



Research report

Meet meat: An explorative study on meat and cultured meat as seen by Chinese, Ethiopians and Dutch



Gerben A. Bekker ^{a, b}, Hilde Tobi ^{b, *}, Arnout R.H. Fischer ^a

^a Marketing and Consumer Behaviour Group, Social Sciences, Wageningen University & Research, Hollandseweg 1, 6706KN Wageningen, The Netherlands

^b Biometris, Wageningen University & Research, Droevendaalsesteeg 1, 6708 PB Wageningen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

In this cross-cultural study we investigated how study participants from China, Ethiopia and the Netherlands operationalized the concept of meat and to what extent cultured meat fits or does not fit into this operationalization. We argue that combining the conceptual approaches symbolic boundaries and theory of social practices helps to better understand the possibly culturally dependent operationalization of the concept meat. Ten visiting graduate students from China, 10 from Ethiopia and 10 native Dutch graduate students completed freelist tasks, a pile sort task, interview and essay task, during a single session. We found that butchered animals are at the center of the concept of meat, although depending on culture not all animals are a source of meat. Symbolic boundaries were restricted or stretched depending on social practices within countries. Ethiopian participants applied strictly defined symbolic boundaries, where Chinese and Dutch participants used more broadly defined symbolic boundaries. Cultured meat was seen as a technology for the future and was positioned across the symbolic boundaries of meat.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Hunger for meat

Meat provides high quality proteins and other nutrients, such as vitamin B12 and iron (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, pp. 193–196; Boland et al., 2013). Between 1995 and 2005 the global meat consumption increased with 15.4% and this upward trend is expected to continue (FAO, 2009). As such, the global meat demand is anticipated to have doubled by the year 2050 (FAO, 2009). The majority of the increase in meat demand stems from developing countries (FAO, 2009). The growing demand for meat cannot be met by conventional meat production alone, because 70% of all arable land is already used directly or indirectly for livestock production and livestock production is unsustainable as it is, due to its large ecological footprint (FAO, 2006; Fiala, 2008; Steinfeld et al., 2006).

Meat is an often appreciated ingredient in meals and plays an

important role around the world. In many countries, most people can only afford to consume meat on special occasions and meat is therefore considered to be a high-status food (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 203; Fieldhouse, 1995, pp. 79–80). With economic advancement people will be able to afford larger quantities of highly desirable food products, such as meat (Steinfeld et al., 2006). However, wealth does not fully explain the demand for meat. For example, in 2005 the GDP per capita of China was 2.3 times larger than that of India, whereas the meat consumption per capita in China was 11.7 times larger (FAO, 2009; The World Bank, 2015). An important explanation for these differences is food culture.

Within the context of this paper, food culture can be described as the food practices exhibited by a group of people who have a shared identity with respect to cultural value orientations (Fieldhouse, 1995, pp. 1–16; Schwartz, 2008). Food culture concerns, for example, what is recognized as food, what is considered edible, food preparation, cuisine and eating practices (Farb & Arnelagos, 1980; Fieldhouse, 1995; Scapp & Seitz, 1998). Like other cultural expressions, food culture is a learned experience. It requires a group of people and is transmitted through socialization (Fieldhouse, 1995, pp. 1–16). When food culture is transmitted from generation to generation, the food culture experienced by the new generation is never completely identical to the food culture

* Corresponding author. Postal address: Messenger Number 3, PO Box 16, 6700AA Wageningen, The Netherlands.

E-mail addresses: gerben.bekker@live.com (G.A. Bekker), hilde.tobi@wur.nl (H. Tobi), arnout.fischer@wur.nl (A.R.H. Fischer).

experienced by the previous generation. After all, migrants from other cultures bring their own eating habits and new food products become available on the market. Nevertheless, (food) culture changes at a slow pace (Fieldhouse, 1995, pp. 1–16; Schwartz, 2008).

Since conventional meat cannot be produced in demanded quantities at acceptable levels of sustainability, alternatives to meat are required (Boland et al., 2013). One alternative to conventional meat is cultured meat (Tuomisto & de Mattos, 2011). Cultured meat is muscle tissue created with tissue-engineering techniques using stem cells (Edelman, McFarland, Mironov, & Matheny, 2005). Although many technological challenges are still to be overcome, with this technology we should be able to produce an almost endless supply of sustainable meat without the need to kill animals (Datar & Betti, 2010; Edelman et al., 2005; Post, 2012; Tuomisto & de Mattos, 2011). The commercial success of cultured meat will largely depend on how consumers see cultured meat in relation to traditional meat (Datar & Betti, 2010; van der Weele & Tramper, 2014). This immediately raises the question what consumers perceive and use as meat. The operationalization of the concept meat may be culturally dependent and hence heterogeneous across consumers from different countries. How cultured meat fits or does not fit within the boundaries of the concept meat may be influenced by the culturally dependent operationalization of the concept meat.

All humans have largely the same basic nutritional needs, but what they consume depends on many factors. Food choices are shaped by food culture (Fieldhouse, 1995, pp. 1–16). The availability of food sources, knowledge, laws, religious influences, and customs shaped in the past, all influence food culture (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997; Fessler & Navarrete, 2003; Fieldhouse, 1995; Scapp & Seitz, 1998; Simoons, 1961, 1994). Hence we expect views of consumers on what constitutes as desirable food to be, to some extent, different, depending on their cultural background.

This study aims to explore how study participants from different countries operationalize the concept of meat, to what extent they do so in different ways, and to what extent cultured meat fits or does not fit into this operationalization. Prior studies on cultural differences concerning meat have primarily focused on exclusion criteria for meat, such as meat taboos (see for example, Fessler & Navarrete, 2003; Simoons, 1961, 1994), where other studies have focused on cultural food consumption practices (Farb & Armelagos, 1980; Fieldhouse, 1995; Simoons, 1961, 1994). The current study will focus on inclusion criteria for something being meat, complemented with exclusion criteria for something being not meat. Our study on both inclusion and exclusion criteria provides the possibility to understand how meat alternatives, such as cultured meat, fit and do not fit into the concept of meat.

In countries, which have distinct cultural value orientations and consumption patterns, we expect at least partially different operationalizations of the concept meat. We will look into food cultures as experienced by study participants from China, Ethiopia and the Netherlands, because these countries are positioned on three different continents, have different histories, different official languages and different cultural value orientations (Schwartz, 2008). In addition, the average amount of meat consumed per capita and the trends in meat consumption volume differ strongly between the countries (FAO, 2009). As the meat consumption and cultures of these countries are very diverse, we argue that if there are differences in how different people across the world operationalize meat, this should be indicated in responses from people from these countries.

In four steps this study will explore how study participants from China, Ethiopia and the Netherlands operationalize meat. First, we investigate what study participants consider as meat. Second, we

investigate where the boundary of meat is positioned and why. Third, we investigate what the reasons are for meat being edible or inedible and fourth, we explore what people associate with cultured meat. By combining the outcomes of the first and second step with the fourth step we will try to answer to what extent cultured meat does or does not fit into the concept of meat.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows, first, we will elaborate on the theoretical approaches underpinning the present study, as these approaches provided a framework that informed our interpretation of the data. This is followed by a brief background on cuisine, and animals commonly eaten or under taboo for China, Ethiopia and the Netherlands. Then we elaborate on the data collection and data analysis methods employed in this study. Afterwards we present the results of the data analyses. The conclusion shows the general operationalization of the concept meat, together with the differences between the three countries. We conclude with how cultured meat fits and does not fit within the symbolic boundaries of meat.

1.2. Theoretical approaches

To better understand how people from different cultures operationalize the concept meat, we adopt two conceptual approaches: the first conceptual approach is the study of symbolic boundaries and the second conceptual approach is the theory of social practices.

Symbolic boundaries “are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). They provide a way for individuals and groups to distinguish different objects from each other. Distinctions can be expressed in different ways, such as through taboos, cultural attitudes and practices (Lamont, Pendergrass, & Pachucki, 2015). Symbolic boundaries are created and reinforced by social actors and social actors are influenced by their culture. When the cultures of social actors differ, symbolic boundaries might be different as well. Therefore, symbolic boundaries help to identify the commonalities in the operationalization of meat for people from different cultures, and provide the possibility to make distinctions between cultures and people within cultures (Epstein, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

People acquire and create their food culture through collectively shared social practices that they perform in everyday life (Fieldhouse, 1995, pp. 1–16). Social practices consist of bodily and mental actions in relation to an object (Reckwitz, 2002). They contain historical and cultural knowledge in relation to practices that helps to understand objects (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 253). The theory of social practices has found recent applications in consumption research (Domaneschi, 2012; Halkier & Jensen, 2011; Sahakian & Wilhite, 2013).

We argue that the conceptual approaches symbolic boundaries and social practices are overlapping and complementary. Both reveal what is acceptable and acknowledged. Symbolic boundaries primarily provide conceptual distinctions between different objects (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168), whereas social practices emphasize actual (mental and physical) behavior in relation to these objects. The following example will illustrate how the conceptual approaches are complementary: The old and very British Oxford dictionary describes meat as “the flesh of an animal (especially a mammal) as food” and flesh is described as “the soft substance in the body consisting of muscle tissue and fat” (Soanes & Stevenson, 2006). This description presents a symbolic boundary that excludes animal parts other than muscle tissue to be considered meat. However, social practices reveal that other animal parts, such as the kidney and liver are also meat as they are packaged, sold and consumed as meat (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 194).

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