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Case Study

Cultural Obstacles to Changing Social Food Taste of Iranians; Case Study: To Change the Taste from Traditional to Bulky Bread

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ABSTRACT

Due to social, cultural, and economic reasons, however, eating habits are not easy to change. Food taste formation begins at birth with breastfeeding and evolves throughout the life course under varying social and cultural circumstances. Since the formation of food taste occurs within social and cultural contexts, changing the related habits is subject to the same influences. In this research, we demonstrated how our samples preferred to use traditional white breads like "Sangak", "Barbari", and "Lavash", instead of bulky baguettes and French breads that were presumed to be more nutrient-richer. This research was done by deep interviews with 20 people from Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Our study had been conducted in the qualitative research framework through in-depth interviews. The major reasons people gave for their food choices in favour of traditional breads included availability, family routines, ceremony, lower prices of traditional breads, and, most importantly, the habit of consuming traditional breads developed from childhood. On the

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E-mail address: Z.Anvari@ut.ac.ir (Zohreh Anvari) other hand, and despite the constant media promotions in favour of bulky breads, its consumption was not equally distributed among social classes. This research shows that economic condition, education, and exposure to media are influential factors in determining consuming behaviours regarding bulky and traditional breads.

Keywords: Bulky bread, eating habits, social taste, traditional bread

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of biological and genetics discussions of olfaction, gustation, and the central nervous system in its formation, human taste is, nevertheless, cultural. Food taste formation begins at birth by breastfeeding and continues throughout the life course. Depending on which culture the child grows in and the relevant food habits, food taste formation reaches its peak at the age of six months when the child starts to eat. In adulthood, acculturation determines the preferences and detestations of food tastes. Although genetics do play a role in food preferences in humans, the various food tastes across distinct cultures prove it to be a cultural phenomenon.

Through eating, we both eat our culturally accepted foods and acquire the gustatory experience of our own culture. We also both consciously and unconsciously actuate the meanings embedded in foods and let them in our mental processes. In fact, tastes are cultural choices and demonstrate cultures. Tastes are interwoven with culturally specific events and practices. Thus, they are attributed to, experienced via, and recalled through specific savours. In social life, foods are accompanied by several markers; during consumption, all these networks connecting food and the rest of society together start being actuated and turn eating into a social experience (Izadi, 2013).

In his work *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2011) illuminated how specific groups, in particular social classes, delineated their life style and distinguished

it from that of others through their choice of goods, clothes, foods, cosmetics, furniture, and interior design. In his work, Bourdieu perused the relation between food, taste, and class, and argued that the working class considered food as belonging to the material world, whereas the bourgeoisie (the middle class) disaffirmed the distinction between the private and public spaces and between natural and supernatural, and so let the form and sensation shaped the experience of eating. Social classes distinguish themselves from each other through food and tastes. Teachers, whose cultural capital overweighs their economic capital, follow an austere way of consumption, and seek authenticity in a way that ensues minimal economic costs. The professional experts or senior managers, on the other hand, disaffirm the common taste found in stodgy, high-fat, rare, and royal foods that are prepared in traditional ways of cooking. According to Bourdieu's approach, food taste depends on the images of the body circulating among the social classes and the impact of food on it; these include ideas about power, health, and fitness by which classes assess certain impacts. Accordingly, the lower classes, who mainly seek physical power and masculinity, are fond of inexpensive, nutritious foods, whereas professional experts and upper classes prefer types of food that are tasty, healthy, and light to prevent gaining weight (Bourdieu, 2011).

For Bourdieu (1984), tastes were the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference, a system of classificatory schemes, or the source of the system of distinctive features that could not fail to be perceived as a systematic expression of a particular class of conditions or existence.

Douglas paid attention not only to flavour, but also to texture, temperature, colour, and other visual patterning elements, grouping tastes in sets of oppositions that structure particular meals and the relationship among different meals. For example, he noted "the same recurring theme is visible in the sequence from thick gravy to thicker custard to solid icing sugar" (Douglas, 1982). Douglas thus presented an early possibility for considering multiple sensory dimensions of food. However, her work, like Levi-Strauss', was oriented toward abstracting binary patterns in sensory features that reflected other structured aspects of "the food system" and its relationship to "the social system" (Douglas, 1982), identifying degrees of intimacy and distance, and identifying group boundaries (Douglas, 1971; see Lalonde, 1992 for a detailed critique). Furthermore, her sensory categories, like those of Levi-Strauss, were based on observation, not on informant descriptions or categories. She did suggest some potential cultural variability in the "degree of autonomy" of the rules of combining colours and textures in the food system in particular societies (Sutton, 2010). Seremetakis moved considerably further in using this—and other ethnographic and self-reflexive vignettes of drinking a cup of coffee, gathering greens, memories of the taste and smell of her grandmother's house in the country—to develop an analysis of the relationship between the senses and

memory, materiality, modernity, and local epistemologies. The sensory is not only encapsulated within the body as an internal capacity or power but is also dispersed out there on the surface of things as the latter's autonomous characteristics, which then can invade the body as perceptual experience (Seremetakis, 1994). "The first sweetened cup of hot tea to be drunk by an English worker was a significant historical event, because it prefigured the transformation of an entire society, a total remaking of its economic and social basis" (Mintz, 1985). Therefore, since food taste formation takes place in social and cultural contexts, its changes are also under the influence of social and cultural circumstances.

Rozin and Rozin (2005) had written suggestively about the forces of conservation versus boredom in tastes and the influence of socially shaped flavour principles in making innovations acceptable or unacceptable. Studies of changing taste while provocative—have, by and large, been speculative about large-scale trends (Haden, 2005) or focused on top-down mechanisms, such as official Soviet policies on luxury consumption (Gruknow, 2005) or Japanese corporate marketing efforts (Cwiertka, 2000). Everyday life and the multiple contexts are arenas in which the culturally shaped sensory properties and sensory experiences of food are invested with meaning, emotion, memory, and value (Sutton, 2010). Change of food taste among a given population occurs within various durations of time that depend on many variables. The available sources to

prepare food, the sacred and the profane foods, food consumption among the social strata, in ceremonies and traditions, media and the food production advertising, and physicians and their advices about healthy and unhealthy foods are all among the factors which may affect the change of food taste.

Nowadays, healthy diet is one of the debatable issues in human societies. The increase of diseases, like diabetes and obesity in modern societies, is partially the consequence of unhealthy diets. The issue has compelled the health policy-makers to prioritize food patterns with the minimum mal-influence on the body ahead of their programs. Due to cultural, economic, and social reasons, the change of food consumption styles in human societies does not occur simply. A food habit, which has formed over a period due to famine or lack of food productions, may cause diseases in the long run. These food habits could form based on the available foods in the relevant environment. Improper approaches in general policies sometimes lead to the formation of food habits that eventually result in the outbreak of chronic diseases and are, in turn, followed by enormous costs for the whole economy. The change of food habits in a brief period in such circumstances appears to be a demanding task, as individuals live with tastes and sayours and health-related advices cannot impel them to change diet.

Our study focused on bread consumption behaviour in Iranian society. In Iran, the bread consumption rate is on average 440 g. per person, indicating it is an inseparable part of the Iranian diet (Abedi & Abedi, 2015). There are several types of bread with various consumption rates in Iran:

Traditional breads: Sangak, Barbari, Lavash, and Taftoon are varieties of traditional bread in Iran that are flat and are baked in traditional ovens. In recent years, baking yeast has been substituted by baking soda, which drastically decreases the bread's nutritive value; recently, Iran's Ministry of Health has issued a ban on its use in baking breads. Sangak used to be baked with whole-wheat flour, but currently few bakeries in Tehran use this ingredient. This type of bread used to have specific importance because of whole-wheat flour. One of the distinctive characteristics of Sangak is that, in comparison to Lavash and Taftoon, it is bulky. Barbari is the other relatively bulky and popular bread in Iran. This variety also has become poor in quality from using baking soda in its dough. Lavash and Taftoon are flatbreads and, in comparison to other types, are of poorer nutritive value from using baking soda and salt in their baking processes. These two are baked more than other types because of their straightforward way of baking, quick processing, and affordability. The waste of Lavash and Taftoon are more than other varieties and cause up to hundreds of billions of economic costs annually.

Bulky breads: In these varieties, using baking yeast, enough resting time, and demanded steam heat result in a favourable fermentation. The fermentation process is accompanied by gas emissions occurring more evenly, which leads to a bulky bread. The breakage of long starch chains during fermentation makes the bread more easily digested. If baked with whole-wheat/barley flour, these types would be of high nutritive value.

Dietary breads: This category includes high-fibre breads for some people with diabetes, gluten-free breads for people with Coeliac disease, and low-protein breads for people with kidney diseases (Aram & Torabi, 2015).

In Iran, 65% of baked flatbreads (Lavash and Taftoon) are of inferior quality and nutritive value. Although the Sangak fermentation process takes hours, 6% of this variety are not porous enough and have poor nutritive value and durability. Despite complete fermentation processes, the same goes for the other types, as 25% of Barbaris and 4% of bulky breads are of poor nutritive value as well, because during the milling of white flour, the fibres and much of minerals (iron, calcium, zinc, magnesium, and phosphorus) are lost. According to the research carried out on this issue, constant consumption of such breads plays a considerable role in the outbreak of noncontagious diseases, particularly being overweight, diabetes, hyperlipidaemia, and cardiovascular diseases. High flatbread waste rates (Lavash, Taftoon and machinemade breads), a drop in the quality of bulky traditional breads (Barbari and Sangak), and the declining popularity of bulky breads are implicated as the main causes of such diseases and enormous economic costs.

The aim of the current study is to investigate the factors underlying the declining popularity of bulky breads that are presumed to be healthier than flat types. We assume that people are relatively aware of bulky breads being healthier than flatbreads. Therefore, the other relevant question arising is why they prefer to eat flatbreads despite their relative knowledge of its disadvantages. The answer to this question would assist organisations like the Ministry of Health in planning the best food basket for the families through related cultural and economic programs.

In Iran, there are many ethnographies about food and bread among different urban, rural and tribal populations (Moradi, 2007). In these ethnographies, the processes of cooking bread and ceremonies and rituals relating to bread are described (Chegelvand, 2014; Ghasemi, 2015; Izadi, 2013; Majidi, 2007; Rangbar, 2018; Zade, 2007).

There were various traditional breads in Shazand (a city in Arak province) which Shazand women used to cook at home; but they no longer cook breads by themselves and buy their required bread from bakeries (Ghasemi, 2015). Bread plays a main role in the life of Lak tribes in Lorestan Province. Bread is the main food for them. Their women cook bread at home and teach cooking bread to their girls (Chegelvand, 2014). City of Hamedan has various types of breads and ovens and there are set of beliefs and rituals around bread (Rangbar, 2018).

In all of these researches, bread and its role (digestive, cultural) in different culture and population in Iran has been described. Researches do not address to evolutions of cultural modes and patterns of bread consumption and factors affecting these changes.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The current study consisted of 20 residents (nine males and 11 females) in Ekbatan that is a middle-class neighbourhood of Tehran, capital of Iran. Because we wanted to control the economic class in our sample, the region was chosen since people in this neighbourhood were neither poor nor rich; we chose our sample from various age and education groups for controlling all the effects on their bread preference in their daily lives. The participants were 25 to 60 years of age. The education level ranged from high school Diploma to Master's degree. Most of them were clerks and some female participants were householders. The availability of different bulky breads for residents was checked in the neighbourhood. There was one bulky bread bakery, two Sangak bakeries, two Barbari bakeries, and three Lavash and Taftoon bakeries in the neighbourhood.

Our study had been conducted in the qualitative research framework through in depth interviews. Interviewees were asked to describe their family's food baskets. Then, they were asked to name the types of breads they consumed most often. Another question was about the level of awareness regarding the healthiness of bread varieties. Influential factors determining the choice of the bread, types of bread consumed in paternal houses, ideas about healthier types of breads, types

of bread they preferred, and why they preferred it were among the questions asked in the interview. Asking about the memories of breads and whether they consumed bread on separate occasions comprised the rest of questions. We analyzed our data after categorizing them in five groups: nostalgia, cost, availability, family, and social, cultural and economic capitals.

RESULTS

The results of our study demonstrated that 80% of the interviewees were familiar with the properties of bulky whole-wheat breads, but only 20% of them consumed it constantly or occasionally. The awareness about the bulky whole-wheat breads being healthier was acquired via television and radio programs, virtual networks, and the internet. Some of the participants were aware of the properties of bulky whole-wheat breads, since they had studied medicine. The age of interviewees did not affect the level of awareness, but the way the awareness was gained was under the influence of certain factors. Internet and virtual networks were the sources of awareness mainly for younger participants. The elderly with hyperlipidaemia, diabetes, and hypertension gain such awareness mainly through diets prescribed by specialists. The level of education, particularly in medical sciences, had a direct impact on choosing the type of bread, so that the medical sciences graduates or the participants with such specialists in their families were more aware of the properties. However, such awareness did not necessarily compel the individual to

consume healthier breads and most of the cases still preferred traditional flatbreads.

The determinants of the preference towards the traditional flatbreads over bulky whole-wheat ones include the following categories, discussed from the most to the least important.

Taste and Smell Differences and Nostalgia

Ninety percent of the participants in our study considered taste, smell, and familiarity of consumption from childhood as the main reasons for their preference towards traditional breads like Sangak and Barbari. Eating Sangak with cheese and basil in the morning, or at the time of breaking the fast in the evenings of Ramazan and Barbari as a part of dinner, were among the reasons that evoked participants' nostalgia. The smell of Sangak and Barbari in the bakeries reminded them of their old neighbourhoods, or the summer nights on the pool-side beds in their grandparents' yards, where their grandfathers arrived with breads in their hands and they ate the dinner that the grandmother cooked with those tasty breads. Some point to the memories of standing in bakery lines for a long time and all the childhood playfulness: "once, one of my friends and I on the way home were talking and eating the Sangak I bought, when I arrived home the bread was almost eaten," a participant said. None of our participants were fond of bulky baguettes, called "fantasy breads" in Iran. Some of them called these types sandwich breads, which reminded them of memories about

the sandwiches rather than baguette itself. They hardly could imagine eating their breakfasts with a baguette instead of *Sangak* and *Barbari* or a bite of kebab and basil with a baguette instead of *Lavash* and *Sangak*. This was similar for *Abgoosht* as well; a traditional broth in which participants preferred soaking *Sangak*, *Barbari* or *Lavash* instead of the so-called fantasy breads. One of them laughed and said, "imagine a table for breaking the fast or *Nazri* (charity food) with baguette!"

Cost

Most of the participants preferred traditional breads, because the bulky types were more expensive. The bulky breads were three times as expensive as the traditional ones, among which *Sangak* is the most expensive. Owing to the economic cost, the families preferred the traditional breads they consumed daily. However, in response to the question whether they would consume bulky whole-wheat breads were they less expensive, most of them answer "yes, but not always." The reason was that taste and smell were still of significant importance to them.

Availability

Most of our cases had pointed to availability as another reason regarding their preference. There were traditional bakeries in the neighbourhood that made providing these types so easy for the families, while bulky breads were only offered by supermarkets or only one bakery in the neighbourhood, if any, and thereby not so close to all families.

Family and Relatives

Despite their own interests in bulky breads, in some cases, they must eat traditional breads because of their families' and relatives' preferences. They believed there were a lot of people who did not like the taste of bulky whole-wheat varieties. Particularly, serving bulky breads in parties was not readily accepted.

Economic, Cultural, and Social Capitals

The findings of our study suggested that individuals with higher levels of economic, cultural, and social capitals were more interested in bulky whole-wheat breads. Despite their food tastes towards traditional varieties, they preferred bulky whole-wheat breads for health reasons. The current research demonstrated that following a specific cultural life style and being distinguished from those following other styles result in consuming bulky breads in families belonging to that cultural stratum. Although the bulky varieties were more expensive and less available, and despite formed taste and nostalgia involved in traditional breads, these families preferred to consume bulky breads. They pointed to healthy families and generally healthy members of the whole society as their reasons for preferring bulky breads; this, they believe was, achievable through providing a proper and healthy food basket.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Nowadays, a healthy diet is one of the debatable issues in human societies. The

increase of diseases, like diabetes and obesity in modern societies, is the consequence of unhealthy diets. The issue has compelled the health policy-makers to prioritize the food patterns with the minimum health detriments in their programmes. The change of food consumption styles in human societies due to the cultural, economic, and social reasons is not simple to pursue. From past to now, humans have eaten not only for sustenance, but for pleasure too, and food has helped shape the creation of societies and religions as well as nations and corporations (Siegel, 2018). Food is not only the source of nutrition for human, it plays various roles in our daily lives, beliefs, and socioeconomics. So, eating as such a wholistic process can be influenced by economic, political, cultural, and many other factors (Ma, 2015). The taste of food is not just a physiological stimulusresponse of individuals to tasting; rather, it is a shared cultural activity as well. We can recognize the taster as a reflexive actor that communicates, performs, manipulates, senses, changes and embodies taste rather than passively perceives a certain experience of food (Højlund, 2014).

This study showed that its participants preferred traditional white flatbreads, such as Sangak, Barbari and Lavash, to bulky whole-wheat types, for example. Because of white flour in the baking process, traditional breads are implicated as one of the causes of being overweight. Because they are baked under direct heat, they are also of poor nutritive value. Since bread is one of the essential parts of Iranian food, its inferior quality will culminate in conditions

like diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. According to our collected data, nearly 80% of the interviewees were aware of the properties of bulky whole-wheat breads and their health benefits. The awareness regarding bulky whole-wheat breads was gained via television and radio programs, virtual networks, the internet, physicians, and some education in medical sciences. Yet, few of the participants exclusively consumed bulky whole wheat breads. The main reasons for the inconvenience included lack of interest in bulky breads, taste and smell of traditional breads, and determinants that bustle with childhood memories and nostalgia. The habit of traditional breads being elements of parties and ceremonies like Nazri had also led to such preferences. The reluctance in using bulky breads extended so far that even imagining the bulky breads at such occasions or ceremonies seems to be ridiculous to participants. Less availability and the triple cost of such breads were the other causes the interviewees stated. It is surprising that, despite being influenced by the facts, there were some among the participants who preferred bulky wholewheat breads. Consuming bulky breads appeared to be a component of the culture to which they belonged. Besides other distinguishing factors and contributors, these participants had chosen to follow a distinct eating style. These individuals had higher levels of economic, cultural, and social capitals, and eating bulky bread was deemed to be a socio-cultural activity on their side to ascertain the health of society through the health of their own families.

Therefore, the findings of current study support Mary Douglas's notion about the sociability of taste throughout the course of life, and the sociability of individuals through savours and tastes. This sociability leads to the formation of eating habits the changing of which, like any other cultural phenomenon, is a challenging task. Informing people and raising their awareness seems inadequate to changing their tastes in the short run. Awareness raising might be the first step but changing the tastes of individuals needs some extra drive. It seems that raising the level of awareness in individuals with higher levels of economic, cultural, and social capital facilitates change. According to Bourdieu (2011), differences in eating styles and other practices distinguish individuals from each other. In relation to bread consumption in different social strata, this distinctiveness is absolutely evident. As a matter of experience, the prevalence of consuming certain food products or other lifestyle elements, like furniture, clothing, and leisure in higher social, economic, and cultural classes (the elite), will sooner or later extend throughout the rest of society. Nonetheless, it is obvious that economic and political determinants affect the trend of any change in consumption patterns. For instance, following the then Shah's command, cultivating tea began in 1901 in the northern part of Iran; it was that switching from coffee to tea began. Prior to that, people drank coffee instead of tea. After more than a century, teahouses are still called coffee houses or cafes, although no

coffee is served in them. The change of taste from coffee to tea did not happen overnight. At first, the royal family drank tea, and it then spread to the northern parts of Iran, and, finally, the whole country adopted the habit (Yazdani, 2010).

Therefore, despite the current resistance to healthier bread consumption in Iran, informing and raising the level of awareness via media and specialists, and embracing bulky breads in higher socio-cultural classes, the goal of a daily increase in bulky breads consumption is hopefully attainable in the future. In addition to informing the members of society, provisioning general policies will improve the trend of change as well. Moreover, moderation of prices and improving the number of bakeries baking bulky breads will encourage their substitution.

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