

The Role of Food Co-Shopping with Friends in the Process of Hungarian Youth Becoming Consumers

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ABSTRACT: Observing the process of health-conscious eating habits becoming the norm for young people is a relevant topic in management studies, as it is an important factor leading to a better quality of life and in reducing healthcare expenses. For this reason, this article deals with one of the most important aspects impacting this process: food co-shopping with friends. Data collection took place in 2 Hungarian regions, Budapest and Tatabánya, and as a control region, Upper Hungary in Slovakia—inhabited by Hungarians—was also involved. This article examines the activities in which food co-shopping is executed, the circumstances of them being carried out, and the health attributes of products bought during food co-shopping. The revealing research's results claim that young people are less health-centric in choosing foods, and that relationship-building activities are vital for them, among which eating and cooking together are very favored. So these activities give intervention opportunities for public healthcare professionals.

KEYWORDS: food, co-shopping, friends, consumption

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Introduction

Obesity leads to a number of diseases. These are high blood pressure, diabetes, abnormal changes in blood lipid levels, coronary diseases, stroke, osteoarthritis, sleeping apnea, several types of cancer, and numerous problems with fertility and pregnancy (Kinlen et al., 2018). Thus, obesity is a significant public health issue in Hungary, as OECD's newest data shows that the rate of obese people is 30% (this ratio is the 4th worst among OECD countries and the worst in Europe) (OECD, 2017), and the issue is made even more serious by the ratio of obese children (between 5-19 years) almost doubling in the past 20 years (WHO, 2018).

In this area, children eating healthy food would substantially contribute to the improvement. This is why examining the process of becoming consumers and the factors impacting it are of utmost importance. In spite of this, the number of international studies examining food co-shopping with friends is incredibly low. So the goal of this study is to expand this topic.

Literature review

Considering the biggest value and pattern giving roles (parents (families), friends (and others from the age group), school and (mass) media (including Internet)), the biggest impact on forming a child's (food) consumption habits and on the process of becoming a consumer comes from parents. However, the effect of friends is much greater than the of the other roles (Cai et al., 2015; Pedersen et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the influence of friends (peers) can be twofold, one is normative, the other is informative.

The age group's normative impact is realized in the socialized person accepting different communities as reference groups. They take the values, behavior and appearance of these groups as patterns to follow, thus making sure they get the rewards from members of the group (e.g. praise, tighter emotional connection, etc.), and that they avoid punishment (e.g. hurtful (negative) opinions, exclusion from the group, etc.). Hurtful opinions lead to low self-esteem and body dysmorphia, the consequences of which are eating disorders (Al-Sheyab et al., 2018). Furthermore, these negative impulses bring about a sense of shame (mostly in girls), which then—quite often—generate emotional “meal(s)” (Wong–Qian, 2016).

As a result of the above, the individual receiving the values will like, choose, or reject and avoid the same foods, products and/or brands, as the other members of the group. What's more, neurobiological studies proved that, regarding foods preferred by a community, newer members do not only voice their verbal agreement, but those foods will actually start tasting better to them (Nook–Zaki, 2015).

The informative influence means that first the individual observes the behavior patterns expressed by their friends, then they copy / imitate those, secondly, they accept the information on a specific thing coming from their peers as credible and trustworthy.

Longitudinal studies even showed that experience (e.g. shopping together) and imitation have a significantly stronger and longer lasting effect than verbal learning (Pedersen et al., 2015; DeCosta et al., 2017). What is even more, simply the knowledge of healthy food does not have a real impact on eating healthy (healthier) (Inhulsen et al., 2017).

However, it needs to be noted that in the cases of either informative influence or the deeper, longer lasting normative influence, the individual receiving the value has a bigger effect than in the parent-child relationship, since there is a much bigger equality among the group members. In this way, in the system of age group relationships, the individual gives and receives values at the same time.

Also, friends (peers) have a substantial effect on family eating habits, too. The reason of this is that young people bring social/environmental, cultural (e.g. gastronomic) and technical/technological innovations taken from their friends (peers) into the life of their families (Lobet–Cavalcante, 2014), children doing so by behaving as educators / value givers in the areas of these innovations (innovative solutions / procedures and products / services).

At the same time, to understand the impact of friends (peers) more deeply, it is practical to dissect the meaning of “food” to its elements. In line with this, on one hand food includes everyday victuals aimed for sustenance, thus it actually has no specific meaning. But it also includes a symbolic interpretation. This symbolic meaning expresses the relationship between people eating together, and therefore the main reason of eating together is to strengthen the bonds (Ochs–Shohet, 2006). However, it needs to be stated that “meals” carried out alone, generated by feelings are also aimed to have this latter goal (to comfort oneself, i.e. to stabilize the status between the individual and themselves (strengthening bonds)).

Furthermore, “food” means the process itself, which involves the planning of the specific meal (including discussing the “menu” and making a list of groceries necessary for the food), procuring the required foods / groceries / materials, and making the meal.

It is also important to point out that the attitudes and behaviors of girls and boys regarding “food” are fundamentally different. Boys tend to consider the gathering/preparing of the “vital sustenance”, in most cases, a chore-like task and experience it negatively, while for girls, creating the “everyday food” is much more than a simple duty most of the time. This is an option for them to have experiences with their friends, to have a nice time, so it is not a duty, but a bonding activity.

With their aging, children take a bigger part in (and spend more time with) the “food” process, but typically girls still have significantly higher values at all ages than boys (Laska et al., 2012).

It needs to be pointed out that while co-operation in cooking is experienced as a pleasure by (almost) every young person (Laska et al., 2012), procuring foods / groceries / ingredients boys consider a duty, and (almost) only girls view it as a bonding activity.

Furthermore, the impact of age groups directly shows both in community building and everyday (sustaining) foods. In the latter case for example, the qualities of the educational system are in the background, as friendships and age group relationships are made mostly between classmates (schoolmates), who also see a part of the foods to eat (e.g. lunch brought / bought, and dining at the others’ families).

The community building foods, along with spending money, are “embodied” by intentional co-eating (e.g. visiting (fast food) restaurants, snacks taking place during events experienced together (such as street food while going to pubs)).

What’s more, the participants often change their actual habits substantially during community building co-eating. For example, a specific group member eats more if the other members eat more than what he or she is normally used to (Herman, 2015), and “nibbles” less, if that is the real or fake—expectation of the community (Vartanian, 2015). Additionally, habitual mimicry is more frequent with girls/women during community building meals, because they—quite often—align the rhythm of eating to each other, and eat less (and different, e.g. light salads) if there is a boy/man they like in their company (Higgs–Thomas, 2017).

Last, but not least, with the appearance and presence of (Internet) influencers and online communities both normative, and (mostly) the informative influence (gathering information and sharing) received new channels. Important to note is that although online communities perform well in delivering information, they barely have any enduring effect on the concrete consumption of food (Klassen et al., 2018).

Research purpose and questions

Based on the results of the international studies (detailed previously), it can be said that food co-shopping is a solution that fills in one of the most important roles and has the longest lasting effect in the process of becoming consumers in the food industry, both in case of parental and friendly (peer) relationships.

For this reason, the aim of this research is to reveal the properties of food co-shopping activities in a system of friendly (peer) relationships in Hungary. The study tries to achieve this goal along the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What activities did food co-shopping get realized in?

RQ2: How big of a preparation preceded food co-shopping?

RQ3: During food co-shopping, what interactions (related to shopping) took place between participants?

RQ4: In food co-shopping, what products were bought (especially with regards to their healthy properties)?

Research methods

Data collection

The research approaches the topic from the children's perspective. For this reason, young people were questioned. Also, to understand the characteristics of the topic's activities, and to reveal the impacting factors in the background, the method of questioning was semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Questions of the interview primarily concentrated on teens (13-18 years old), secondarily on young adults, because this is a period where young people want to become individuals, start to walk their own "paths",

during which they experiment, try new things, and the eating habits developed in this age are retained (and strongly resist change) (Stok et al., 2016).

Sample

In Hungary, people were questioned from 2 different regions. These two regions are Budapest and Tatabánya (and its immediate surroundings). As a control region, Upper Hungary (Felvidék) in Slovakia—inhabited by Hungarians—was also involved. Regional division took place based on the settlement where each young person had his official address for the longest period of time before hitting adulthood.

As presented earlier, in this area, according to the results of international studies, there is a significant difference based on the children's gender, so the same number (5-5 in each region) of girls and boys were asked. At the time of the interview, all of the responding young people were between 21 and 25 years old, so in every observed period, they had vivid memories of food co-shopping. Furthermore, every respondent either already had their degrees or were studying at universities, and all of them are the children of parents that graduated in higher education, as the health factor of eating is in proportion to the level of education (those with higher education tend to eat more healthily) (OECD, 2017).

Also, respondents all lived away from their parents for a longer period of time (such as dormitories and/or rented apartments), so they had to deal with their own meals (or a substantial part of it), and their own, independent decisions and habits were researchable.

In line with these conditions, there were 30 respondents in total.

The interviews were conducted between February and May 2019.

Main findings

In advance, it needs to be highlighted that contrary to expectations, in the 3 geographical regions involved, there were no significant differences the aims, attitude and actions of the youngsters. For this reason, the responses from the 3 geographical regions are evaluated as one.

Income required to carry out food co-shopping

Food co-shopping with friends assumes the young person has the necessary income. This income can either be from parents (allowance), or from–informal or formal–wages.

6 out of the responding young people never received any allowance. The 24 others did (22 of them starting from their high school education, 2 even before), but 17 only got parental aid to handle eating in the school before noon (breakfast/“brunch”).

Above this, all but 2 of the respondents worked to earn money for a longer period of time during their high school education. This longer period for 6 of the youngsters is reoccurring work (also) during the school year, while the others only worked in summer holiday(s). Also, 26 of the respondents were in a contractual work relation at the time of responding.

RQ1: What activities did food co-shopping get realized in?

Food co-shopping is realized in co-shopping to provide classic sustaining meals. It also needs to be noted that these also have a bonding aspect (such as friendly conversation during the activity), but their primary aim is not bonding but to allow the realization of sustaining meals. As such, sustaining food co-shopping is partly made up of purchases allowing for school meals before noon, partly of food purchases including every other sustaining solution taking place in the later ages (after high school education).

Food co-shopping also happens to be a bonding exercise. This means both food-oriented and event-oriented activities. The former are the fast food restaurant visits with others and shopping for co-cooking. Event-oriented (in other name: “party”-like) activities are made up of buying (and consuming) (ready) meals (such as street food during “pubbing”) in company, while going out, and also of purchases for common events (for example “house parties” / “dormitory parties”). The aim of “party”-like activities is carefree entertainment and/or stress relief, during which drinking (alcoholic) beverages receives a bigger emphasis and attention than food consumption, but this article will not be observing the (alcoholic) beverage purchases and consumption because of its topic and scope.

Sustaining food co-shopping

Almost all of the sustaining food co-shopping in high school education are purchases allowing for school meals before noon (breakfast / “brunch”). It is important that while those living in dormitories mostly carried out these

procurements at supermarkets, a smaller part did so at the school cafeteria, the ones living at home almost exclusively at the latter.

This was practically a daily activity for both those living in dormitories and for those living at home.

Furthermore, just like every other sustaining food co-shopping, procuring breakfast/”brunch” has a significant bonding aspect. This is deduced by the fact that even those young people shopped together with friends at school cafeterias for whom it was otherwise unnecessary (they already had food (e.g. brought brunch from home/the dormitory or bought some at a store)).

In this age, lunch either took place at home or as part of the prepaid cafeteria/canteen menus, so neither the ingredients nor the direct food purchases/payments involved friends, so this kind of meal is not covered in this research.

In higher education, co-shopping for sustaining meals was at least a weekly occurrence for every respondent. It is important to highlight that these occurrences decreased drastically for every working young person. It also has to be noted that these activities were replaced in the case of those living with their partners/spouses by lone (mostly women) purchases, and purchases with partners.

Co-eating oriented food co-shopping

The bonding by eating (almost exclusively) junk foods with friends and visiting fast food restaurants were absolutely not typical before the age of 16.

It needs to be pointed out that the majority of young people, especially after the age of 16, had their allowances increased, which was now enough for some entertainment, but the expenses of these raised allowances (almost) exclusively meant buying cinema tickets. Thanks (also) to this, only a small part of activities aiming to strengthen the bonds between friends were visiting fast food restaurants.

After the age of 18, the number and rates of visits to fast food restaurants increased substantially, as out of the respondents, 19 people carried it out at least once or twice a month with friends. A further 8 people (7 men and 1 woman), since they have started working and because they live alone, admit they have no time to cook after work, so they eat every day at nearby fast food restaurants (mostly with co-workers, sometimes even alone). It needs to be pointed out that those working right now, but not

living alone (they live together with partners/spouses, friends), cook together regularly, so visiting fast food restaurant is less frequent amongst them. However, this less frequent occurrence still meant at least 2-3 times a week in the majority.

Co-cooking activities meant for bonding were not typical during high school years. But in higher education, co-cooking (and shopping for it) were practiced quite often. Regarding this, it is important that women mentioned a bit higher frequency than men (most of the women reported a weekly occurrence, the others 1-2 times a month, while most of the men also mentioned a weekly frequency, but 4 of them said not even once per month). It also needs to be highlighted that these frequencies only decreased significantly for working people not living with friends. It also has to be noted that these activities were replaced in the case of those living with their partners/spouses by lone (mostly women) purchases, and–sustaining–procurement and cooking with partners.

Event-oriented food co-shopping

Experiencing “going out” events together for bonding were quite rare during high school years (only 1-2 per year). However, the frequency of these drastically increased during higher education, as for 28 people this (was) a weekly event, and the remaining 2 people also reported 1-2 times a month. All of these events, as per definition, included the consumption of drinks, while–though in a less spectacular and memorable way–most of them also involved food consumption.

“House parties” and/or “dormitory parties” organized together with friends did not reach even 1 per year during high school education. And this experience can be called rare during higher education, too, as the majority of respondents only took part in such events less than once a month.

RQ2: How big of a preparation preceded food co-shopping?

Preparation for food co-shopping is basically the pre-selection of products that are desired, and determining the places of procurement for such products.

Sustaining food co-shopping

During high school education, no preparation preceded shopping at the school cafeteria.

Contrary to this, in cases when people living in dormitories filled up their stocks required for non-prepaid meals, there were certain activities

that could be considered preparation. We still cannot talk about conscious planning, but if those living in dormitories wanted to choose from several product categories (for example bakery and/or dairy and/or meat products), they carried out food co-shopping at supermarkets (such as SPAR) or discounters (such as LIDL) near the dormitory. The reason was that they knew these store types had a wide variety of choices within categories, and they could realize significant savings due to the frequent discounts. They did not actively track these discounts (they did not check the advertising leaflets for details), but they checked the information at stores themselves. And the impulses and new information on certain procurement places the people living in dormitories shared with the others in person.

However, if they only needed one or two specific products (for example 1-2 rolls for that day's breakfast), tendency for comfort took over and they went to the nearest (small) store.

Sustaining food co-shopping was carried out in higher education in a similar fashion to the previously detailed dormitory routines, but with a much greater consciousness. A reason for this was that they had a significantly higher income by then, so besides groceries, they were able to buy products satisfying their other everyday needs (e.g. cleansing items, hygienic products) for themselves, and they had the option to prefer products in a product category that were more enjoyable for them. However, gaining a price advantage globally and within the product category remained an important aspect, so they did not only make a competition among closer small stores and supermarkets/discounters, but all the available discounters, supermarkets and hypermarkets, too. As such, they consciously paid more attention to price levels and discounts, besides the offerings. But it also has to be noted that the regular following of offers and discounts of relevant procurement places was not typical at this time.

It is important to emphasize that while in the high school years, food co-shopping involved simpler purchasing from few product categories, in higher education (generally on a monthly basis) there were more complex ones, for the support of which the young people already drafted shopping lists, too.

What's more, young people leading their own households at the time of responding needed to pay attention to discounts regularly to optimize costs of their complex purchases (dominated by items necessary for the household as opposed to just groceries) as food co-shopping. For these, in

most of the cases they turn to printed discount leaflets. On rarer occasions, they also check online discount advertisements, but only if the printed ones were not available.

Additionally, these people also wrote shopping lists of the products that are necessary. The lists included required items that they are used to (only the stock had to be recharged), or their discounted (thus gaining the price advantage) competitors, and items that were bought earlier due to discounts (e.g. although they did not run out of detergents at the time, but it was discounted then).

It needs to be pointed out that paying attention to the discounts regularly and writing shopping lists is typical for everyone whose mother did the same, while the 1 person who doesn't do these had parents who also did not use these methods, even though his friends did. This 1 person reasons that he would not be able to keep to the list anyway.

We have to stress that list writers only barely diverted from the preliminary list. The differences were mostly due to further discounts (replacements in often used product categories, rarely earlier purchases), and on rarer occasions due to being weak against temptation for some enjoyment (smaller pleasing products (e.g. buying chocolate, ice cream, chips, etc.)), and/or were generated because of shopping while being hungry (more groceries). It is important to see that while advance purchases compared to the former, planned ones are almost exclusively typical of women, the latter, enjoyment- or hunger-oriented purchases are of everyone.

Co-eating oriented food co-shopping

It has to be noted, that every fast food restaurant visit was preceded by planning exclusively about which restaurant chain or specific restaurant the company should go to. Obviously, people afflicted by conditions tightly connected to eating (e.g. lactose and/or gluten intolerance) consciously gathered information about the offerings of every eatery (mostly from online sources), and only recommended places that offer food (also) for them. It needs to be emphasized that the people in these individuals' friend group, although they were not directly affected by the issue, came out as innovators, meaning they automatically searched for places where their friends with afflictions can also go to (and the search results were constantly discussed with them).

In relation with co-cooking, respondents said the same as they did with sustaining food co-shopping, as even for these occasions they did not

only purchase groceries for the specific food that would be prepared, but bought everything else they needed at that point of time.

Event-oriented food co-shopping

In the case of “going out” parties, food co-shopping was not preceded by any kind of planning, as only the place of the party / pub was discussed by the friends. They only decided on food co-shopping and its place specifically if they got hungry, and in such cases, it wasn’t typical to pay attention to conditions tightly related to eating habits.

Regarding parties organized together, respondents said the same as they did with sustaining food co-shopping, as even for these parties they did not only purchase products necessary, but bought everything else they needed at that point of time.

Furthermore, on these occasions, the required product categories and the approximate quantities (also) got determined.

RQ3: During food co-shopping, what interactions (related to shopping) took place between participants?

Sustaining food co-shopping

It is important to note that during sustaining food co-shopping, friends did not interfere with each others’ purchases, so they neither discussed selecting or buying specific items, nor money management.

Co-eating oriented food co-shopping

In the Literature review, it was mentioned that friends have a significant impact on family eating habits, too. Of the responses, this impact was made mostly in dining together. Although the friends did not discuss or even emphasized the importance of factors about buying specific products in these cases, either, but innovations taken over from each other became a huge part of their own eating habits, which they then introduced to their families, as well.

Such innovations during visits to fast food restaurants were the trying and adoption of other cultures’ food (e.g. far Eastern foods, hamburger, pizza, etc., sometimes with a Hungarian twist). In these cases, friends (as a risk reducing habit) tried each others’ food, and also those highly recommended by the others. It is important to emphasize that these actions happened with all the respondents who regularly visited fast food restaurants with friends. Additionally, all of these people kept these foods “on their menu” at the time of responding, while 6 respondents eat such foods

regularly with their parents (they prepare them together and/or take food bought at restaurants to their parents/home).

A substantial portion of innovations taken over from friends (and passed on to families) came from co-cooking. It needs to be noted, though, that these are not directly related to the subject of food co-shopping, because they do not detail the actual purchases (and bought products), only the food prepared. These meals became a common family practice among respondents, which they then taught to friends, too. It must be pointed out that these solutions were not only the foods themselves (e.g. hunters' stew), food supplementaries (e.g. pomazánka), but also food preparing techniques / processes / methods (e.g. pickling, steaming, etc.). The vast majority of those cooking together with friends also kept these foods on their "repertoire" at the time of responding.

Event-oriented food co-shopping

Regarding "going out" parties, respondents mentioned the same as they did with visiting fast food restaurants (as the majority of these food co-shoppings also took place at fast food restaurants, the minority at the place of drinking (e.g. pub)).

With parties organized together, during food co-shopping those involved reminded each other to be cost-efficient due to a tight budget, but responses say even these were rare, as everybody chose the necessary items upfront from the already discussed product categories based on these aspects.

RQ4: In food co-shopping, what products were bought (especially with regards to their healthy properties)?

Sustaining food co-shopping

Basically it can be said about every purchase providing sustenance that they are determined by aspects of cost-efficiency (such as price, quantity, pack sizes, etc.) and the value of enjoyment received from them (such as taste, flavoring, consistency, etc.), while the effects of foods / groceries on health did not even come up. Except for the lactose and/or gluten intolerant people, because it was unavoidable for them to select based on these issues. It is also important to highlight that besides these factors, other health-oriented viewpoints (e.g. vitamin content, richness in fiber, etc.) did not get any attention.

It also needs to be noted that the preference system generated by aspects of cost-effectiveness and enjoyment value was not constant at any

of the respondents, as the structure was fundamentally influenced by the actual amount of money available for the specific food purchase.

The remarkably low level of health consciousness is greatly reflected by the bought (cold) food (e.g. bakery, dairy (such as butter, cheese), meat products (such as salami, patés)) were less healthy foods (energizing, but low on nutrients). For example, in the high school years, for the young people dealing with school meals before noon themselves, these meals consisted of cheaper sandwiches (e.g. salami buns, rolls with butter they made themselves in the case of those living in dormitories), sweet bakery products (e.g. chocolate sweet rolls) and substitute products, smaller portioned chocolates and sugary, carbonated sodas. Children received small amounts of allowance, so they had to cut back on meals or pass on them altogether to gain some money freely spendable on desired luxury items. It needs to be highlighted, however, that from the responses of young people it turned out that parents were mostly aware of what their children bought and ate for brunch, but parents were basically only concerned whether their children ate anything at a specific day, and may only have complained about them eating only chocolate instead of food in a classical way.

Co-eating oriented food co-shopping

Even with fast food restaurant visits, the aspect of health never came up, respondents only chose based on the enjoyment received out of it (besides the already present health conditions). From their responses, they mostly consumed (from fast food chains and smaller stores) hamburgers, Chinese foods, and a smaller portion ate pizzas and dessert-type sweets.

Furthermore, neither with foods made together (mainly goulash, paprika potatoes, stews, pancakes, pizza, rarely hunters' stew, strapacky), nor with choosing ingredients did they pay attention to the effects on health. Exceptions are meals made for friends dealing with health conditions (e.g. salads, low on spices, etc.).

Event-oriented food co-shopping

Regarding "going out" parties, respondents mentioned the same as they did with visiting fast food restaurants.

What's more, purchased / prepared "foods" (snacks (mostly salted sticks, chips, snacks with dips (tortilla), rarely smaller sandwiches)), (almost exclusively sugared, carbonated) beverages and alcoholic drinks for

parties organized together are not selected based on their (negative) effects on health.

Conclusion and limitations

This research empirically contributes to observing the properties and effects of food co-shopping with friends.

This study used a qualitative research method to carry out the observations, and uses a sample of a relatively small size, thus limitations stemming from this solution have to be taken into consideration when re-using the conclusions of the research. For the limitations of the research, it is important to quantify and examine the observed scope of questions representatively, so that both parents and public health professionals are able to take the necessary steps for improving the children's health condition / situations based on the exact picture presented through the results.

Based on the conclusions of this research, young people (although they are the children of the most educated society group in this matter) are not health conscious in their choices of groceries, foods and ingredients.

Furthermore, the research revealed that for young people, bonding activities are especially important, among which eating and cooking together have a very prominent place. They take over knowledge received on such occasions as innovations, and implement them into their own everyday eating habits, and also bring them to the life of their families.

In the United States, the project named Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program / Supplemental Nutrition Education Program – Education was developed based on such experiences. As a part of this project, they not only teach 14-18-year-old students to cook (cheap, simple and healthy) meals and prepare daily eating routines, but they do so by involving the friends of these students to share their experience with each other (Price et al., 2017).

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