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**Taco Consumption Experience:  
Exploring Taco Experience for Swedish Consumers from a  
Cultural Perspective**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this study was to explore, from a cultural perspective, how Swedish consumers experience taco consumption; and in doing that, understand what has made tacos connect with the Swedes and remain current. Taco consumption is common practice among Swedish people, particularly in families with small children; and interestingly, Sweden has the second highest per capita consumption of Mexican type of food in Europe. A qualitative study with an Existential Phenomenological approach was conducted and 12 Swedish adults from 24 to 57 years old were interviewed. Taco consumption experience was analyzed from its practical and symbolic elements and was found to be an important part of today's Swedish culture. The integration of tacos to Swedish culture was explained by its connection with the families, the characteristics that tacos have (e.g., *socialness*, resemblance to the format of Swedish celebrations) and the benefits that tacos bring to these families (e.g., low risk meal solution, a meeting point). In sum, tacos have had a good *Cultural Fit* with Swedish culture that has enabled them to be digested and be incorporated into the culture.

Key words: consumption, experience, consumption experience, meanings, tacos, families, Existential Phenomenology, culture, Sweden.

## **Introduction**

Tortillas, jalapeños and salsas are regular products found inside every supermarket in Sweden. Being born and raised in Mexico that was the last thing I was expecting to find in a country as far away from home, both geographically and culturally. However, Mexican food has found a place in the stomach and in the heart of Swedish people. The observation that initially caught my attention later triggered the interest to adopt it as a topic for this study.

Today's consumers are eager to experiment with new food and flavours (Euromonitor, 2008: 3); then it is not a surprise that the interest and consumption of Mexican food has developed around Europe. Within other ethnic cuisines, the Mexican is third just behind the Chinese (1<sup>st</sup>) and Indian (2<sup>nd</sup>) (Datamonitor, 2005). Except in the UK, Mexican food is the second most popular ethnic cuisine in all Europe (Datamonitor, 2005). However, the Scandinavian countries (e.g. Denmark, Sweden and Norway) are responsible of consuming almost half of the Mexican food of Europe (Santa Maria - B, 2011). In fact, Sweden and Norway are the countries with the highest per capita consumption of Mexican food out of all the countries in Europe (Santa Maria - B, 2011).

The taco concept was launched in the Scandinavian region during the 80's by Old El Paso (Old El Paso, 2011). First it was launched in Norway in 1973 and nine years later it was introduced

into the Swedish market. During the first years of the Mexican food market in Sweden, Old El Paso was the only brand within the Mexican food category. However, the category development and the novelty of Mexican food inspired other businesses such as Nordfalks, who in 1991 launched its own line of Mexican food under Santa Maria brand (Santa Maria - B, 2011). Today, Santa Maria is not only the leader brand in the Mexican food category both in Sweden and the rest of the Scandinavian countries, but has also replaced Nordfalks as the name of the company (Santa Maria - B, 2011).

Behind these numbers there are thousands of families and groups of friends who, most commonly, sit during Friday nights and eat tacos. These persons and their experience consuming tacos are the main interests of this study. To consume, in its purest form, means to eat or drink (Marshall, 2005: 70). Products are consumed not only for what they do for the person, but because of what they mean and say about them (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Consumption involves the production of meanings; therefore when individuals consume they are consuming the products' meanings and images (Carù & Cova, 2007: 4). Then it can be said that in the context of food, we not only eat because it provides us with vital energy, but food and meals have different roles and meanings in our lives; for example being part of family traditions, an expression of love, or a way to stay healthy (Bellows, et al., 2010). As Margaret Visser writes "Food is never just something to eat" (Visser, 1986:12 in Jones, 2007: 133).

The **aim** of this study was to explore, from a cultural perspective, how Swedish consumers experience taco consumption; and in doing this, understand what has made tacos connect with the Swedes and remain through time. The method used to fulfill the aim was an Existential-Phenomenological one, which included participant observations and in depth interviews.

There are two parts in this aim that merit extra attention in order to better grasp the stance from which this study was developed; the consumer experience and the cultural perspective.

### **Consumer experience**

There has been much discussion around the definitions of consumer and consumption experiences (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Carù & Cova, 2003 and 2007; Walls, et al., 2011). Very often when talking about consumer or consumption experiences they are connected to hospitality and tourism topics (Walls, 2011) or in relation to the hedonic features of a product (Addis and Holbrook, 2001). However, since the purpose of this study is not to theorize on these concepts and the topic is one of a food (i.e., tacos), I will explain the four factors that define the consumer experience in this study. First, in the context of this study the individual is seen as a consumer. Second, this consumer lives an experience when he or she interacts with the market or with a product (Addis and Holbrook, 2001; Carù & Cova, 2003), in this case with tacos. Third, taking into account that experiences have different intensities (i.e. going from ordinary to extraordinary), taco consumer experience is part of the ordinary experiences (Carù & Cova, 2003). Fourth and last, a consumption experience such as this one, stands at the end of the continuum of consumption experiences designed by Carù and Cova (2007) where the consumer is the one who organizes his/her own experience.

Consumption experiences of everyday products have been widely researched; some examples of studies around everyday foods are the cases of chocolate (Zarantonello & Luomala, 2011), pasta

(Dalli & Romani, 2007) or wine (Mora & Moscarola, 2010). Other studies have focused more around rituals and routines of food consumption experiences like Thanksgiving Day (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991) or the consumer experience of the “British pub” (Clarke, et al., 1998).

### **Cultural perspective**

The second relevant aspect in the aim is the cultural perspective; the cultural perspective acknowledges the relation that both food and consumption have with culture. The concept of culture as used here means a whole way of life (Williams, 2000) and not the aesthetic meaning of culture. Culture, in this sense, is defined by Johann Gottfried Herder as how man thinks, acts and lives (Williams 1988:89, in Tellström, 2006: 22). Creatively McCracken uses two analogies to define culture, first as a ‘lens’ which determines the way the individual views life; and second as ‘blueprint’ that shapes human activity. McCracken (1986: 72) then concludes that “culture constitutes the world by supplying it with meaning”. Then, it can be understood that we see through culture and we live by culture.

The food-culture relation is very tight and complex; in fact, for some authors food *is* culture (Bell & Valentine, 1997; Montanari, 2006). Montanari (2006) explains that food is culture in three different moments: first when it is produced, second when food is cooked and last, when it is eaten. Food is embedded in people’s lives and forms part of their culture. “What you eat, how is prepared and the context of the meal are thus socially and culturally regulated and sanctioned” (Kjærnes, 2001 cited by Lien & Nerlich, 2004: 71). All in all “man eats, so to speak within a culture” (Fischer, 1988: 281). Therefore, when one talks about food, one talks also about culture.

The consumption-culture relation has been investigated primarily by a “family of theoretical perspectives” called Consumption Culture Theory or CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). CCT sees consumers as culture producers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and culture as the “fabric of experience, meaning and action” (Geertz, 1983 in Arnould & Thompson, 2005: 869); additionally meanings, from the CCT perspective, are always in transition (McCracken, 1986) and are embodied and negotiated by consumers. These views of the consumer, culture and meanings have provided a frame by which this study was constructed and analyzed.

In sum, in this study I connected the consumer experience and the cultural perspectives with the intention to describe and understand the experience of the individual in a context. The context is given and derives from the culture; we live in culture and what we do is part of it. There is a dialogue between the person and the culture, and one is the expression of the other. What the person does and lives is an expression of the culture and at the same time the culture is the reflection of what the persons do; and it is between interaction of these elements, person and culture, where this study is emerges and is supported.

### **Relevancy of the study**

From the literature review done for this study there were no published studies found in Europe, which had as their study focus tacos or for that matter, Mexican food consumption. The literature that talks about tacos and Mexican food in general, comes in its majority from the USA, leaving an open space for this study. Besides the opportunity to develop an original study, stands the fact that tacos in Sweden are an institution and its relevancy stands out not only within the Swedish or Scandinavian context, but also in the European perspective. As a TV commercial of one of the

largest retailers in Sweden declared: “We in ICA love Sweden and we want to manifest it with an offer of the most Swedish of the Swedish: tacos!”<sup>1</sup>(ICA, 2011).

## **Overview**

This study has four main building blocks. First, the introduction that presented the study and its interest. Second, the methodology, where it is explained how the study was conducted and the analysis performed. Third, the findings highlight the most important results that help us give answer to the aim of the study. The findings present the experience from its practical and symbolic elements. In turn, the symbolic elements are divided into inside meanings and outside meanings. The fourth and last block comprises the conclusions, implications for marketers and theory, as well as the limitations.

## **Methodology**

The nature of this study is qualitative and an Existential-Phenomenological perspective was primary used as both method of collecting and analysing data. Some aspects of Grounded Theory methodology were also used in the analysis of the information, and will later be explained.

Existential-phenomenology uses the description of the lived experience and the meanings that emerge from them, to make sense and to understand different phenomena (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). It is exactly the lived experience of a person the starting and standing-point from which the researcher gains insights into the experience (Hackley, 2003; Moisander, Valtonen & Histro, 2009).

This approach was chosen because it aims to obtain ‘a first-person description of experience’ (Giorgi 1983 in Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989: 13) and to describe the experience as it is lived (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989) and not its psychological origin (Merelau-Ponty, 1962 in Gouldin, 2005). Most importantly this approach seeks the understanding of the meanings that emerge from the lived experiences (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989: 139), which are central to this study. With this approach I was able to describe the meaning of the taco consumption experience through the eyes of the person who has lived the experience (Martí, 2010: 115).

The data collection was done through participant observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Prior the start of the field work, a pilot interview was conducted to see how it worked and pertinent adjustments were made to the interview guide (Note: The interview guide can be found in the appendix section). Additionally an interview was conducted with the Global Marketing Director at Santa Maria, Henrik Billger; the objective being to obtain the general demographic profile of who eats tacos and to get to know the history and development of tacos from the view of the leader company in Mexican type of food in Sweden. The profile provided by Santa Maria was used as a guide to select the informants. The profile was generally described as families with children (Santa Maria –A, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup>Original text in Swedish ”Vi på ICA älskar Sverige, och det vi vill manifestera med ett erbjudande av det svenskaste av det svenskast: tacos!

### The informants

The informants were recruited considering the general profile provided by Santa Maria and it was done by means of a convenient sample. This was judged as the most appropriate method considering it is quite sensitive to be allowed into a house and take part of a family dinner without previous reference. Then, all of the informants were referred to me by a mutual acquaintance from both the informant and me. However, I had not met any of the informants prior to the observation and or interview.

The following table represents the summary of the informants who participated in the study. It is worth noticing that two of the informants, Emilia and Lucas, don't have children. However, it was important to also get the view of respondents that did not have the exact described profile in order to have a more comprehensive view of taco consumption experience through different stages in life. This proved to be a good strategy and interesting results came from that decision.

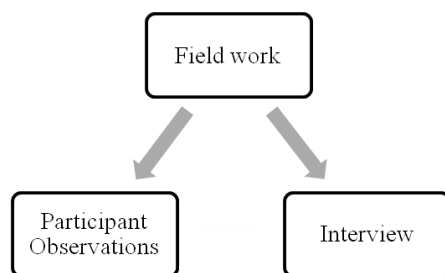
#	Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Family composition	Method
1	Emilia	24	Student	Lives by herself	Interview
2	Lucas	33	Product developer	Lives with girlfriend, no children	Interview
3	Oscar	48	Manager	Married, 2 children of his own 18 and 16; plus 2 of new marriage 18 and 16	Interview
4	Sofia	40	Head of R&D	Married 2 boys: 5 and 8	Interview
5	Jacob	49	Marketing Manager	Married 3 children: 17, 15 and 11	Interview
6	Emma	45	Lawyer	Married 2 children: Boy 15 and Girl 13	Interview
7	Viktor	57	Product Developer	Married 2 boys: 22 and 16	Interview
8	Amanda David	44 44	House wife Policeman	Married, boy 14 and girl 7	Interview and observation
9	Hanna	36	Researcher	Married, 2 boys 6 and 4, girl 2	Interview and observation
10	Maria	45	PhD Student and consultant for a bank	Married 3 children of her own, 2 boys 11 and 7, girl 3; plus 3 children of her husband in their 20's	Interview and observation
11	Josefine	50	Nurse	Married, 3 boys: 20, 18 and 15	Interview and observation

Table 1. *Description of informants.*

Observing the informants as a whole, it can be said that they are rather homogeneous considering their origin (i.e., all Swedish) and their social status. Nevertheless, a wide age range was covered going from 24 to 59 years old. Considering gender distribution, the informants were seven females and five males. All of the families who participated can be considered as nuclear families; this are families that “consists of two adults living together in a household with their own or adopted children” (Giddens 2003, in Jonsson 2004: 34”).

## Field work

The field work was done in the Gothenburg area and it can be divided in two parts, participant



observations and interviews (Figure 1). Four participant observations and eleven interviews were conducted. All of the informants that participated in the study were interviewed, whether they were being observed or not. The only main factor that differentiates informants that were only interviewed from the ones that were observed and interviewed, is the fact that the last ones were in all cases families.

Figure 1. *Field work structure*

### *Participant observations*

The participant observations were conducted at the informants’ house in a day where they were having tacos for dinner. This type of observations were selected versus non-participant observations taking into account my personal interest of having a firsthand experience with tacos and considering the awkwardness that would have been experienced by the informants of having a person watching while they had dinner.

The participant observations covered the preparation of the tacos, the meal time, and until the table was cleared; they lasted lasting from one hour to two and a half hours. The language spoken during the observations was Swedish; this was done with the intention of disturbing as little as possible with the normal flow of the activities, as well as to have the possibility to interact with the children present during the observation. An observation guide was developed that focused in five different aspects: (1) Actors, who participates and what are their roles. (2) Objects: what are the elements of a taco-dinner. (3) Feelings and attitudes: what is the mood and attitude towards the taco-dinner. (4) Activities: what happens, in which order. (5) Space: where does taco-dinner takes place. (See Appendix 1)

Doing participant observations was very important in order to gain familiarity with the taco-dinner and understand every aspect of it. Also, the observations were particularly relevant considering my non-Swedish background and the fact that I was not acquainted with how taco-dinners are. Friedrichs and Lüdtkke (1975) also mention that the value of the participant observations comes as they reduce the importance of the interviewee language skills and other factors that affect the transmission of the information between the researcher and the informant (Friedrichs & Lüdtkke, 1975, in Tellström 2006). This last aspect was particularly relevant to this study, considering the fact that the interviews were conducted in English, a language though



spoken by all respondents, it was their second language and for some, a language that have not practiced in many years.

After every observation and with the help of the observation guide, a field note was created for each family observed. These field notes were done right after the observations in order to have the experience fresh and not forget the details. After the table was cleared I proceeded with the interview.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are said to be the most powerful way by which one can obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of another person (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989: 138), which is the aim of this study.

I used phenomenological interviews, which are different from other in-depth interviews. Here the informant's perspective, meaning his or hers view and experience, are taken as 'fact' and are the main source of data (Gouldin, 2005). This aspect is referred by Sandberg (1994) as the object, which is one of the two dimensions of phenomenological interviews; the other is the confidence and will be later explained. The object can be defined as the way the interview is designed and carried out so that the informant experience is always in focus.

Before each interview started, a short document with the presentation of the study project was handed to the informant. This document included the description of the project, the use that was going to be given to the material collected from the interview or/and observation, as well as the assurance of the confidentiality and anonymity of the information provided, together with my contact information.

An interview guide was developed with seven key open-ended questions, follow-up questions and prompt questions (See Appendix 2). The interview guide was used as an aid to highlight key issues that were central to the interview and as a way to keep the interview focused on the taco consumption experience. The opening question is important in phenomenological interviews as it sets the arena that will be discussed (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). In the case of this study, the opening question was, in almost all of the cases: "Please describe what it means to eat tacos for you and your family?".

The follow-up questions, as described by Sandberg (1994), depart from the situation described by the informants, with the aim to get better and deeper understanding of the experience as the informants expanded their answer (Sandberg, 1994: 81). As for the prompt questions, they were used in the cases where the respondent looked puzzled, and needed a more detail explanation of the question.

Most of the questions asked were *what* and *how* questions, avoiding *why* questions. Some examples of these questions are: Can you give me examples of different occasions where you eat tacos? or How has your experience changed from the first times you had taco-dinner until today?. *Why* questions force the respondent to try to explain the reason they do something the way they do it, instead of generating the description of their lived experience or what it means to them (Sandberg, 1994; Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). Prompting was used as a technique to get more in detail information, examples and to better understand what was being described by

the informants. It is fair to say, that having an interview guide did not impede keeping an open agenda and allowing new topics or question to emerge as the interviews proceeded.

The interviews were conducted as close to a regular conversation as possible in order to generate rapport with the interviewee. This aspect is what Sandberg (1994) calls confidence and it is the second dimension of a phenomenological interview. The confidence dimension refers the social relation between the researcher and the informant and it aims to enable the cooperation between informant and researcher, as well as keeping the focus of the interview on the object, the experience of the informant (Sandberg, 1994: 79-81).

### **Data treatment: analysis and interpretation**

All the informants who participated in this study were treated, as DeVault (1991) says, as “expert practitioners” of tacos and taco-dinner. Through their words, descriptions and stories I could understand their view of their experience; then it only made sense that they were treated as experts; experts in their own taco consumption experience.

The analysis and interpretation was done following an iterative process, characteristic of Existential-Phenomenological and Grounded Theory methods. An iterative process means going back-and-forth in the information, where a part of the text is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the whole, and by doing it developing a sense of the whole (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990: 347; Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994: 433). The iterative process also was used as means of moving between the collected data and the literature. Prior to the field work, the search of literature was not exhaustive, leaving the data collected to guide the search of relevant literature.

The analysis and interpretation was done through a four step process (Figure 2). This process was not fully identified in the beginning and it was created organically while it was being done; hence this is a *posteriori* description of the process.

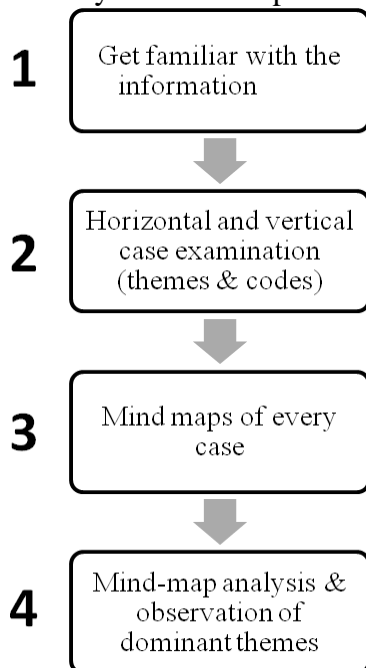


Figure 2. *Analysis and interpretation process*

The *first* step was to get familiar with the information. This was done by doing transcripts of the recorded interviews and reading the field notes. This first step prepared the material to start working on it.

The *second* step consisted of going across the data vertically, i.e., through every case and then horizontally, i.e., across all the cases. Themes or codes were generated when each case was revised. The generation of themes and codes is a distinctive technique of the Grounded Theory methodology; this technique was thought to be useful in the initial steps of the analysis to continue exploring the collected material. Forty-four themes were found and collected in one document. Later the themes were evaluated in relation to the aim of the study and selected on the basis if they helped answer them or not. Themes that did not contribute to the

aim of the study were placed apart, narrowing and focusing on the remaining themes. This step seemed unsuccessful in the beginning as the information was not yet reduced; however, it was used as a first impression of the material that later was contrasted with the analysis obtained in the next steps.

In the *third* step all of the interviews with the initial coding were printed and a mind-map technique was used to summarize and highlight important aspects of each interview. Mind-maps are graphic representations of radiant thinking which refers to the “associative thought process that proceed from or connect to a central point” (Buzan and Buzan, 1993: 57-59). From the central object or central point branches radiate representing the main themes; topics of lesser importance which are also represented as branches, are attached to the main branches. Mind maps and concept maps have been used by different authors in various fields: nursery (Tattersall, Watts & Vernon 2007), cross cultural research (Wheeldon and Faubert, 2009) and marketing strategy (Goodman, 1999). Mind-mapping has also been suggested as a tool to organize information in phenomenological research (Lester, 1999). While building the mind-maps I observed relationships between themes or aspects that each informant highlighted. This allowed me to have thorough understanding of each interview.

In the *fourth* step an analysis across the eleven mind-maps was done in order to observe dominant themes that expressed different meanings. These themes are what Thompson, Locander & Pollio (1989) call Global Themes. Global themes are identified across interviews, but need to have support in the individual interviews. Having all the mind maps of the interviews facilitated contrasting one interview to the other and have a panoramic view (i.e. sense of a whole) of the taco consumption experience.

In sum, the analysis and interpretation process was done in four steps that are the result of inspiration mainly from phenomenological studies as well as of the actual process of doing it.

## **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, meaning that I captured the informants’ taco experience and in all could be considered good research, the criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, in Eriksson and Kovalainen, 20010) was followed. These criteria were considered adequate as it is specifically designed for qualitative research such as this one.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four aspects which provide trustworthiness to the study: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*. *Credibility* refers to the need of sufficient data to merit the claims and the links observed. To this regard it can be said that the data collection was done thoroughly and until the point of saturation was reached. Additionally, multiple methods of data collection were used (i.e. observation and interview) to have a detail account of the experience. The iterative process of going back and forth from the interpretation to the transcripts, and always looking for support from the informants’ interviews, was the means by which the claims and links were made. As for *transferability*, this refers to the connection and contrast of the presented study with other studies. This study drew inspiration and was contrasted

against different studies (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Dalli & Romani, 2007; Zarantonello & Luomala, 2011). Furthermore, even when this study used the views of 12 informants and it didn't pretend to generalize, the findings could be applied to other people in similar conditions (i.e. nationality and family situation). In regards to *dependability*, which refers to the process of the research, if it has been logical, traceable and documented; I can say that all steps that lead to the findings were documented and discussed with the adviser of this study. Finally, in terms of *confirmability*, which talks about the interpretations of the study; the iterative process and the referral to the transcripts supported each aspect of this study which gives confirmability to it.

## Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed that taco consumption is deeply rooted into the individuals

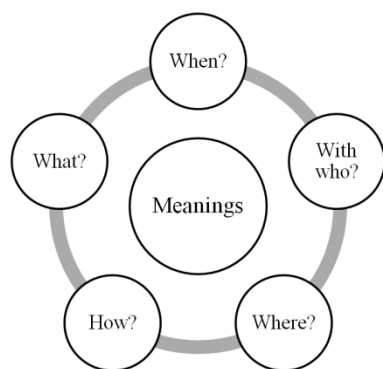


Figure 3. *Practical and Symbolic elements of taco consumption*

and into the families, regardless if they are regular consumers or just occasional ones. Inspired by Baudrillard's idea of sign-value and with the intention of facilitating the exploration and understanding of the consumption experience, I have divided it into two elements: a **practical** and a **symbolic** one. The **practical** element refers to the functional and observable aspects of how tacos are consumed. The **symbolic** element explains the meanings of taco consumption. Figure 3 represents how the meanings (symbolic) are in the center of the experience and on the outside are the practical elements that describe the functional aspects of taco consumption.

However, we have to remember that the experience is one with the meaning; as Martí et al. (2010) explained, it is not the subject and the world, but the world lived by the subject which is the focus of phenomenological studies, as this one.

### **Practical element:**

As mentioned before, the practical element of the experience refers to the functional and observable aspects of taco consumption such as how are tacos consumed, with whom, and when.

In order to provide structure to the description of how tacos are consumed, inspiration was drawn from the dimensions that Kjærnes et al. (2001) used to describe an eating system. Kjærnes et al. (2001) distinguish three different dimensions: Eating pattern, Social context of eating events and Meal format (Figure 4). For the purpose of this study the names were kept, however the meanings cover only a meal and not the whole eating system, which includes every 'eating event' (i.e., every occasion something is eaten) during a day.

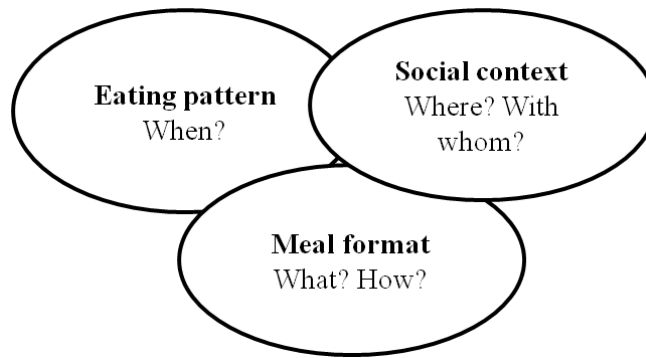


Figure 4. *Elements of the taco-dinner inspired on Kjærnes et al. (2001) The eating system.*

### ***Eating pattern***

The Eating pattern describes when the taco-dinner happens in terms of the time (Kjærnes et al., 2001: 40). For many informants tacos are consumed most commonly on Fridays evenings. However, for some others, tacos are a meal that they also have during weekdays.

*Often Friday maybe Saturday, not so often on Monday. I think it takes a little bit more time to eat, so Friday and Saturday evening we eat it. (Amanda, 44)*

*Over time, taco dinner could appear on a Tuesday or Wednesday, mid week as well, so its, and if they are home on their own with some friends, then so its definitively a taco thing. (Jacob, 49)*

Taco-dinner was also associated in many cases with *Fredagmys*, a Swedish term that literally means the ‘cozy Friday’. Viktor describes what the *Fredagmys* is:

*Lots of families with small children want to have a very nice and cozy Friday night, evening, staying at home, watching TV, eating stuff, getting together. (Viktor, 57)*

### ***Meal format***

The Meal format describes the composition of the taco-dinner in terms of ingredients and the process of preparing it. As a meal tacos are consumed in what is called a taco-dinner. This dinner as it will be further explained, consists of many ingredients including the hard tortilla shells or soft tortillas, and different kinds of vegetables. Interestingly, one of the informants defined taco-dinner as a system:

*For me tacos would be the system with the shell and the tortilla and the ingredients, that you mix and put it together yourself, and you mix things like vegetables and meat and these shells. (Oscar, 48)*

Taco-dinner is integrated by a compilation of different ingredients as Oscar describes:

*It would be the tortillas, it would be the hard taco shells, both ones, some likes it soft, some hard, the small hard taco tubes, that are easier to eat for everyone, it would be minced or chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, onions and salad, and guacamole, from pre-spiced mix with avocado, some other salsa, and it would be some crème fraiche [sour crème].(Oscar, 48)*

The informants construct their own taco-dinner using different ingredients that consider the different tastes of the participants (e.g., family or friends). However, in the families observed and during the interviews the variation between each taco-dinner, in terms of its ingredients, was minimal; they all shared the following ingredients: hard shells or soft tortillas, minced meat combined with the ‘taco spices’, corn, diced tomato, cucumber, cheese, sour cream, *salsas* and guacamole. For tacos to deliver the full experience all the ingredients need to be present and arranged in different bowls.

*They [her children] really like tacos and we have all the ingredients, that is important, has to have the ingredients, all these little things. (Josefine, 50)*

*I mean while you do the meat and you prepare it, you can chop off the vegetables and of course if you mix them then the whole taco experience is gone, you have to have them in different bowls, because that’s why you should be able to pick and choose your favorite vegetables and stuff, so if you mix them its then like a salad and the experience, the taco experience is gone. (Emilia, 24)*

As for the cooking, based on the observations, it took approximately 20 to 30 minutes from the time all the ingredients were taken out from the refrigerator and until the meal was set on the table, ready to be eaten. In general cooking tacos was described as something easy to do. The meaning of easy will be later explored and analyzed.

*It is easy [laugh]. You start with the meat on the ‘platta’...pan together with the spices and some 1 deciliter of water I used. In the meantime when its cooking, I’m chopping off the ingredients, tomato, cucumber, salad, onions, and I put that into bowls and when that’s ready the meat is ready as well, it takes 5 to 10 minutes, that is part of the meaning of saying its easy, doesn’t take much time, there is no risk of doing anything wrong. (Lucas, 33)*

After everything is prepared and every ingredient is on its respective bowl, all of it is set on the center of the table where it is accessible for everyone. In the families observed, tacos are accompanied by Coca-Cola, milk or some type of soda for the children; for the parents, beer was the preferred drink. During the interviews informants expressed that some beverages go better with tacos than others:

*I always drink beer to this [tacos]. Sometimes you get the feeling that you can’t drink certain things with certain food, sure, so I could not have wine with this, I don’t know*

*why. Its beer and I suppose is water for Susana and its always Coke, because he [son] drinks Cokes for everything. (Viktor, 57)*

*When I was younger it used to be soft drinks Coca Cola or something like that... Usually when you eat tacos, its weekend or its kind of a gathering or so, usually you have something alcoholic to drink, but I don't know if wine really goes with that, but I'm a wine lover, so I guess I would prefer wine and but, yeah I mean, having beers Coronas, mojitos, could be. (Emilia, 24)*

Acts of *decommoditization* were observed during the preparation of the taco-dinner. *Decommoditization* is a transformation process of the products purchased in the supermarket, where the consumer discards the packaging of the products or combines them to make their own mix (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). During the observations the tortilla packaging was removed and they were arranged in a plate; this also happened with the cheese, chips and guacamole, which are the ingredients that come in packages. *Decommoditization* was identified in a study about Thanksgiving Day in the USA by Wallendorf & Arnould (1991:27) and it was regarded as key to create a meaningful ritual for the participants. Thompson, Pollio & Locander (1994: 438) point out that the acts of decommoditization are efforts to “obscure the standardized, mass-produced aspects of a consumer good and to create a sense that personal care and meaning has been invested in it”. In the taco-dinners the meal produced had the feeling of a home-made dinner and not something that came out from a package.

### ***Social context***

The Social context in this study describes where and with whom people are eating tacos, who prepared them and the duration of the meal (Kjærnes et al., 2001: 41). Tacos for most of the informants have been and are today prepared and consumed inside the house. Some of the informants like Hanna however remembered that years ago it was possible to eat tacos in a restaurant.

*20-25 years ago, tacos was the new thing. You could have taco buffet in some restaurants and I also remember going to a very good Mexican restaurant that used to be in Linnégatan, El Paso, but which is not there anymore. But I remember that restaurant very well because I liked so much. (Hanna, 36)*

Anyhow, today tacos is a meal prepared and consumed inside the house and informants associate tacos to a homemade dish and not something that they would ask in restaurants.

*We wouldn't go to restaurants to have tacos, it is something that you fix at home; but we could go to a Mexican restaurant, but I would never pick tacos. (Josefine, 50)*

Based on the observations and interviews, women were mainly the ones cooking the tacos. In the cases of the informants that were parents of older children (e.g., Amanda and David, Emma, Jacob, and Oscar), they highlighted the fact that their children helped out on the preparation of tacos. This was also seen during the participant observations.

**Interviewer: do they [children] participate cooking other meals [besides tacos]?**

*Jacob: Yeah, but not as much as when we prepare this, there is a lot of elements, bring out the, you know prepare the guacamole, you know the cheese and the onion and whatever it is, the sour crème, all the ingredients you have along with it; they believe that is quite fun to do it.(Jacob, 49)*

The actual consumption of tacos, considering the observations, lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. The time spent on the table varied from family to family; families with small children spend less time than families with teenagers.

Tacos are consumed with family or friends. They are consumed in different occasions during the *Fredagmys*, birthday parties and other social reunions mainly when there are children involved. During all observations all members of the household were present, which is what normally happens when they have tacos. Having all family members together for taco-dinner was also described by the informants during the interviews.

In all, tacos are a social dish prepared and consumed at home with family or friends in the taco-dinner. As a meal, taco-dinner is composed by different ingredients that make the eating experience unique as it is customized to the participant's preferences.

### **Symbolic element: the meanings of taco consumption**

Tacos by the informants were understood in different ways, as food, taste and meal. As a food they are understood as the hard shells, in most of the cases, but also as soft tortillas.

*Tacos for me is the shells in a way, because we normally... there are these kind of different forms square ones, like small plates and wraps. (Viktor, 57)*

*I think here back in Sweden or in America as well, taco is not the bread; taco is the meat and the taste, that's a taco, taco taste you know. (Lucas, 33)*

The **symbolic** element is the heart of this study and describes the meanings of taco consumption by the informants, in other words, this section delves into what is the understanding of the informants of their experience with tacos.

From the analysis of the interviews different Global Themes emerged that expressed various meanings of taco consumption. It was noticeable that the meanings had a different relation to the person; some meanings were related to a closer sphere of the person, while others referred to an external sphere; however they both interact and form the experience. The **inside** meanings relate to a closer sphere in reference to the person (e.g. house, family, friends, etc); while the **outside** meanings relate to an outer sphere (e.g. country, society) (Figure 5). The logic behind the division is not to dissect the experience into individual elements, rather to describe

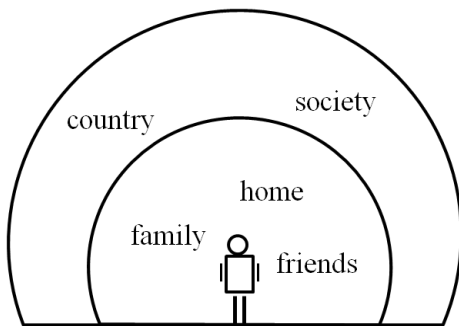


Figure 5. *The symbolic element: inside and outside meanings of taco experience*



the interaction between the two. In this sense, the inside meaning is not independent from the outside meaning, and vice versa; and they both feed from each other. This is in direct relation to Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989) figure/ground metaphor that describes one of the world views of existential-phenomenology.

### *Inside meanings*

#### **Taco-dinner as symbol of Family and family construction**

At the heart of the taco consumption, as expressed by the informants, lies the family. Even when the intention of this study was not that of generalization, it was observed in all interviews the constant appearance of family as a central meaning when talking about tacos consumption. Family is defined by Giddens (2003, in Jonsson, 2004:34) as a group of persons connected with each other by kinship. Family in the terms used by the informants refers to the traditional nuclear family. In Sweden the majority of people live in this kind of families (Bäck-Wiklund & Johansson 2003 in Jonsson 2004). A family, as DeVault (1991:39) explains, is more than a group of individuals, but it is constructed from day to day through activities like eating together.

*Its about, it's a family thing, a family get together thing, and kind of when the kids are, when they are, I wouldn't say allowed, if they want to choose something, "why don't we have a taco dinner?" [imitating his children]. So its not much of a Mexican thing, its more a family gathering thing, do you see what I mean. (Jacob, 49)*

*It's a family event and everyone is happy and enjoy the meal. (David, 44)*

The relationship expressed by the informants between the family and the meal is one that has been widely researched (DeVault, 1991; Holm, 2001; Mäkelä, 2000) and they have identified family meals as important elements by which the family is maintained together. Mäkelä (2000: 11) argues that a meal is essential for the unity of the family and a form of socialization and social reproduction. DeVault (1991: 79) goes a step further by saying that "part of the intention behind producing the meal is to produce 'home' and 'family', which is exactly what the informants expressed. In its rawest form, sharing a table, is the first sign of membership in a group (Montanari, 2006: 94); then **sharing a table is a sign of belonging to the family.**

It could be questioned, what makes tacos consumption and taco-dinner any different from other meals? Don't all meals build family? As reported by some of the informants, during the week the different members of the family have diverse activities as it is not always possible to have a meal together as a family. Most commonly on Fridays versus other days of the week, it is when the family gets together and has a meal (i.e., dinner); that meal is tacos. Consequently, the connection between taco consumption and the construction of family is made more evident.

*...most of the time I try to fit in the football practice with the times of the meal. But now its hard when its between 5 and 6.30, because then he is at home at 7pm so then its too late for the small kids to wait, so today it was an exception; most of the time we try to sit down all of us and eat, really, specially on Fridays we always do that. (Maria, 45)*

Note: Later in this section the distinction between weekday, Friday and weekend meals will be discussed.

The fact that the families in this study mentioned that it is hard to eat as a family has been reported in other studies, where they mention that the family meal is disappearing (Holm, 2001). A family meal according to Holm (2001) needs to meet the following criteria: (1) to be eaten by a person who lives in a multi-person household; (2) takes place in the home; (3) it is eaten in the company of other family members; (4) it is eaten by all household members at the same time; and (5) what is eaten is hot food. The family meals are being replaced by eating “outside the home - in restaurants, cafés, bars and in the streets” (Holm, 2001: 200). In the Swedish case, family meals are less frequent in comparison to other Nordic countries (Holm, 2001: 206). However, as Andersen (1997, in Holm, 2001) explains, even when there is a tendency to ‘eat-on-the-go’, families with a busy schedule are finding time to take a routine break and have a special meal, a good meal, where everyone in the family gets together. This phenomenon is exactly what was described by some of the families interviewed for this study.

*...she is working, he is exercising, we seldom get together and it was the same with Linus [older son] when he was at home, we were seldom eating at the same time Monday to Thursday, so it was one of us making dinner and if people come late they have to warm it and stuff like that. The Friday night has been a different thing for some years now, because everyone is home at the same time, so I think...; I think there is a reason why the Fridays look like that in comparison compared to the rest of the week. (Viktor, 57)*

However, it is not only the fact that families get together and enjoy eating tacos, but the fact that this particular meal is distinctively social. According to DeVault (1991: 78) “meals are social events”. Examples of the social aspect of taco consumption experience and its importance for the family were expressed by all informants; these could be seen as commonplace considering that we are talking about a meal. However, in the observations and interviews informants talked about tacos consumption as different versus other meals in terms of its enhanced social characteristics.

*I think what brings the activity level and the discussion, what increases the discussion, the socialization, the socializing, the only thing I can think of is that they like the taste, the atmosphere that creates around the table or what does that comes from? You pass around things and to get that bowl of onion you need to ask for it and if you have another type of dish you maybe have potatoes, meat and sauce and salad, that is four things and tacos you have I mean what you have? 5, 6, 7, 8-10 things to choose from...that triggers interaction and maybe it has been more in the feeling and you do more socializing. (Oscar, 48)*

*But what does it mean to me? Its social, its ehh kind of laid back and it is something you can eat for hours actually, I know it is kind of Spanish and all that that you sit and eat for hours and hours, and take it easy, and that is so not typical Swedish, I mean Swedish people don't really do that, that you seat for hours like you do in other countries that I have experienced its more like you eat and then you go over to something else and yeah*

*you do it, but you can really sit with tacos and I mean, like in the end pick something to eat; you can prolong the eating, the meal. (Emilia, 24)*

Furthermore, family meals have been referred as being the ‘social glue’ (Fruh, et al., 2011: 20) and even some researchers have found that certain foods have this quality of being a ‘social glue’. Such is the case of pasta in a study done among young Italian consumers (Dalli & Romani, 2007). From the comments given by the informants, it can be said that taco, in the form of taco-dinner, possesses the quality of acting as a social glue particularly within the family.

There were two main elements that make tacos social and which facilitate the interaction between the participants of a taco-dinner. The first one comes from the fact that taco-dinner is consumed with other people; either with friends or family. It was made clear by informants that taco consumption experience was a collective one, and it was almost unthinkable to consume it individually.

*For myself only? No...no, no I wouldn't, I think it has to do with the social thing, you need at least two, but no, no I would never eat by myself. (Emilia, 24)*

The second element is found in the way tacos are integrated and consumed. Taco-dinner, as explained before has different ingredients so each person can design their taco by themselves. It is in the process of preparing the taco and the passing and sharing of the different ingredients when conversation happens. Informants contrast the way tacos are eaten compared to regular Swedish food and see that taco consumption is more social.

*There is more of something, just try to figure out if I can express it in another way, there is more activity more interaction, let's say, supports or enables more interaction between everyone around the table. (Oscar, 48)*

The meaning of taco consumption as a symbol of family is one that seems to be passed on through different generations and it is inherited by the person once they move out and start living on their own. The two informants who at the moment did not have children expressed that in the future when they have children they would start eating tacos more frequently.

*I think by the time I get children I would eat more tacos, because it is easy and maybe the children like tacos as well. (Lucas, 33)*

*I think it will come back when I get my own children, you probably do it, like I did it with my family. But NO WAY! I think tacos are here to stay! (Emilia, 24)*

With different words, what is being expressed by these two informants is that they will use tacos and taco-dinner to build their families. It can be said that by consuming tacos they are ‘doing family’. ‘Doing family’ is a term used by James, Curtis & Ellis (2009) that perfectly fits with what is described and entails the organic and dynamic sense of what is to build a family. It cannot be said that tacos is the only way to build family, however what taco consumption represents, is a social encounter for the families that both symbolizes and builds family.

Lastly, through the analysis of the eleven interviews a cycle was observed where taco consumption accompanies the life of a person and of a family through different stages (e.g., small children, teenage children, moving out). Figure 6 shows how taco consumption moves along with the person and the families in their different stages of life (e.g., couple with no children, family with small children, family with teenage children, children move out, etc). At these different stages taco consumption varies. For example informants explained that they started to have tacos more often when they had children versus before having children.

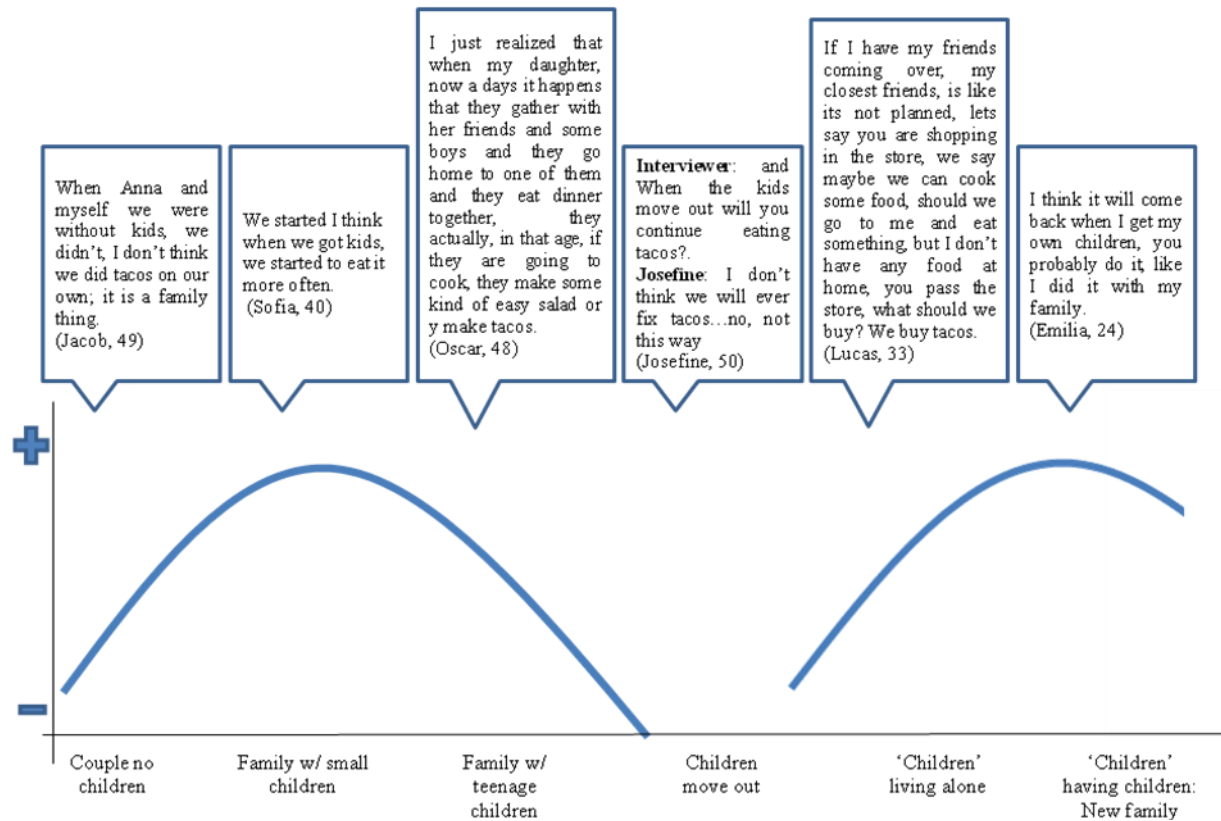


Figure 6. *Family stages and tacos*

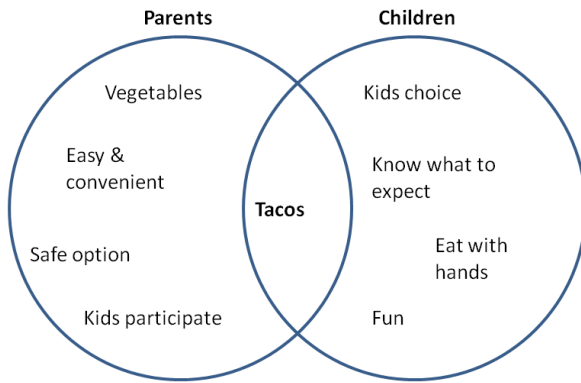
Moving further in the understanding of family as a symbol of taco consumption experience, the fact that a family without children is not a family, has to be acknowledged. The children in the families of the informants appeared to be at the center of the family and parents gravitate around them. Moreover, when talking about tacos children were also at the center of the consumption and the reason why, in many cases, the family consumed tacos.

*I think having kids you mostly go for what they like, because that makes the meal much more enjoyable (laughs), and my kids like tacos. ( Maria, 45)*

*Lots of families with small children want to have a very nice and cozy Friday night evening , staying at home, watching TV, eating stuff, getting together. For us it started when the kids were small, because it is more practical, you are tired after work for a week. (Viktor, 57)*

So far, taco consumption experience for the informants was a symbol of family and family construction; and within these families children had a paramount position.

### Taco-dinner as a negotiation between parents and children



James, Curtis and Ellis (2009: 42) in their study about children’s participation in the family meal found that “meals need to be negotiated within the family so that the different tastes of family members can be accommodated”. Taco-dinner was also seen by informants as a negotiation between parents and children (Figure 7). Starting from the decision whether to eat tacos or not, or when to do it, both parents and children participate in the decision and agree on it.

Figure 7. *Taco-dinner negotiation between parents and children*

*Most of the time it is one of the kids, who is always wishing for tacos [laughs] and most of the time, I mean, he could easily have tacos twice a week. But most of the time I think, it takes some time to prepare I mean, not too much, but, but I think, I’m probably the one who takes the final decision and he is the one who comes with the suggestion. So we have a mix there. (Maria, 45)*

*We have a very structured idea of what to eat for the whole week, already on Saturday we decide for the whole week and then we go and buy all the ingredients, so its, it used to be Friday night it was, like reserved for the kids, ‘what do you want to eat on Friday night?’ and they can make a choice. (Viktor, 57)*

Coming to an agreement of what to eat may help the family since different meal preferences between the family members can create problems for the person who cooks (Mäkelä, 2000 in Jonsson et al, 2004). The development of these individual food preferences and avoidances begins in the childhood, through personal experience and social interaction (Guidetti & Cavazza, 2008: 83). However, tacos appeared to be a meal where the different preferences could be accommodated, as everyone prepares and customizes their own taco according to their individual taste.

*You take a little of that and a little of that, it takes time to eat for everyone, the children take what they, they like, I take what I like and everyone is happy. So I think that’s important. (Amanda, 44)*

As in every negotiation there has to be some benefits obtained for each participating party. On one hand there are the parents, and for them the benefits are both functional and emotional. On

the functional side, tacos is an easy-to-cook and convenient meal, composed by different, but easy to find ingredients; many of the ingredients that conform a taco-dinner are regularly found in a house, whether tacos is on the menu or not. It is also a way for the children to eat vegetables, which the parents mentioned not to be *'their forte'* (Maria, 45). Tacos were also referred as a 'good meal'. A good meal in the informant terms is one were the children *'get everything, a little bit of everything, the meat, the vegetables, the bread, the guacamole'* (Josefine, 50). Some of the parents as well conveyed that when preparing tacos, their children get more involved.

*I was thinking in the preparation the kids typically get more involved also and in some way, now we have 4 kids, so when we are trying to pull them into help into preparing a meal its difficult, because they are on into the Facebook or the Playstation or whatever, but for some reason for taco its so easy, manageable, if you tell them to slice a cucumber they can very well do it, if you ask them to do more complicated things when you prepare other meals, it takes more tuition to help them. (Oscar, 48)*

Interestingly it has been suggested by some authors (Olsen and Ruiz, 2008 in McIntosh et al., 2010: 624) that "children participate in meals more frequently when their choices are served, having received "reward power" from having their food choices considered". Children's participation on the preparation of tacos was well appreciated and encouraged by the parents.

On the emotional side, the children like very much eating tacos, therefore the parents felt content by serving something that their children will, without a doubt, eat and enjoy.

*Is one of the few dishes that I know that they are going to eat when I put in the table, it isn't always like that. So for me tacos is ehhh, the special thing with tacos is that is very appreciated. (Maria, 45)*

*They like it very much. It's one of the few dishes they ask us to give them. (Hanna, 36)*

The end result of having happy children was that of happy parents. Parents are happy because their children not only eat tacos, but deeply enjoy them, and they are having time together as a family.

Some of the informants expressed certain concerns about the fact that some of the ingredients in the taco-dinner, i.e., the taco mixes or sauces are prefabricated and include for example sugar or high levels of salt; for others it was more the idea that *"I don't know what is in it"* as Hanna (36) expressed. However, since the consumption is occasional they downplayed their concern. As Josefine explains:

*Josefine: Well there might be that there is a lot of sugar, a lot of sugar in the sauce...I don't feel it tastes a lot of sugar, no I don't, and I really don't care, we really like it, its at simple as that; it doesn't bother me.*

***Interviewer: so it is not important?***

*Josefine: no, once a month or twice a month no big deal.(Josefine, 50)*

In the other hand we have the children. There are three main perceived benefits for the children, as expressed by their parents. The first has to do with their participation in the decision of **doing tacos**. Usually throughout the week children tastes are considered, however they don't get to participate so actively in the decision. Conversely, on some days like Fridays, the children were part of the selecting what was going to be served for dinner. As Jacob said:

*It is a dinner with the kids in a way, when they kind of in charge of making the choice, yeah. (Jacob, 49)*

The second benefit relates to the **taste and how tacos are eaten**. The taste has to be there in order for the children to want to eat them. As for the way tacos are eaten, it is different from the way they normally eat, both in how they are served and eaten. In the descriptions words like fun, exciting were constantly appearing as to define the perception of children regarding tacos.

*I think they like being a bit more active themselves, putting the pineapple and the tomatoes, in this little boat that they..I think they like that. And then I think that they really like the taste, it cannot just be fun, I mean, if they have to eat it, it has to taste well as well, so...I think they like the set up of different things that they know and like and they can choose for themselves and there is more activity around the table. (Maria, 45)*

The third benefit has to do with the fact that tacos is something were **children know what to expect from them**. It is a familiar taste and they can design their own dish considering their own preferences. As Maria (45) expressed:

*They don't eat the guacamole, the two smaller ones, and they don't eat the taco sauce, but then they have to say no to a complete dish, you see, they can have what they want. (Maria, 45)*

In sum, taco consumption provides a win-win experience for both parents and children, giving both sides' important benefits. Taco-dinner is an easy business.

### **Taco-dinner as a low risk and safe meal solution**

Whether the context is a children's party, a regular Friday dinner or night with the girls, tacos are understood by all informants as a low risk and safe meal solution. Risk is more often discussed in the context of purchase decisions or when talking about food, related to health issues and hygiene. However, in the case of tacos consumption, tacos act as solution that lowers the risk of cooking something that will A) tastes good and B) will be accepted and liked by all participants of the meal.

#### **A) Tastes good: Solution for cooking food that tastes good**

When cooking there is always risk involved in whether the dish will taste good or not. Usually the skill level of the person who is cooking has a direct impact on the end result. However, with tacos there are no high cooking skills required in order to produce a tasteful dish. In a sense,

tacos eliminate the surprise factor of how will the food taste, and delivers a consistent flavor every time.

*I'm not a chef, I'm quite bad in making foods, and for me its... I know it will taste good. ... it doesn't take much time, there is no risk of doing anything wrong. (Lucas, 33)*

*It's very easy to prepare you fry some minced meat and you have the spice mix and you buy the stuff, its very easy and accessible, in that sense its convenient, its easy to prepare good, convenient and the kids like it. (Oscar, 48)*

B) Well accepted and liked: a solution for providing food that will be accepted and liked, especially by children.

DeValut (1991), in her book *The Work of "Feeding a Family"* where she interviewed 30 families in the U.S., reports that pleasing a family is one of the first requirements of a meal. However, cooking and pleasing the family it is not always easy; the informants expressed that children can be 'picky' with food, especially when new foods or flavors are introduced. The rejection to novel or unknown foods is referred to as *food neophobia* (Dovey et al., 2008:182). *Food neophobia* is identified in children between 2 and 6 years old and it decreases as the child grows older (Dovey, et al, 2008; Fischer, 1988). It has been researched that it takes up to 15 positive experiences for the successful acceptance of a food into the child's diet (Dovey, et al, 2008). With this information in mind, it is only natural that parents feel very positive when their children accept and like a food. Therefore in the setting of a Friday night when the parents don't want to cook something elaborate or struggle for acceptance of the menu, there are tacos. Furthermore, when there are new children which food preferences are unknown, tacos are *the* alternative; and is in this context that the meaning of tacos as a safe and low risk solution emerges.

*Tacos that's a good one. That's a secure one (laughs). Nothing bad can happen with tacos. (Josefine, 50)*

*It's a Friday night and then you want to have a nice time with your family and sort of prepare for the weekend, so you don't want to make big meals that take long meals that take long time, you want to prepare something quickly. That everyone likes and can eat and tacos is a good thing. (Hanna, 36)*

*If you have friends over and they have kids; most children like tacos and they can adjust it to their own test, so it's a safe bet if you want to prepare a meal for kids that you don't know that well. When we have friends over, I've done it a couple of times. Like the adults have one dish and the kids have tacos. It's a success! (laughs) yeah!. (Maria, 45)*

Different from other foods that require a more complicated cooking procedure, tacos are easy and fast to cook; they provide certainty to the cook that the dish will be liked by the diners as tacos accommodates the tastes of all the family and non family members. In overall, tacos are a food that one can rely on and is therefore safe.



### **Taco-dinner as convenience**

In all interviews tacos were defined as an easy, quick to cook and convenient meal. This was one of the strongest associations and benefits of tacos, and one of the reasons, along with taste that made tacos a frequently sought after dish. Convenience food as defined by Buckley et al., (2005:7 in Carrigan et al., 2006) includes “any fully or partially prepared food in which a significant element of the skill or energy involved is taken out of the kitchen and into the marketplace”. However, the term convenience is far more extensive as it covers the different stages of the consumption experience: planning, shopping, storage, preparation, consumption, cleaning and disposal (Carrigan et al., 2006).

*Tacos is a, it's a nice and simple way to fix a good dinner in a short time (Josefine, 50)*

*It's so easy you can really divide it, you buy the bread, oh fix the meat, oh fix that and so on, its kind of easy to have, like in Sweden we say knytkalas <sup>2</sup>. (Emilia, 24)*

Tacos convenience entails two main components: energy saving and efficiency.

#### *Energy saving*

Convenience not only is time saving, but also energy saving (Candel 2001, in Carrigan et al., 2006: 373). During this study this aspect was clearly appreciated; women, who were the ones preparing the tacos during the observations, go about the preparation without hesitation and without a recipe. The energy saving was also present in the decision making. When taking the decision of what to eat on a Friday or even on a weekday, tacos for some families, it the “no brainer” option. There are no surprises with tacos; it provides consistently good flavor and enables the family to focus on getting together and being a family. The combo of family and convenience was also noted by Romany (2005 in Carrigan et al., 2006:374) in her study about Italian families; there she established that convenience food helped families who experienced a lack of time and culinary skills and “was a route to retaining family cohesion in the face of other contemporary life pressure, rather than a threat to family unit”.

*In one way, a word that pops up is convenience, ehh and connecting the family. I think the basis for that, we know with the system that you buy in the store that you are provided a spice mix and it is very easy to prepare you fry some minced meat and you have the spice mix and you buy the stuff, it is very easy and accessible, in that sense its convenient. (Oscar, 48)*

#### *Efficiency*

Being pressured by time was constantly mentioned by the informants who were parents, and often time is a key aspect taken into account in their decisions.

*Both parents normally work here, and you have in my case now with 2 – 3 teenagers, its World Championships in logistics, 'Daddy can you pick me up?', horseback riding and things like that. (Jacob, 49)*

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<sup>2</sup> knytkalas: potluck or a party where every guest brings something to drink or to eat.

With this in mind, then it is only natural that when looking for meal options the time dedicated to prepare and cook is maximized and wisely used. Besides the efficient use of time, the ingredients needed to prepare tacos are normally found at a house in any given time; this makes possible to prepare and serve tacos without requiring a lot of time in advance to put it together.

*I nearly have it at home always, because the bread is whole forever, no not forever, but for a month, yes, (laughs) and I have crème fresh at home and vegetables I have at home, so if they (the children) ask, I nearly always can do it. (Amanda, 44)*

Understanding of tacos as convenient expanded beyond the parents and was also transmitted into the next generation. As explained by informants with teenagers, tacos are a frequently recurred meal option for when their sons or daughters are getting together with friends.

*I just realized that when my daughter, now a days it happens that they gather with her friends and some boys and they go home to one of them and they eat dinner together, they actually, in that age, if they are going to cook, they make some kind of easy salad or they make tacos. They do so. At least I know that they make tacos, like a taco dinner. So it's a strong concept, because it's attracting teenagers of that age and they probably bring that habit with them. (Oscar, 48)*

However, not everything is convenient about tacos consumption. Some informants expressed that cleaning the different bowls and dealing with the leftovers was a hassle.

*Since you put a lot of things on the table you have a lot of things to clear afterwards, and specially a lot of things to put on the fridge and you get all this small pots, 'should we throw this away or should we save it' (boring voice) and 'should we throw this away or should we save it' and so on, and you have a little of everything left and so on. (Sofia, 40)*

Even when tacos are not the 'perfect meal', it is a convenient meal both of its energy saving attribute and overall efficiency.

### **Taco-dinner as a meeting point**

Food acts as both a ritual and a routine; routines make everyday life easier by reducing the complexity of the decision making (Marshall, 2005: 73). Taco-dinner represents a **meeting point** in that routine, particularly in the routines of the families. A meeting point in, its general sense, is a geographic place where people arrange to meet. Tacos while not a geographic place, they create a space that facilitates the encounter of families or friends and are in that sense, a meeting point.

*The Friday night has been a different thing for some years now, because everyone is home at the same time, so I think, you mean you put it that way and you question is put that way; I think there is a reason why the Fridays look like that in comparison compared to the rest of the week. (Viktor, 57)*

*That might be one of the clues why tacos is so popular because is a way of getting together. (Josefine, 50)*

The routines of the families were clearly observed in the interviews, as the informants described how they organized the food during the week and what was eaten in the different occasions. The patterning of food events over time is referred as the meal cycle (Goode, et al., in Douglas, 1984:170). It was evident in the case of families, how they had a distinctive meal cycle that separates what is eaten on weekdays, from that of weekends. For some families Friday was somewhat a day apart from weekdays and it stood by its own. For many of the informants and their families, tacos are consumed on Fridays. On Fridays families are looking for something that is easy to cook and everyone in the family likes it. Tacos consumption in form of the taco-dinner signals the end of the working week and the beginning of the weekend.

***Interviewer: In what occasions do you eat tacos?***

*Viktor (57): Friday night only, but it has its, its very specific purpose I would say.*

***Interviewer: what would that be?***

*Viktor (57): it goes together with relaxing stuff, its, its, when you come to think about it, we never eat it at any other occasion and that is not a negative thing in a way, because we like to keep the Fridays if you are not invited to someone, if you are at home, I don't recall I have ever come to anyone for dinner and having tortillas, no.*

Weekday main meals are private events and less formal compared to celebratory meals such as Christmas dinner (Marshall, 2005: 80). Weekdays meals described by the informants were characterized mainly by what could be seen as everyday Swedish food; informants often emphasized the fact that not all the family ate together.

*Sofia (40). During weekdays we are not always home everyone for dinner, it could be that one of the kids its off to a friend or we have some other kid that is visiting us. It could be that I'm working or travelling you know this SCA travelling thing, or that my husband is working irregular hours a lot of time, he is on call. So a lot of times during weekdays there is not all of us there or its different or it could be more people there. Then its also always either could be that someone has to go to an activity so that you have a time to catch or that you know there is homework afterwards or something like that. So that is what makes it different in the weekdays. So we don't spend that much time cooking during the weekdays, so its no so complicated food, its easy food.*

***Interviewer: can you give me some examples (of what do you eat on the weekdays)?***

*Sofia (40): spaghetti and meat sauce, or meatballs and macaroni, or pfff just salmon that you just put quickly in the oven and potatoes and a quick sauce or tomato soup with meatballs in it; these type of things.*

*Maybe regular week its Chinese food one day and then Italian and then Swedish dishes, I try to mix it. The Swedish dishes are the base line I would say and then its fantastic from food from other countries, it's a lot of fun. (Josefine, 50)*

The fact that tacos, for some families, are consumed on Fridays and they provide variety to the weekly eating routine emphasizes the meaning of tacos as a meeting point. Research has been done in terms of the change of routine from weekday and weekend type of food. People change their behavior depending on the different moments of the week; from Friday to Sunday people eat more abundantly, while during the weekdays the aim is to “be good” (Haines, et al., 2003; Raclette, et al., 2003 in Jaeger et al., 2011: 421). In general, weekend type of food was described to be more elaborated, because the informants said to have more time to cook.

*In weekends we make, we like to cook in our family we prepare more difficult dishes in weekends when we have more time (Emma, 45)*

*Recently we been having quite a lot of traditional Swedish food, it usually takes a lot of time to prepare, that's a thing that Adolf does during the weekends (Hanna, 36)*

DeVault 1991: 44) explained that the variation between weekdays and weekends and between everyday and special holidays, mark the tempo of a household life. As Kjærnes et al. (2001: 28) describe “eating is not only a matter of food choice, but also a question of when and where – of time and place”. Taco consumption is the meeting point in the meal cycles that brings families and friends together; and for some families it was part of the transition from the working week into the weekend. In a sense tacos, for these families, also mark the passing of time in the week.

## Outside meanings

Different from the inside meanings, the outside meanings are dichotomous, signifying that they have contradictory directions (Figure 8).



Figure 8. *Dichotomous character of the outside meanings.*

The first dichotomy refers to the circumstances surrounding taco consumption. To one side are the informants who understand taco consumption as everyday and conventional food.

*It is an everyday dinner. (Josefine, 50)*

*So it is quite basic in a way, its well known, people love it, but its it's a bit basic, it's a bit internal in the family I would say, and for kids primarily. I'm thinking while I'm talking. So its not so sophisticated, 'I have my own taco lets like you know, like come out to us and try our fantastic chicken recipe!'; I don't think we would do it anyway. (Johan, 49)*

On the other side, there are informants expressing that tacos for them are something special and somewhat exotic.

*For us it has been not a weekday dinner, it could be Friday or weekend dinner, its connected to something extra for the kids, it's a little better than ordinary weekday dinner, in their minds yeah (Oscar, 48)*

*I would probably regarded it [tacos] as, as I said, is exotic but not too exotic, is lagom<sup>3</sup> exotic, you see, so in that sense is somewhere in between, its not foreign food, its not typically food, but the very Swedish ingredients that you use makes it, you know, its like a mixture (Maria, 45)*

The children's age, appeared to be the common denominator amongst the informants who expressed either tacos being everyday food or rather exotic. The informants who found tacos as something special, as well as exotic, had in almost all the cases, younger children. On the other side, informants who found tacos conventional and everyday food, had teenage children. What does having younger or older children conveys? It conveys that the parents of teenage children have been cooking tacos for many years, far more than the parents of younger children. Then, a relation between the number of times that a family has eaten tacos has an influence on the meaning of tacos, and determines whether they understand tacos as being a special food, a treat or just a conventional dish. To this respect, Viktor clearly explains:

*For the beginning it was exciting, it is not exciting today, when you have eaten it 50 times its not exciting. (Viktor, 57)*

In sum, it can be said that the context of taco consumption and whether it is seen as something conventional or special is influenced by the number of times that the individual or the family has eaten them; and the number of times tacos has been eaten is related to the age of the children in the family; younger children equals less time eating tacos; older children equals more time eating tacos.

The second dichotomy expresses the position that tacos have in the mind of the person, in terms of how Swedish tacos are. On one side, tacos are understood as Swedish food and on the other as non Swedish food. However, compared to the first dichotomy, this one seems to be more confusing for the informants, as they don't know how to define it. The following excerpts give good examples of this situation.

*If someone would say what is the typical Swedish food I would never mention tacos, but if someone would say 'what do Swedes eat?' I would probably mention tacos among the 20 dishes that Swedes eat a lot. (Sofia, 40)*

*If you have pomme gratäng, but then is that Swedish or French? What is the origin.? (Oscar, 48)*

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<sup>3</sup> Lagom: moderate, just right.

*It is hard to say, what's, what's Swedish and what's not?. (David, 44)*

Metzger (2005) in his doctoral thesis *I köttbullslandet* (e.g., In the meatball country) provides some inspiration as how to better understand the 'distances' between cuisines from different origins. Metzger created a map where he placed different cuisines considering how close or how far where they to Swedish cuisine. Depending on how far or close these cuisines were, three different categories of 'foreignness' were defined: (1) the core, (2) the intermediate and (3) the peripheral. These categories are based on how frequently a cuisine appeared in cookbooks and other literature dating from 1900 to 1970, and the cultural distance from each cuisine to the "Swedish" (Metzger, 2005: 110). Metzger identified the French, Italian, Viennese, and American (i.e., USA) cuisines to be located at the core, meaning closer to Swedish cuisine. Spanish, Russian, Danish, to mention a few, were in the intermediate category. On the periphery were located Asian, South American and Finish cuisines, among others. What is more relevant with what Metzger proposes in his map, is the idea and representation of different distances from the Swedish cuisine. When asking the informants to place tacos and other 'foreign' foods in perspective to Swedish cuisine, these are some of their comments:

*I think it actually it comes down to what was introduced first, because we ate spaghetti and meat sauce long before we started eating, I mean as Swedes I would believe, we started with spaghetti and so on, so that is why it feels more Swedish because it has been within the culture longer time, and then pizza and then tacos and then Thai came in later I think, as the culture in a way. (Sofia, 40)*

*My children I don't think they perceive it as anything else than Swedish because always has been there. No we don't even think, consider that is anything else than a normal part of a Swedish cuisine. (Viktor, 57)*

It appears as if the time that the dish has been 'available' plays a very important role in determining its distance with the Swedish cuisine and whether it becomes part of what is understood as Swedish. Tacos in this sense, is understood as Swedish for the generation that has lived with them all of their lives and less Swedish or in the process of becoming Swedish to a generation who was present during the introduction of tacos.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how Swedish consumers experience tacos. An Existential Phenomenological approach was used as the method for collecting and analyzing the experiences of 12 Swedish consumers. Taco consumption experience has been analyzed from its practical (i.e., eating pattern, social context and meal format) and symbolic elements (i.e., meanings of taco consumption). Within the symbolic elements two spheres were described, one sphere closer to the person that contained the inside meanings and one external sphere, which contained the outside meanings. The following inside meanings of taco-dinner were described: first, taco-dinner as a symbol of family and family construction; second, as a negotiation between parents and

children; third, as a low risk and safe meal solution; fourth as convenience; and lastly as a meeting point. The outside meanings in contrast with the inside meanings were dichotomous. One dichotomy referred to the circumstances surrounding taco consumption (i.e., tacos as conventional and everyday food or exotic and special) and the other referred to whether the tacos were understood as Swedish food or non Swedish food.

It can be said that tacos, today, are an important part of the Swedish culture. This is a probably simple conclusion, but rather relevant since tacos have gone beyond the shelf in the supermarket and into the Swedish families. Reaching this conclusion and leaving it like that would be going half way; however, throughout this study I have also learned how it has become that way. Tacos have become part of the Swedish culture by growing roots in one of the main institutions of a society, the family. Tacos as it was explained, is attached to families and particularly to children; as in other studies, tacos as a meal was found to be a mean by which family is constructed (DeVault, 1991). There are certain characteristics of tacos that have fastened them to these families, such as the interaction that brings to the table, the way it is consumed and the appeal of its flavour. Tacos are a social dish and that *socialness* stands out from the regular meals that the informants have during the week. Tacos provide a nice break from the routine and at the same time help build this routine in the traditional *Fredagmys*.

The way tacos are consumed, even though it is different from other meals, resembles the format that traditional Swedish celebrations have with the *smorgåsbord* or Swedish buffet. Taco-dinner as well as the *smorgåsbord* have multiple dishes and offer the possibility to its participants to customize their experience by deciding what they will eat. In a sense, taco-dinner is a weekly celebration with the additional benefits of its convenience. Tacos convenience connects them again to the families as they are a low risk meal solution. Further, tacos act as a meeting point for families with scarce time, due to the fact that both parents work and family members are involved in multiple activities.

Taco as a taste has transcended the taco-meal and the tortillas; today it is being incorporated to other dishes resulting in intriguing combinations such as taco-pizza, taco-pie or taco-hamburger. And it is its taste that is a favourite amongst children and in result, favourite of parents wanting to please their children and wishing for a good time with them at the end of the week.

The win-win relationship of tacos is a triumph in the negotiation between parents and children, making tacos a frequently sought after dish within the everyday alternatives. Besides a successful negotiation, tacos consumption is a reflection of the different stages in the life of these families; tacos come with children and 'leaves' with them. Tacos are *inherited* and transmitted into the next generation that will use them with their children to build family and recreate the feeling they had with their family when eating tacos.

All in all, these characteristics have made attractive for families to eat tacos week after week and with time tacos have been *digested* into the Swedish way of life, that is, into Swedish culture.

Tacos along with other things are contributing on building what is Swedish at this point of time. What is Swedish today is definitively different from what was Swedish 10 years ago and from what will be Swedish 10 years from now. Interestingly, through the understanding of tacos

experience I have observed how a culture is constructed. This goes in line with what was the framework for this study that saw consumers as culture producers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore it coincides with McCracken (1986) who suggested that cultural meaning is constructed by people and it is in constant transition. The meaning of what is Swedish is constructed by the Swedes with simple things such as taco consumption. In sum, this study gives a good example of how Swedish culture is, as all cultures are, organic, i.e. alive, and how people consume shapes and constitutes culture.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are of two kinds, of content and of method. Considering the content limitations it can be said that only the views of adults were taken into account, leaving the voice of children expressed only through their parents and not directly from them. In other studies like the one by James et. al., (2009) the objective was to take into account children's participation in the family meal. Considering the children's' voice could be particularly relevant based on the central position that children have within the family and with taco consumption. In the same line, the particular role of the different actors in a family (i.e., parents and children) has not been accounted for or used, and it could be employed as an element to inspire further studies. There is a series of studies where the view of the woman is highlighted (e.g., DeVault, 1991, *Feeding a family*) and could provide an interesting angle to the study.

Lastly, early in the development of this study it was decided that the role of the brands and advertising was not going to be considered. However, knowing how the brands communicated with the consumers when the taco concept was brought to Sweden could provide additional information for example, in regards to how have tacos been integrated into Swedish food culture or the association that tacos have with Fridays and family. The role of advertising in taco consumption could be a good way to further the analysis and understanding of taco consumption in Sweden.

The concerning the method, the limitation of this study has to do with the fact that there is only one researcher behind this study. This could hinder the analysis and there is a potential risk of only focusing on certain aspects and failing to see others (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989).

### **Implications for theory**

This study has different implications to theory. It first contributes to the body of studies in the Consumption Culture Theory (CCT) family of theories. One of the aims of CCT is to investigate how consumers consume (Holt 1995 cited by Arnould & Thompson, 2005: 875) and this is what has been researched with this study for the case of tacos in Sweden. Secondly, this study moves beyond the traditional explanations that describe the elements by which foreign or ethnic food is 'transported' and adopted in different countries; the most widely factor mentioned is migration (Rossiter & Chan, 1998: 1; Verbeke and Poquiqui, 2005). However in the case of Sweden, the consumption of tacos has no direct relation to the immigration into the country; the largest immigrant group consists of returning Swedish citizens, followed by Iraqis, Somalis and Poles, and there are no significant number of immigrants from Mexico (SCB, Statistics Sweden, 2010). This study presents other factors such as the fit of the food with the values of the society



such as family. It gives a good example of what Ilmonen (1991: 178) refers as *taming* that is when there is a reduction of the spices, elimination of foreign flavours and addition of familiar ingredients in order to turn foreign food into something familiar; in other words, moving ethnic food from foreign to familiar culture (Ilmonen, 1991: 176). This is the case of tacos and its resemblance with the *smorgasbord*, or the use of familiar ingredients to the Swedish pallets, such as minced meat.

Lastly, with this study I would like to contribute to theory by proposing the term *Cultural Fitness*. *Cultural Fitness* aims to describe what I have seen with the case of tacos in Sweden, in terms of the correspondence or fit that exists between the incoming or foreign food with the existing food culture and culture in general. This term that I know of, has been used in a context of IT tools (Gobbin, 1998); a context far from a food or meal. What I suggest *Cultural Fitness* to define are the cases, such as the tacos in Sweden, where immigration and the contact with the original food culture has not played an important role in the adoption of the foreign food into the recipient culture. How the new food arrived, whether by immigration, travel or fashion, is not in this case important; what *Cultural Fitness* proposes to express are the elements that a food has, in terms of what the food or meal contains, how it is eaten, and the fitness of these elements with the actual culture. Having a good *Cultural Fitness* enables the new food to be *digested*, in a cultural sense, and as a result to be incorporated into the culture.

### **Implications for marketers**

The current study provides some insights that could be helpful for marketing practitioners due to the following reasons. First, the different moments in the life of a person and family where tacos are consumed and how tacos accompany people's life could be used as a source of inspiration for future advertising campaigns. Second, this study could also help in the development of new products and line extensions that target families, in the sense that this study shows important characteristics that the food needs to have in order to make it appealing for families; for example, the social aspect of a dish, that invites interaction between the participants. Third, this study sheds light into a how food, in this case tacos, are inherited from one generation to the other and this could inspire new advertising campaigns which can display this phenomena. Additionally, the involvement of adolescents in the preparation of tacos and the fact that they are having tacos with their friends independently from their families, could be a source of inspiration for marketers in terms of new advertising concepts. Fourth, as seen in this study some consumers have eaten tacos for a long time and tacos for them are no longer seen as special. This could represent a potential risk as consumers look for new ways and foods to bring excitement to the table. Fifth, the Existential Phenomenological approach taken with this study enabled to place the consumer experience in focus regardless of the brand the informants consume. The hero of this study is the lived experience by the consumers; therefore is not biased by any brand. This aspect could be valuable to practitioners as they can see the consumers under a new light and beyond the boundaries of their brands.

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## Appendix 1: Participant Observation guide

### Space

- Where do they eat? In front of TV, kitchen, living room.
- What are the seating arrangements?

### Actors

- Who takes part of it?
- Who participates preparing it and what does everyone do?

### Activities

- What is done and in which order?
- Do they give the food a special touch?
- What is the sequence of events?
- What happens during dinner?
- What other activities happen simultaneously while preparing the meal?
- What happens before, during and after dinner?
- What are the elements of the 'Fredags mys'?

### Objects

- What are the elements of a taco-dinner?
- Which brands are present?
- How is the table set?
- Do people read instructions or do they know what they're doing?

### Feelings

- Attitude towards food? Bored, excited, neutral...?
- What is the mood?

## Appendix 2: Interview guide

### 1. Please describe what it mean to eat tacos for you and your family?

*Prompt a)* Does it mean anything special to you?

*Prompt b)* What is special about eating tacos?

### 2. If I tell you tacos what are the first things that come into your mind?

In what ways it is convenient?

- a. What is the mood at your house when you are having taco-dinner?

### 3. How often do you eat tacos?

- a. Can you give me examples of different occasions where you eat tacos?
- b. What is different in these different occasions when you eat tacos?
- c. Who makes the decision to eat tacos?
- d. What do you feel when the decision to eat tacos is made?
- e. In what ways is taco-dinner different from other meals?
- f. What about having variety is important to you?
- g. What do you enjoy the most about taco-dinner?
- h. What do you don't enjoy about taco-dinner?

### 4. Can you describe, what are the elements that make a taco-dinner?

- a. Please describe what are the stages involved in a taco-dinner as the one we experienced today?

If I come to eat tacos or taco-dinner at your house how would you describe make the taco-dinner?

- b. Have you incorporated your personal touch to the taco-dinner? What elements?
- c. What would you replace taco-dinner with if tacos were not available? How would you feel?

### 5. Where did you learn about tacos?

- a. How has your experience changed from the first times you had taco-dinner until today?

### 6. Which types of ethnic food (the one whose origin is outside of Sweden) besides tacos do you regularly eat?

- a. Would you consider tacos being ethnic food?
- b. Are tacos exotic?
- c. What is more Swedish tacos or Thai food? What makes you think that?
- d. In which occasions?
- e. What does eating ethnic food makes you feel?
- f. What do you find attractive about ethnic food in general?
- g. Would you consider tacos as part of the Swedish food culture?

**7. Describe a typical Friday for you and your family**

- a. Please describe what is the Fredagmys for you?
- b. What does Fredagmys means to you?  
    Prompt: what is special about Fredagmys?
- c. How important is having this routine in your family?

Participant information

Age:

Civil status:

Children (y/n) and ages:

Occupation:

**Prompt examples**

**Can you give me an example**

**In what way...**

**How did you feel...**