.T. (2012). Why we eat what we eat. The eating motivation survey (TEMS). *Appetite*, 59, 117-128.
- Saad, G. (2017). On the method of evolutionary psychology and its applicability to consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 54, 464-477.
- Steckler, C.M., & Tracy, J.L. (2014). The emotional underpinnings of social status. In J.T. Cheng, J.L. Tracy, & C. Anderson (Eds.). *The psychology of social status* (pp. 201–224). New York, USA: Springer.
- Uren, H.V., Roberts, L.D., Szidic, P.L., & Leviston, Z. (2019). High-status pro-environmental behaviors: Costly, effortful, and visible. *Environment and Behavior*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916519882773>.