

Meal Importance and Preference for Types of Dishes in the Transition Economy of Bulgaria

Introduction

The liberalization of international trade by former centrally planned economies opens new business opportunities including exports and direct foreign investment in the food sector of emerging market economies. Evidence from Central and East European countries suggests that western companies have been particularly active in the snack food market, convenience food products, and fast food restaurant sector.

This study investigates basic food consumption behavior of Bulgarian consumers and focuses on the importance of meal to individuals and their families, preference for various dishes, and habits involving eating meals away from home. Knowledge based on this empirical study will offer insights about current preferences of consumers and will suggest ways in which a company searching for positioning itself on the Bulgarian market may reach and maintain customers.

Under the centrally planned system (prior to 1990), many ate at least one meal, typically dinner, in a cafeteria located at the workplace. After the collapse of the communist system, the welfare program could not be supported. Many cafeterias closed as a result of plant closures or cost reduction measures. Simultaneously, the economic liberalization opened opportunities to operate restaurants. The new private restaurant sector slowly emerges because of sluggish demand resulting from the decline in real incomes experienced at the early stages of transition to the market economy.

The objective of the study is to identify demographic and socio-economic characteristics of consumers influencing meal importance, dish preference, and eating meals away from home. Moreover, the study accounts for geographical differences across four major regions in Bulgaria.

Eating Out

Food has an important place in Bulgarian culture and meals are a serious form of human interaction. As incomes increase, consumers devote less time to preparation of main meals at home (Florkowski et al., 2000). The scarcity of time and preference for convenience encourage eating meals away from home. In industrialized economies, expenditures on meals away from home are substantial, but in many economies in transition, eating out is less common. For example, in Belarus consumers spent xx percent of their food expenditures on eating out. Although Bulgaria's per capita income is higher than in Belarus, according to the survey eating out is still infrequent. Among the three main meals, breakfast is the most likely to be eaten outside home by Bulgarians. Typically, breakfast is the smallest of the three meals and can consist of a locally made "banitza" (i.e., a stuffed pastry with cheese or other filling). Dinner or supper include meat dishes and, on occasion, fish or fried cheese. In contrast to eating breakfast outside home, which is a reflection of convenience, eating dinner or supper is connected with a special occasion such as a birthday.

Data

The study is based on data collected from 2, 133 households in 1997 representing 85 percent of members of the household panel operated by the Bulgarian Statistical Office. The survey instrument was delivered in-person and collected four weeks later by government enumerators. The questionnaire, translated into Bulgarian, was self-administered and asked for consumption habits, and characteristics of the household and respondent. Questions probing for the importance of meal and eating meals away from home included Likert-like scale recording respondents' perceptions ranging from 'not important' to 'very important' or from 'almost never' to 'almost always.' Preference for seven dish types was marked on a five-point scale ranging from 'dislike very much' to 'like very much.' Respondents were also provided a category 'don't know' in case some were not sure of their actual preference.

Meal importance. In general all three meals, breakfast, dinner, and supper, were important to Bulgarian consumers and their families. The majority never ate any of the three

main meals outside home: breakfast was never eaten away from home by nearly 65 percent of respondents, dinner by 73 percent, and supper by about 87 percent, respectively. However, some differences were noticeable. In particular, breakfast was ‘not important’ to about 13 percent of respondents, while only 1.9 percent and 2.6 percent of respondents expressed a similar perception of dinner and supper importance, respectively. About twice as many respondents perceived breakfast as ‘neither important nor unimportant’ than any of the other two meals. Dinner and supper were found ‘very important’ or ‘important’ to about 90 percent of consumers.

Dish preference. Grilled meats were by far the most preferred type of dish among respondents. About 52 percent of respondents ‘liked very much’ grilled meats followed by 39 percent showing a similar degree of preference for cooked meats. Salads or pickled vegetables, soups, and cakes and pastries were ‘liked very much’ by 30 percent, 28 percent, and 26 percent of respondents, respectively. Sandwiches and vegetarian dishes were the least popular. The strong preference for meat dishes is not surprising given the rather dramatic decline in per capita meat and meat product consumption in recent decade. Prior to the transition to the market economy, Bulgarians enjoyed a meat and meat product consumption comparable to residents of Western Europe. The combination of the substantial decrease in the number of livestock numbers (Murgov, 1998) and real incomes led to a change in consumption including the substitution of staples, mostly cereals, for sausages and meat.

Empirical Model

Eating out is currently infrequent in Bulgaria. However, a segment of population has adequate income permitting eating meals in restaurants. This demand for food services stimulates the growth of the new private restaurant sector. The large number of consumers not eating out poses a problem: how to best account for two population sub-segments to provide reliable empirical results? Three alternative approaches were used to identify variables influencing eating any of the three meals away from home: 1) a probit model distinguishing only between those who ate or did not eat meals away from home; 2) ordered probit models reflecting frequency of consumption; and 3) ordered probit models estimated only for those reporting

eating out. Other ordered probit model was chosen to account for the categorical and ordinal nature of the data for meals away from home (Maddala, 1983).

In this paper we chose to proceed in specifying and estimating the model using data provided only by those who reported eating out. Consequently, results provide insights about the segment of the population already eating out. This knowledge can be applied to the development of strategies focusing on intensifying the observed behavior rather than effectively broadening the group of consumers eating meals away from home.

The selection of explanatory variables reflects the notion that eating meals away from home is a reflection of ability to pay for such services, i.e., the household income. Furthermore, characteristics of a consumer shaping preferences are also included; in particular, education, age, employment status, and gender influence eating meals away from home. These variables are typically selected in similar studies of American consumers. Oftentimes household characteristics such as the marital status of a respondent and household size are added. In case of this study, the perceived importance of main meals has been used to specify an explanatory variable to test the nature of its influence on eating out.

Results

According to estimation results, the set of variables significantly affecting eating breakfast, dinner or supper away from home consists of largely the same factors (Table 1). The higher the income or the educational attainment level of a respondent, the more likely was he to eat any of the three meals away from home. His or her full employment status was also associated positively with eating out suggesting the likely substitution of meals away from home for home meal preparation. In contrast, the older the respondent the more likely was she to eat any of the three meals at home. This result is consistent with observations on behavior associated with aging, which includes different forms of socializing among elderly than younger generations. Married respondents and female respondents were also more likely not to eat meals away from home. This result indicates a potential division of tasks with households and is consistent with reported influence of gender on time allocated for meal preparation (Florkowski

et al., 2000). In Bulgarian households, meal preparation is primarily a responsibility of women and in married households more time was allocated for meal preparation. This result is consistent with the attached importance of meal in opinion of respondents.

The likelihood of eating out breakfast or dinner decreased as the importance of a meal increased suggesting that those attaching a great deal of importance to any of the two meals were likely to eat it at home. However, the result was not statistically significant for eating supper. This meal, although important as shown by the frequency summary, may be eaten away from home because a number of family celebrations or social occasions involve an evening meal. Such a meal, although eaten away from home, is not necessarily eaten in a restaurant, but at a family member or friend's home.

Another difference among estimated results of the three equations is the positive and significant influence of the household size on eating breakfast away from home. There are two plausible explanations for this result. If the household included children, some may be eating a breakfast at school. However, if the households includes primarily working adults, they could eat on the way to work saving the effort of preparing a meal, while assuring a timely arrival.

Regional differences were confirmed in case of eating out dinner and supper, but not breakfast. Residents on northern Bulgaria were less likely to eat dinner or supper out in comparison to residents of the metropolitan region of Sofia. However, no differences between the latter and those living in southern or coastal Bulgaria could be found. Different behavior of consumers in northern Bulgaria has been found in other studies (e.g., Moon et al., 1998; Florkowski et al., 2000). In general, the resident in northern provinces tend to be older, more likely to be unemployed, and have lower incomes, but even after controlling for these differences, the location itself continues to exert statistically significant influence. Differences in regional cultures may be behind the observed results. The development of cultural differences may have been encouraged by the existence of physical barriers, mostly mountain ranges, between the northern, southern, and metropolitan regions.

Conclusions

The selection of the modeling technique can influence the results of estimated relationships and determine the recommendations. Breakfast foods may increase in popularity because they tend to be less expensive than other meals, meet expectations of convenience, and breakfast is already the most likely meal to be consumed away from home. Highly educated and employed consumers, who often feel pressured for time, may be the most important customers. Types of dishes may be developed to suit local tastes. They should account for the type of meal. For example, breakfast items can include items similar to those offered by bakeries and coffee shops, but dinner and supper dishes must include meats.

A number of studies show that households in industrialized countries increasingly substitute home preparation of meals by purchasing ready-to-eat dishes, partially cooked meals, or eating out as an adjustment to the rise in the wage rates, allocating more time primarily on leisure (Capps et al., 1985; McCracken and Brandt, 1987; Nayga, 1996; and Price, 1999). Bulgarian economy is just striving to take off after almost a decade of transitional period characterized by highly unstable macroeconomic conditions and contracting economy. Expanding economy will provide a growing market for food processing, food service and restaurant industries. The information about sociodemographic profiles influencing the frequency of eating meals away from home will be useful for the food industry to formulate strategic growth and marketing plans in the near future.

References

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Table 1. Factors Influencing Eating Breakfast, Dinner, and Supper Away from Home - Ordered Probit Estimation Results

Variable name	Breakfast		Dinner		Supper	
	Coefficient	t-value	Coefficient	t-value	Coefficient	t-value
Constant	0.1322	0.62	-0.2727	-0.94	-0.3474	-1.05
Meal importance	-0.0587	-2.16*	-0.1138	-2.55*	-0.0123	-0.22
Education	0.0894	5.05*	0.0950	4.66*	0.0970	3.90*
Income	0.0949	3.20*	0.0787	2.32*	0.8028	2.05*
Household size	0.0657	2.66*	0.0135	0.46	-0.0009	-0.03
Gender	-0.1912	-3.09*	-0.1813	-2.65*	-0.2532	-3.07*
Employed	0.6894	9.90*	1.0873	13.60*	0.4239	4.59*
Married	-0.3074	-4.33*	-0.1704	-2.10*	-0.2585	-2.52*
Age	-0.0194	-9.04*	-0.01433	-5.72*	-0.0221	-6.81*
Region 1	-0.0497	-0.63	0.0088	0.10	-0.0944	-0.89
Region 2	0.0222	0.22	-0.1534	-1.44	-0.0689	-0.56
Region 3	-0.1150	-1.47	-0.2562	-2.94*	-0.4345	-3.85*
μ^1	1.0331	24.28*	0.6708	17.60*	1.0544	15.60*
μ^2	1.5341	28.53*	1.0778	21.91*	1.4840	15.09*
μ^3	2.0922	26.67*	1.5481	24.14*	1.5973	13.96*

* Significant at $\forall = .05$.