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ANALYSIS OF FOOD PREFERENCES OF MODERN UKRAINIANS

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Abstract

Introduction. In Ukraine, sociological studies are conducted on the attitude to healthy eating in general, as well as the analysis of its structure and content. However, there is a lack of qualitative research that allows to understand better how healthy food concepts are implemented in everyday life. The article shows how people consider the health benefits when defining a "healthy food"; what is considered healthy / unhealthy food; and whether people really follow the principles of healthy eating in real life.

The purpose. The article is based on research aimed at elucidating daily nutritional practices and attitudes to food. Research results demonstrate how healthy nutrition is included in the concept of "healthy food". After considering a conceptual framework for the study, the design and research methods were described. Then the empirical results were presented. Finally, conclusions that characterize the contribution of this study are given.

Results. The findings and conclusions are based on empirical studies conducted by the authors in 2020-2021, studying the daily nutritional practices of residents of Odesa. Data were collected through surveys and in-depth interviews. Research shows that people define the healthy food in terms of food composition and ingredients, specific cooking methods and food combinations, specific social context and health benefits. However, in practice, people do not always follow a healthy diet.

Conclusions. The study contributes to the study of the problems of health and show how aspects of a healthy diet are reflected in everyday life, as well as what respondents mean under healthy food. In general, the study of nutritional practices provides researchers with more opportunities to analyze healthy food in the context of social life. Our contribution to health research relates to the study of the aspect of healthy eating in the social construction of healthy food. The limitations of our research results are due to the use of the methodology. We studied everyday food practices in the city with its inherent social organization, which limits the scope for generalizing conclusions. Thus, in the future, it is necessary to compare the results obtained with research data related to other social and cultural contexts.

Keywords: food preferences, eating habits, healthy food, health issues, nutritional practices, Ukrainians.

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АНАЛІЗ ХАРЧОВИХ ЗВИЧОК СУЧАСНИХ УКРАЇНЦІВ

Анотація

Вступ. В Україні проводяться соціологічні дослідження, присвячені відношенню суспільства до здорового харчування в цілому, а також аналізу його структури та змісту. Однак бракує якісних досліджень, які проливали б світло на те, як уявлення про здорове харчування впливає на повсякденне життя українців. У статті показано, як споживачі враховують аспекти користі для здоров'я при визначенні поняття «правильне харчування»; що вважається здоровою/нездоровою їжею; а також чи дійсно споживачі сповідують принципи здорового харчування у реальному житті.

Метою є з'ясування щоденної практики харчування та ставлення до їжі. Дослідження демонструє, наскільки аспекти здорового харчування включені у поняття «правильне харчування». Започатковано концептуальну основу дослідження та визначено методологію дослідження. Також проаналізовано емпіричні результати та зроблено висновки.

Результати. Отримані дані та висновки обґрунтовані на підставі емпіричних досліджень, проведених авторами. Вивчалися повсякденні практики харчування жителів Одеси. Дані зібрані шляхом опитування та глибинних інтерв'ю. Дослідження показують, що споживачі визначають правильне харчування з огляду на склад та інгредієнти, специфічні методи приготування та комбінацію продуктів, певний соціальний контекст та переваги для здоров'я. Однак на практиці українці не завжди дотримуються здорового харчування.

Висновки. Дослідження сприяє вивченню проблем зі здоров'ям та показує, як аспекти здорового харчування відображаються у повсякденному житті. Також визначалося, що розуміють респонденти під правильним харчуванням. Загалом вивчення звичок у харчуванні надає дослідникам більше можливостей для аналізу здорового харчування в контексті суспільного життя. Дослідження пов'язане з вивченням аспекту здорового харчування у суспільній конструкції правильного харчування. Обмеження результатів наших досліджень зумовлені використанням методології. Вивчалися повсякденні харчові звички в мегаполісі з притаманною йому суспільною організацією, що обмежує можливості для узагальнення висновків. Таким чином, у майбутньому необхідно порівняти отримані результати з даними досліджень в інших соціальних та культурних контекстах.

Ключові слова: гастрономічні переваги, харчові звички, питання харчування, здорове харчування, українці.

JEL classification: J10; R11

Introduction

Healthy nutrition is an urgent problem in modern Ukraine. The food structure for Ukrainians is still unsatisfactory: it is characterized by high calorie content, which leads to overweight and obesity, and is also characterized by excessive consumption of animal fat, sugar and salt. High consumption of fat, sweets, sausages and bread is accompanied by inadequate intake of a number of important food such as fish, natural meat and fresh fruit. The food of the overwhelming majority of the population is unbalanced, inadequate and irregular. Health research has shown a high incidence of disease attributable to unhealthy diet.

In the current economic crisis, many Ukrainians switch from natural products to their cheaper substitutes in order to save money. Nutrition is now a major expense, and diet is deteriorating. This trend has a negative impact on the health of most population.

On the other hand, research data show that for a certain part of Ukrainian consumers healthy food is becoming a necessary part of their lifestyle.

With the growing interest in healthy food, a deeper study of nutritional practices is of particular importance as dietary norms, traditions and habits are an integral part of everyday life. In this regard, the term “proper food intake” seems to be a suitable research tool for understanding how attitude to healthy food is formed. In Ukraine, this area is not considered well. There is a lack of information on how people solve the issues of healthy nutrition in practice and how they explain their attitude to it. Currently, most research is quantitative and devoted to the study of general trends in health / nutrition or solving marketing problems.

Our qualitative research was aimed at finding out how the idea of good nutrition is interpreted and applied by ordinary consumers. In their answers, the respondents put forward several points of view regarding the concept of proper eating. However, within the framework of this article, we will focus primarily on the aspect of the health benefits of nutrition and describe how this aspect is reflected in everyday practices of the inhabitants of Odesa. It should be mentioned that life in the city is extremely dynamic, which determines the lifestyle in a special way. When these studies are conducted in other smaller or larger cities, the results may be different.

The purpose of the article

The article is based on research aimed at elucidating daily nutritional practices and attitude to food. Research results demonstrate how healthy nutrition is included in the concept of “healthy food”. We start with a conceptual framework for the study. Next, we describe the design and research methods. Then we present the empirical results. Finally, we give conclusions and characterize the contribution of the study.

Results

In the literature, much attention is paid to the study of how modern life affects the practice of nutrition and what changes occur in relation to nutrition in everyday life. Some authors believe that in recent years the importance of traditional family meals has been lost and food has become unstructured and individualized. The issues of changing and preserving food traditions and habits are widely discussed by sociologists [1].

The concept of “food event” is essential in the study of daily nutrition and is considered as a social event, i.e. as structured meal that involves consistency, a combination of several components and a social context. This concept covers various aspects of the food system and includes three dimensions: diet, food content and social organization [2]. This approach allows you to put the practice of nutrition in a socio-cultural context and to establish a connection between nutrition, its social organization and everyday life. Proper food is a kind of norm that determines what food should be in terms of its content and social aspects. In sociological literature, healthy nutrition is usually considered as an event structured according to social and cultural rules (for example, hot meal). It usually includes a number of traditional components.

The concept of the healthy food has also been associated with delicious and nutritious homemade meals prepared by the hostess for family members [3].

This implies a joint meal and in this sense “serves as a metaphor for family life” [4]. Thus, the concept of “healthy food” is associated with the structure and form of the meal, as well as with its social aspects. In general, healthy food relates to certain cultural norms and can be considered in two main dimensions: normative, referring to the rules that determine the set and possible combinations of ingredients; and relational, which concerns communication and interaction with food. Both approaches provide a good analytical framework for exploring different social contexts.

Health as an aspect of eating well has been emphasized many times in the sociological literature. Charles and Kerr found that most respondents associate healthy nutrition with healthy food [3]. Fresh and home-cooked food is characterized as healthier than processed or prepared food. Healthy eating is described as consuming healthy foods that includes meat, potatoes and vegetables [5].

A number of studies have shown how respondents characterize healthy / unhealthy diet through “good” (fresh, natural, unprocessed, homemade) or “bad” (instant, sweet, industrially processed, additives) food [6-8]. Healthy food and healthy eating are often considered as equivalents and opposed to processed, synthetic, artificial and unhealthy food [9].

In our research, we analyze the health benefits in relation to daily nutrition. The study is devoted to the daily eating practices of Odesa residents and their attitude to food.

The study was aimed at analyzing nutritional practices in order to obtain answers to the following important questions: 1) how is food structured at the daily level and 2) whether the modern diet differs from traditional one. The study is spent among the residents of the city of Odesa (Ukraine). Data were collected in 2020 in structured face-to-face interviews. The survey included 232 respondents of different age (18 to 86), gender, education level and types of household.

Everyday food has been studied in terms of its content, structure, time and place. The questionnaire included questions about nutrition the day before the interview, as well as attitude to food. Among others, the group of questions about attitude to food included statements related to health. The respondents were also asked to describe healthy homemade food. The data obtained were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS).

The results demonstrate a fairly stable behavioral pattern of nutrition on weekdays. The diet usually includes 3 to 4 meals a day. Most of the respondents give preference to the consumption of hot food and familiar dishes, although there were some deviations from tradition. The day is structured around meals that occur in sequence and can be categorized. The respondents’ diet consists mainly of such traditional dishes as bread, soup, porridge, meat, potatoes, pancakes, dumplings, pies, etc.

The sequence of meals and their composition correspond to generally accepted rules and follow traditional norms. At the same time, the results reflect a certain simplification of the format and composition of the food. Mostly eating at home, cafes and restaurants are rarely visited even during working hours. Shared family meals continue to play an important role in the social organization of daily meals.

The most common daily meals include breakfast, lunch, dinner and supper. It is noteworthy that lunch and dinner are defined as events with different content. Nevertheless, the meal that the respondents define as dinner remains the main and most complete meal of the day, and also has the most complex format. Although the structure of the meal has become simpler and more flexible, it is common to have a regular full meal.

In the section of the study on attitude to food, respondents were asked to recall a typical day at home and to name the homemade food they consider healthy. The answers show that healthy food is associated with the usual dishes traditional for Ukrainian cuisine: soups, meat and fish dishes, boiled vegetables, cereals, potatoes, etc. Thus, cultural norms continue to influence strongly the perception of healthy food. The results are shown in Fig. 1.

One of the objectives of the study was to analyze the idea of proper meal in the context of the daily nutritional practices of the inhabitants of Odesa. Respondents were asked to describe how they eat dinner on a weekday; what they mean by the phrase “healthy dinner”; what they think is right and wrong in their dinner; and what prevents them from putting the principles of proper eating into practice. In 2020, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted in Odesa. The residents who were in active working age (from 28 to 53 years old) were interviewed. Among them there are equal numbers of men and women, 20 of whom live with a family, and 6 are single. Almost all of the respondents (with the exception of two) work, and most of them have a standardized working day.

The respondents were asked to talk about how they usually eat dinner on a weekday: about the time and duration of dinner, about the number and composition of meals, about the methods of cooking, about the social context of dinner, and about changes in their diet in recent years. The respondents were also asked to discuss the notion of “proper dinner”.

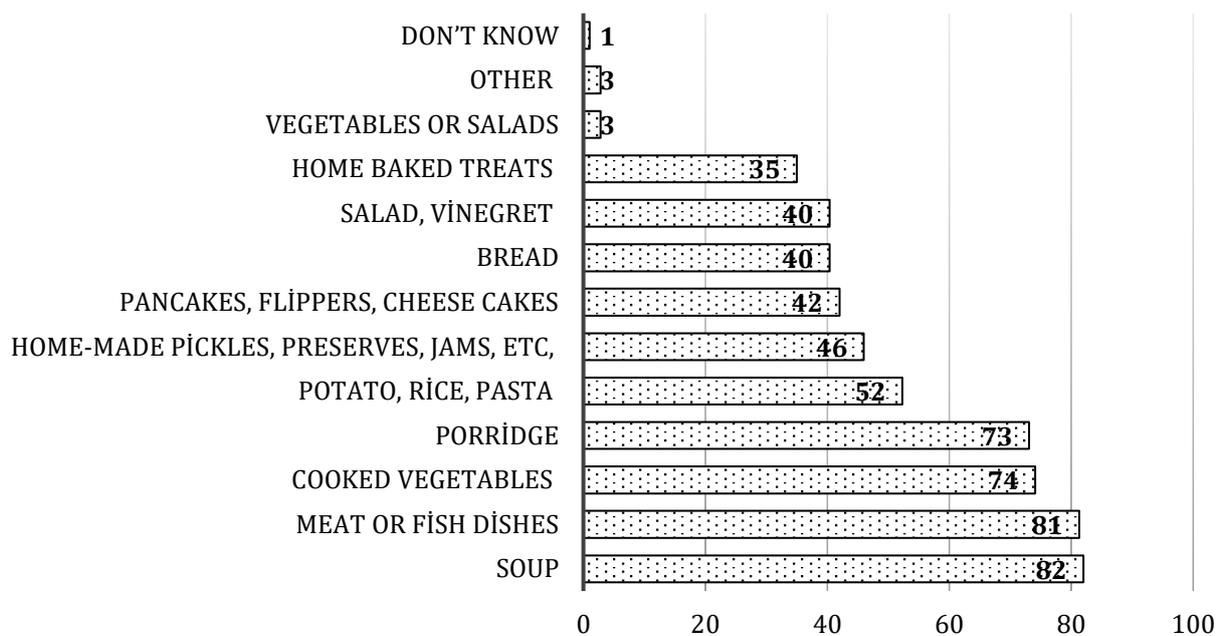


Fig. 1. Proper homemade food

Firstly, healthy food is perceived by the respondents as a part of their lifestyle, a guarantee of well-being and general well-being. Among the answers were the following: "Proper nutrition means well-being is normal" (man, 50); "The good food is healthy food. Healthy food is one that does not harm your health, that fills you with everything you need" (woman, 32). First, the proper dinner is associated with a certain diet and should be regular: "Is it right (to have dinner)? Of course, there is dinner every day" (man, 38); "The regime is very important for stability, for the normal perception of nutrition by the body. The mode prevents many problems..." (man, 47). Secondly, the composition and balance of the diet are important for the interviewed respondents: "I think we need to balance so that, for example, proteins and carbohydrates are present, this is how I consider food from this point of view" (woman, 33). In addition, a proper dinner should be varied in its composition: "All components should be present in the diet: meat, dairy, salads, fruit and vegetables. All products must be present for the body to function properly" (woman, 40).

In addition, healthy food must be fresh, natural, and prepared in a specific way. "Food should be fresh, just cooked. Then, it should be natural food, cooked without any ... Not boiled sausage, but it should be cooked meat, for example..." (man, 40). For a number of respondents, meat is indispensable and forms the basis of proper dinner: "Meat must be mandatory. Because the protein contained in meat cannot be replaced by any other product" (woman, 33). At the same time, some respondents have doubts about the usefulness of meat and even a desire to give up its consumption completely. Fish is mentioned as one of the kind of healthy food, but in fact it is rarely eaten. Equally important is the "correctness" of food combination, for example, salad with minimal dressing is a more correct side dish for a main meal than, for example, fried potatoes or pasta. There is a strong belief that steaming is the best way to cook, although stewing and boiling are also mentioned as the healthy methods of cooking. The proper dinner is always prepared. According to the respondents, the healthy meal is hot food, with a special role played by first course. Majority of respondents are sure that it is the soup that makes food a dinner in the usual sense. The soup is described as a wholesome and proper food, essential for health and good for the stomach.

According to the respondents, a proper meal consists of several dishes, i.e. it is quite complex in structure. "My idea of healthy meal is soup, the second course, and some kind of drink" (woman, 33). At the same time, some of the interviewees are inclined to a more simplified dinner format and believe that one dish is enough. In their opinion, a classic three or

four course meal is too heavy to digest and it is much healthier to eat smaller portions and lighter food.

The prevailing opinion is that healthy meal should be prepared at home from fresh natural products. "It is prepared with love and at home, and not bought..." (woman, 53). Cooking food at home is considered by the respondents as a guarantee of a full normal diet.

"A proper dinner is healthy dinner, it's dinner at home" (man, 50). Proper homemade food is contrasted with unhealthy food – processed food, sandwiches and fast food, which are negatively treated. "I think it's right that we cook ourselves and don't buy any ready-to-cook products. We only have just prepared food" (woman, 42). "Consumption of ready-to-cook products can be justified by emergencies as an alternative way out when there is nothing to do. Not the best option, but quite acceptable" (woman, 32). But basically, the respondents believe that ready-to-cook products are inappropriate in home meals. Home is mentioned as the most appropriate place to dine. "If I have a chance to dine at home, I'd better dine at home, even if it will be later" (man, 38). Overall, family meals are highly appreciated. At the same time, on weekdays, a joint meal is not always possible, and only dinner is becoming the dominant practice. The social context of food is gradually changing: eating patterns become more simplified and flexible, and situational factors and personal preferences play an increasing role. There is an opinion that the phenomenon of a joint family meal is becoming a thing of the past, especially in big cities. Family dinners take place on special occasions.

In general, healthy meal is determined through the composition of the dishes (soup and main course), food categories (meat, vegetables, fruit), food quality (fresh, freshly prepared), cooking methods (home cooking, no frying), time and regularity (stable, daily), social atmosphere (at home, together, in a relaxing environment) and health benefits (nutritional composition, balance of ingredients). In contrast, eating unhealthy food is associated with irregular eating, unstructured meals, junk food (sweets, fat food, junk food, snacks), and improper cooking methods (frying). The statements of the respondents regarding healthy and unhealthy food are presented in Table 1.

However, not all respondents associate a proper meal with a healthy diet. Some of them take a purely utilitarian approach:

"It seems to me that we need to eat and that's it. Satisfy your hunger and that's it. To eat and be full" (woman, 49). In addition, "correctness" can be associated with pleasure: "It is the pleasure received from food" (man, 40); "The main thing is that it's delicious" (man, 35). For such respondents, taste is more important than usefulness: "I like it more so that I have fun. Maybe it's not very healthy, but I'll have fun, for me this is nice" (man, 48). In addition, some of the respondents answered that they had never thought about healthy meal and simply satisfied the needs of the body: "The body feels what it needs. Quite clear self-regulation" (man, 47). Such respondents are not ready to change their eating habits.

Proper nutrition is important, but there is a gap between the respondents' perceptions and their actual diet. They often dine in a hurry, in inappropriate conditions, buy unhealthy food and convenience food, skip lunch, indulge their desires, etc. The following factors have been identified that prevent proper nutrition:

- lack of financial capacity:

"I think that healthy food is expensive" (woman, 48);

- unsatisfactory quality and range of products: "I'm not sure I know where to buy good products" (man, 47).

The results of in-depth interviews show that the concept of "healthy eating" is defined in several dimensions (cultural, social, emotional, etc.), with the key aspects of health benefits, which are described by respondents in terms such as strict diet, composition and the combination of products, the balance and variety of the diet, the quality of the products and the methods of cooking. However, some respondents do not associate a proper, full meal with a healthy diet.

Table 1. Summary table – “healthy” and “unhealthy” dinner (respondents’ assessments)

Time	Dine on a regular basis and do not hurry	Skip dinner and eat in a hurry
Composition	2-3 dishes or a complete main course; consumption of drinks for a while before / after dinner	Unstructured food (snacks / one simple meal of the dish); drinking beverages at dinner, desserts
Content	Traditional simple food, hot and freshly prepared; balanced diet	Fatty, heavy, salty, sweet, ready-to-cook products; harmful combinations; large volumes
Dishes	Soups, meat, fish, useful basic products, vegetable salads	Lack of soup, salad with mayonnaise, sandwiches
Products	Fruits and vegetables, meat / fish, buckwheat, fermented milk products, cereals, cheese, nuts, herbs	Frozen food, sandwiches, pasta, potatoes, pastries, sweets, spices, sauces
Preparation	Homemade, freshly prepared; cooked on steam, baked, stewed, boiled, cooked on the grill	Convenience food and fast food; stale; fried food
Place and social context	Home, calm atmosphere, pleasant communication, cleanliness	Fastfood establishments, unsuitable workplace, dirt (dirty dishes, dirty tables); factors distracting from the food

Conclusions

As the results of our survey show, the majority of Odesa residents are focused on the consumption of hot food, and hot meals remain the accepted norm of everyday food. Dinner traditionally consists of several courses. Typically, there are two main dishes (soup and meat / fish with a side dish).

The results correlate with the findings of European sociologists that dinner in its traditional sense remains an important daily ritual in the life of most people [2]. It is noteworthy that existing dining practices are not limited to components of the right menu, but include the social, cultural and emotional aspects of dining as a social event.

Home-cooked dinner is one of the main characteristics of proper food: about two-thirds of the respondents reported having dinner at home the day before, i.e. there is a steady orientation towards dinner at home, even on weekdays. This is explained by the fact that food in a cafe or restaurant has never had wide popularity among Ukrainians [10]. Most of the respondents who eat at home prefer cooked food. Thus, in today's environment, homemade dining retains its value, although many have to dine alone due to the work schedule.

Research results show that modern food practices in the city depend on its own rhythm of life, longer distances and higher standards. This is especially true for diet (late dinner), format (simplification) and social context (dine alone, in the workplace, accompanied by reading or watching TV). Today, a proper dinner in its traditional sense is rather a weekend or holiday event [3]. It is assumed that changes in the social context affect the development of the concept of “healthy dinner”, which is important for further sociological research.

According to the results, healthy eating can be defined as a regular mid-day meal with several hot meals made with unprocessed foods at home. It is associated with a common meal and has a certain social and cultural significance.

This confirms the results of other studies [3]. The event, designated as dinner, remains the main and most complete meal of the day, and has a more complex format than other meals.

In general, the study of dining practices provides researchers with more opportunities to analyze healthy eating in the context of social life. Our contribution to health research relates to the study of the aspect of healthy eating in the social one.

The limitations of our research results are due to the use of the methodology. We studied everyday food practices in the city with its inherent social organization, which limits the scope for generalizing conclusions. Thus, in the future, it is necessary to compare the results obtained with research data related to other social and cultural contexts.

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