

Natural, Enjoyable, and Finnish: Social Representations of Eating Meat in Finnish Meat Product Advertisements

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Abstract

In this study, we examine how meat product advertisements shape the image of meat-eating at a time when alternatives to meat-eating are increasingly being discussed in many Western countries. Drawing on social representations theory, multimodal analysis, and deconstructive reading, we explore how certain meanings are attached to meat-eating while others are put aside. The research material consisted of 65 advertisement videos published by the two largest Finnish meat product companies between 2013 and 2021. We identified naturalness, enjoyment, and Finnishness as the main concepts used to promote meat consumption. The social representations in the advertisements were constituted by three embedded themata namely, edible/inedible, human/animal, and us/them, structuring everyday conceptions regarding meat-eating. Theoretically we seek to show how the advertisements participate in dialogical negotiation on socially salient topics in present-day societies and contribute to the construction of social representations.

Keywords

social representations, meat, food, advertising, dialogical approach

Over several decades, Western countries have witnessed growing concerns regarding meat-eating. In particular, the impact of the livestock industry on climate change, the public health effects of meat-eating and the moral side of animal farming have surfaced the public discussions (e.g., [FAO, 2013](#); [Friel et al., 2009](#); [Vinnari & Vinnari, 2014](#)). In turn, the central role of meat in Western diets has been questioned, which has led to proposals such as limiting meat intake by opting for more plant-based proteins (e.g., [NNR, 2012](#)) or substituting meat with synthetic alternatives ([Marcu et al., 2015](#)).

Simultaneously, recent research has shown that meat is not easily substitutable. From a nutritional perspective, meat and other livestock products are an important source of protein, energy, vitamins, and minerals, and contribute greatly to global food security ([FAO, 2011](#)). Moreover, for humans, food not only nourishes but also signifies. For example, particularly in Western cultures, meat-eating is associated with the construction of *social identity* and *social class*, *performing gender*, and the construction of *power hierarchies in a family context* ([Beardsworth & Keil, 2002](#)). These associations – among many others – have helped to firmly establish the cultural position of meat-eating; thus, its associated dietary habits are not easily questioned, nor novel ideas and alternatives easily accepted ([Marcu et al., 2015](#)).

In the present paper, we explore the socially constructed meanings attached to meat and meat-eating in Finnish meat product advertisement videos. Social representations theory (SRT) is applied as the principal framework of analysis. We utilise the theoretical and conceptual tools of SRT to understand how social representations of meat-eating are



formed at a time when the consumption of meat in Western societies is increasingly being questioned in light of the above-mentioned concerns. The study contributes to the social psychological research on food and, more specifically, to everyday meaning-making of animal-origin products.

Meat-Eating in a Finnish Context

Finland holds a privileged position in relation to food in a world context. High standards of living, industrialised production, and international chains of distribution make practically every foodstuff, including exclusive delicacies, available to consumers (Beardsworth & Keil, 2002). In this context, food can be viewed not only in nutritional terms, but also as an instrumental resource that can be used to represent certain lifestyles, social statuses, or values (Fiddes, 1994).

Over the last century, meat has been transformed from an exclusive and prestigious food to a product that is abundantly available in many Western countries (Fiddes, 2004). Meat consumption in Finland has almost tripled since the 1950s, from an average of 29 kg/year per Finn to over 80 kg/year per Finn in 2019 (Ravintotase, 2021). This *meatification* (Sage, 2016) of the human diet has led to growing concerns about the adverse effects of meat-eating. The battle against climate change (IPCC, 2018) has heightened the sense of urgency for reducing emissions, and meat production – and the livestock industry in general – has been identified as a notable source of human-induced greenhouse emissions (FAO, 2013). Furthermore, the growing body of medical research has highlighted associations between diets high in saturated fats (including meat) and obesity, cardio-vascular disease, hyper-tension, and cancer (Friel et al., 2009). Moreover, a diet with a high ratio of animal to plant protein and a high meat intake is associated with an increased risk of mortality (Virtanen et al., 2019). These issues render meat-eating a salient question regarding public health. For example, the nutrition recommendations in the Nordic countries recognize meat as an important source of protein but recommend limiting the intake of red meat because of both environmental and health-related reasons (NNR, 2012, p. 146). Finally, as the demand for meat has steadily increased, meat production “*has come to exemplify Fordist production processes with emphasis placed on rising volumes and faster throughput*” (Sage, 2016, p. 185). These processes raise critical questions regarding animal welfare (e.g., Vinnari & Vinnari, 2014) making meat-eating also the subject of moral debate in Finland.

The past decade in Finland has witnessed a continuous public discussion that has focused on justifying the various positions for and against meat-eating. For example, in 2019, Jenni Haukio – spouse of the President of Finland – received an award from a Finnish animal welfare association and gave a speech that advocated animal rights. Amongst the Finnish farmers, the speech was interpreted as an assault against their livelihood and caused a widespread public debate involving opposing statements from members of the Finnish parliament and the Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK) (Yle Uutiset, 6.11.2019). In same year, the Student Union of the University of Helsinki removed beef options from their student restaurants to reduce the carbon footprint of the almost 10,000 lunches served daily (HS, 15.10.2019). This action stirred up emotional responses both supporting and opposing the decision, and once again, several members of parliament, including the Minister of Agriculture, openly stated that they were against the decision (HS, 16.10.2019). A similar debate arose in 2021 when Finland’s capital, the City of Helsinki, decided to stop serving meat at city-organised events. The chairperson of the MTK responded by condemning the announcement as ignorant greenwashing (HS, 2.11.2021). These examples are representative of many events that demonstrate the polemization of meat-eating in Finnish public discourse. Kupsala et al. (2015) have shown how Finns divide into social groups that hold different positions regarding animal farming; however, research on the different meaning-making processes that lead to these grouping is still lacking.

Making Sense of Socially Contested Issues

In the present study, meaning-making in relation to meat-eating in Finland is explored through SRT. At the core of the theory is the concept of *social representation*, which refers to an assembly of components: *belief* (information), *attitude*, and *mental image* (Moscovici, 1973). According to Moscovici (1984), social representations have two distinct functions: 1) they offer a socially shared definition of phenomena that individuals encounter in their everyday lives, and 2) they provide individuals and groups with guidelines for positioning themselves in relation to the object of social representation. In other words, social representations define phenomena with socially shared *communicable* forms. On

the other hand, social representations are *normative*, providing guidelines for *what to think* about certain phenomena, and limiting the differing views.

Constructing and debating social representations function as *collective coping* when social agents try to make sense of a salient phenomenon. Typically, this is something new, like genetic modification of vegetables (Wagner & Kronberger, 2001) or synthetic meat (Marcu et al., 2015). An already established social representation may also become salient for renegotiation if the social context changes: for the social agents involved, maintaining the established form of understanding of the topic may become a relevant project (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2016). Wagner and Kronberger (2001) argue that this process of meaning-making, or *symbolic coping*, constitutes the very core of SRT.

Meaning-making involves three core processes: *anchoring*, *objectification*, and *naturalisation*. Anchoring involves labelling something based on pre-existing categories. In an example from the study by Wagner and Kronberger (2001) on collective symbolic coping with biotechnology, people anchored genetic engineering of plants to an already existing idea of '*injecting substances into an organism*'. Once anchored, a phenomenon acquires a communicable form within a society or group – it is made familiar. Objectification refers to the process of assigning a phenomenon a concrete form by employing symbols, icons, metaphors, or tropes. Continuing with social representations of genetically modified food, an image of a tomato growing uncontrollably and finally exploding in the laboratory is a prime example of objectification (Wagner & Kronberger, 2001). In a study exploring the reception of synthetic meat, Marcu et al. (2015) observed a similar meaning-making process, which resulted in negatively charged social representation and led to opposition towards the novel idea. Lastly, naturalization is the process in which something once unknown turns into something that is *taken-for-granted* and is assigned a place in social reality. Naturalised elements of social representations become anchoring points for new social representations (Philogène, 1999).

Social representations are rooted in the history of the group sharing them. Moscovici and Vignaux (1994) call the underlying, historically embedded structure of social representations *themata*. In turn, Marková (e.g., 2006) has emphasised the role of *proto-themata* in the formation of social representations. Proto-themata are *meaning potentials* that are activated in certain circumstances. For example, changes in political, ideological, or scientific context may interfere with the lives of individuals, groups, and societies and initiate the formation of more complex structures of lay knowledge. Proto-themata occur as dyadic oppositions, such as safe/danger or food/poison, and act as cultural presuppositions in common-sense thinking (Marková, 2006, p. 171). When explicated, the proto-themata transform into themata, which govern the formation of social knowledge and its meaning structures (Marková, 2006) – in other words, the formation of social representations. Proto-themata can originate from biology, culture, or history – among many other things – and are part of the socially shared and implicit knowledge entangled with language and communication. However, proto-themata – as well as themata – are not necessarily culture-specific. For example, Mäkineniemi, Pirttilä-Backman, and Pieri (2011) demonstrated that the social representations of ethical and unethical food were characterised across Finland, Denmark, and Italy by the shared themata of natural/unnatural and required/prohibited.

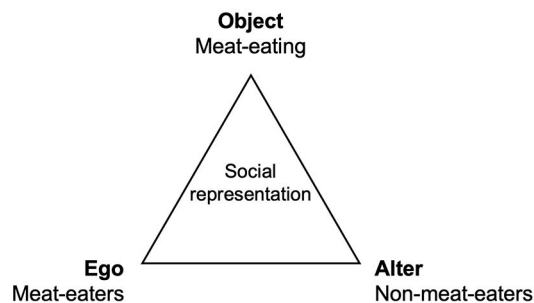
Moscovici (1984) has emphasized the profoundly social nature of social representations: a social representation regarding the object is not individually (ego) constructed, but in interaction with others (alter). To illustrate the social meaning-making process of meat-eating, we follow Marková's (2003) dialogical approach and propose a *dialogical triad* as the basic unit for the present research. Other triadic conceptualisations (e.g., Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Buhagiar & Sammut, 2020) presuppose a shared *project* to bring together ego and alter in representing the object. In contrast, it is *dialogical tension* that links ego and alter in a dialogical triad. Tension is inherent in the ego–alter relation: there can be no communication unless the participants are drawn together by tension, nor social action unless the oppositions in tension confront one another (Marková, 2003, p. 152). As highlighted by Duveen (1998), a social representation can facilitate both a means of understanding and a means of *not* understanding (p. 461). Moreover, Marková (2003) has suggested that ego and alter are created in and through symbolic communication; hence, the process of representation can be viewed as constructing not only the object, but also the subjects themselves. Through dialogical approach, social representations can be conceptualised as dynamic constructs that contain power, resistance, change, and stability (Sakki, Menard, & Pirttilä-Backman, 2017).

In our analysis, the object in the dialogical triad (demonstrated in Figure 1), is meat-eating. We suggest that the previously discussed moral, environmental, and health-related questions that surround meat-eating generate tension in

Finnish society, which disrupts the normative functioning of social representation and call for a reorganisation of social knowledge. This draws ego and alter into a dialogical relationship in which a viable social reality is renegotiated.

Figure 1

The Dialogical Triad of Social Representations of Meat-Eating



For analytical purposes, we suggest that ego comprises *meat-eaters*, the existing and potential audience of meat advertisements. Following Marková's (2003) idea of dialogical tension, alter is thereby the counter for ego, the *non-meat-eaters*. For the advertiser to propose meanings relating to meat-eating (object), the subjects (ego and alter) must also be defined: what is meat-eating in relation to *not* eating meat. Therefore, incorporated in the triad is a sample of the dialogical process relating to meat-eating in a Finnish context.

Advertisements and Social Representations

The social meaning-making processes of constructing and shaping social representations may take place in different forums of social interaction such as the media, the school, or the everyday discussions. Advertising has a central role in many present-day societies and can influence appreciations, desires, and social distinctions (Williamson, 1978). However, advertising has remained largely underutilised in social representations research (de Rosa, 1998) despite its undisputed role in the construction of everyday conceptions (for recent exceptions, see Pirttilä-Backman & Kassea, 2013; Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2019).

The primary aim of advertisements of everyday consumer goods can be considered to introduce products and attach them with certain meanings to make them more appealing to the consumer (Williamson, 1978). Simultaneously, advertisements may disseminate broader ideas that are related, for example, to norms, dignity, or social roles (e.g., Pirttilä-Backman & Kassea, 2013). Thus, as well as attempting to affect consumers' decisions, advertisements may suggest ways to perceive an object or subjects – such as meat-eating or meat-eater – in social reality (de Rosa, 1998).

An advertisement's communication is achieved by anchoring and objectifying the product to a set of desirable lifestyles, values, conventions, and attitudes. For example, Hakoköngäs and Sakki (2019) have shown how dairy product advertisements promote a specific product while also conveying ideas of banal nationalism: domestic production and local work is advocated and valued in contrast to an undefined "other". It is debated whether advertisements "mirror" shared conceptions or "mould" values, ideas, and beliefs (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Based on previous research (de Rosa, 1998; de Rosa & Farr, 2001), we argue that from the perspective of SRT, advertisements represent both the mirror and the mould: they appeal to the established conceptions (e.g., perceptions of what is considered "Finnish"), reflect the changing values and ideas (e.g., perceptions of what is environmentally friendly), but also present novel ideas (such as new products or trends), thus participating in the construction of new social representations. An advertisement, like a visual image, can simultaneously be perceived as a *product* of social representations, as a *medium* through which new or pre-existing social representations are conveyed, and as a *source* of social knowledge that can stimulate the development of new social representations (de Rosa & Farr, 2001). While consumers rarely engage in direct conversations with advertisers, from the perspective of the dialogical approach to SRT (Marková, 2006), advertising does not represent univocal communication: the stances of ego and alter are unavoidably present in the dialogical triad (Figure 1). It should

also be noted that the audience is not expected to passively absorb the meanings suggested by an advertisement; instead, as shown by Pirttilä-Backman and Kassea (2013), the audience may take different stances and actively interpret and question the message, which may all result in (re)negotiating the meanings of the presented topic.

To elucidate the relationship between social representations and advertisements, we draw on social semiotics (Kress, 2013) and approach advertisements as *multimodal texts*, material sites of emergence of immaterial social representations. Etymology offers a subtle analogy: the Latin word *textus* translates literally as a *woven thing*, which stems from the process of weaving together textual threads – gestures, speech, sounds, images, written words, and music – into a coherent whole. The process presupposes a *weaver*, the writer of the text (e.g., advertiser), who aims to express something meaningful to the interpreter (e.g., the viewer) of the text. To increase the likelihood that the intended message is understood, the writer uses culturally embedded semiotic resources to establish cohesion in the text (Kress, 2013, pp. 35–37). However, the rules of which ensembles of semiotic resources constitute a cohesive text in a certain context is a matter of social negotiation; therefore, the advertiser cannot significantly deviate from the audience’s communicative conventions. In fact, to be understood, the advertiser *must*, to some extent, employ the audience’s shared knowledge. Consequently, the advertiser incorporates certain social, political, economic, and technological contexts in the message, impregnating it with views that stem from the society and its worldview. Bordwell (1991) calls these subtle and often unintentional contents as *symptomatic meanings*. From the perspective of SRT, symptomatic meanings can be regarded as naturalised social representations: both concepts are (at least partly) implicit, undisputed, and widely accepted assumptions about the shape of social reality represented by a certain group (Philogène, 1999). We suggest that in advertisement videos, objectifications are those tangible threads that individually – or together with other threads – constitute coherent meaning structures (anchorings) in a given social context (ego–alter–object relationship) (see de Rosa & Farr, 2001).

Based on the previous research on social representations and advertising, we view the advertisements videos as products of a dialogue between ego and alter: the videos thus incorporate the stances of meat-eaters and non-meat-eaters, which are linked together by a dialogical tension that emerges from the social context. Utilising this perspective, we specifically ask:

1. How is meat-eating objectified and anchored in the advertisements?
2. Are there shared conceptions of meat-eating present in the material that can be considered social representation(s) and, if yes, how are they organised (themata)?

Method

Material Collection Procedure

The material for this study was collected during the spring of 2021 from the YouTube channels of two of the largest Finnish meat product companies: HKScan and Atria. In Finland, the two companies have over 50% of the market share for meat products. Both companies are active in social media marketing: in the spring of 2021, there was a total of 906 videos on their YouTube channels.

The material was varied and included videos promoting new or seasonal products, videos providing cooking instructions, and different documentary material. From the perspective of content marketing, essentially every video could be considered an advertisement; however, in the present study we focused solely on the material that explicitly promoted one or more meat products (or product families). To define what specified meat in the advertisement content, we employed Beardsworth and Keil’s (2002) definition of an “everyday understanding” of meat: *the lean muscle tissue of mammals that is attached directly to the skeleton*. A total of 312 videos met this criterion. The excluded videos were primarily instructional videos (recipes) on how to prepare food (464 videos) and videos that were not directly related to a product (e.g., interviews with company representatives) (130 videos). Following Shelley’s (1996) distinction of the two modes in visual argumentation, *demonstrative*, and *rhetoric*, the remaining 312 advertisements were then divided into two categories. Advertisements in the *demonstrative* category ($n = 150$) were mostly shot using a single camera angle and presented graphics, hands, or utensils to illustrate the features of a marketed product. These demonstrative adver-

tisements were also excluded from the study's material. In contrast, advertisements in the *rhetoric* category ($n = 162$) were cinematic narratives that followed a variety of characters in a wide range of settings. Through their more versatile narration, rhetoric advertisements conveyed the *beliefs* as well as the *attitudes* and *mental images* of meat-eating (see Shelley, 1996); in other words, they expressed the components of social representation (Moscovici, 1973). Participating in the meaning-making process was indicated by presenting a *portrayal of meat-eaters, an associated lifestyle, and the circumstances in which meat is eaten*. Finally, the remaining 162 rhetoric advertisements were examined, and different versions of the same advertisement were excluded: in these cases, the advertisement with the longest running time was retained. The final material for the study was comprised of 65 different advertisement videos published between 2013 and 2021.

The Analysis Procedure

To answer the research questions, we applied a combination of *multimodal discourse analysis* (MMDA) (Kress, 2013) and *deconstructive reading* (Burman & MacLure, 2011) to analyse the social representation(s) in the advertisements. The aim of MMDA is to identify the contents, forms, and functions of cultural products by taking into account the different textual threads that constitute the overall meaning (Kress, 2013). In videos, for example, these textual threads include written and spoken texts, moving images, music and sounds, the length of scenes, and the camera angles. Following the principles of SRT, we utilised MMDA to analyse the material within the social and historical context in which the videos were created.

In practice, we first familiarised ourselves with the material by watching the videos multiple times to identify patterns of consistency and diversity in the overall content. To manage the simultaneously occurring threads that constituted the overall meaning, we followed the example of Hakoköngäs and Sakki (2019) and transcribed the time, pictures, narration, text, and music of each video in parallel columns. We started by identifying objectifications (e.g., objects, symbols, people, groups or metaphors) from the transcriptions and added them as codes. Next, we utilised Marková's (2000) suggestion that anchorings attach objectifications to culturally shared associations: we examined the ensembles of the identified objectifications and searched for coherent systems of meanings (anchorings) that could be considered accordingly. Twelve objectifications and three related anchorings were identified.

Regarding the second research question, there are no established qualitative methods for identifying themata in SRT research. However, we suggest that the principles of deconstructive reading can be employed to carry out this process. Deconstruction is based on Derrida's philosophical thinking (e.g., Derrida & Spivak, 1997), and it shares ontological and epistemological presuppositions with the dialogical approach of SRT (e.g., Marková, 2000). Both perspectives regard thinking as a process that is based on language and, in turn, social reality as a construct that is developed through the use of language. In deconstruction and in the dialogical approach, dichotomies form the fundamentals of our thinking and are therefore unescapable (Derrida & Spivak, 1997; Marková, 2006). Deconstructive reading interferes with these oppositions: a text (e.g., an advertisement) is stripped of its immediate shape by focusing on its embedded presuppositions, internal inconsistencies, ideologies, or prejudices.

The objectifications and the anchorings identified in the first phase of the analysis were given a more detailed examination using the three principles suggested by Burman and MacLure (2011, p. 284): 1) view the world as thoroughly textual, and disregard the concepts of *natural*, *self-evident*, and *innocent*; 2) identify and scrutinise the binary oppositions in texts; and 3) challenge content that is taken for granted to open up textual spaces that may appear closed. Throughout the analysis we acknowledged the dialogical triad principle that a tension draws ego and alter together (Marková, 2003); we therefore defined dichotomies by examining what was omitted from the texts alongside what was present. As a result, we identified three dichotomies (themata) that underlie the social representation of meat-eating in the advertisements. In the next section, we present the characteristics of each thema and the related objectifications and anchorings.

Results

As a result of applying MMDA to advertisement videos, we identified twelve recurring objectifications of meat-eating. These objectifications connect the contents of the videos to three anchorings that associate meat-eating with naturalness, enjoyment, and Finnishness. By taking these sets of objectifications and anchorings as subjects of deconstructive reading, we identified three dichotomies that form the themata of social representation of meat-eating in the advertisements: edible/inedible, human/animal, and us/them. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Themata, Anchorings, and Frequencies of Objectifications in Advertisements

Themata	Edible/inedible	Human/animal	Us/them
Anchorings	Eating meat is natural	Eating meat is enjoyable	Eating meat is Finnish
Objectifications	Nature ($n = 30$), fire ($n = 25$), historical images ($n = 17$), humans as carnivores ($n = 7$)	Beautified meat ($n = 64$), absence of animals ($n = 61$), family and friends ($n = 43$), laughter ($n = 28$)	Iconic Finnish landscapes ($n = 29$), “purely Finnish” ($n = 25$), craftsmanship ($n = 19$), summer cottages ($n = 7$)

It is worth mentioning that a single advertisement video could include elements (objectifications or anchoring) from one or more thema. In the following sections, we present an analysis of the objectifications and anchorings (research question 1) along with the identified dichotomies that constitute the themata (research question 2) of meat-eating in the material. The results are explored through excerpts that highlight the characteristics of the advertisements’ social representation of meat-eating.

Eating Meat Is Natural (edible/inedible)

In the material, meat-eating is anchored to *naturalness* – the idea of living in harmony with nature – by objectifying meat-eating through an association with natural landscapes, references to the long history of preparing meat with fire and equating humans with carnivores. Analysis of an excerpt from the video *Rapeseed pork from Aura (Rypsiporsas Aurasta*; HKScan, 2018) demonstrates how the idea of naturalness is multimodally constructed. In the video, a protagonist/narrator – introduced to the viewer as “*Chang Kam Fu, a Michelin-chef*” – prepares meat and provides comments (Excerpt 1).

The Cantonese-speaking narrator is presented as a distinguished guest visiting Finland: the narration is backed by Asian-inspired music (00:52), marking a sharp contrast with the surroundings that represent a traditional Finnish countryside and farm (1:00). The use of a foreign narrator with a respected position (“*Michelin-chef*”) validates the quality of Finnish meat and introduces meat-eating as a global phenomenon; this presentation reinforces the idea of meat as a normatively accepted food (00:52). The narration refers to a long history of preparing meat: “*The skill of cooking meat has been passed down from our ancestors, from one generation to another*” (0:56–0:57). Fire (flames, smoke; 00:52; 00:58) is used as an objectification that cements this historical connection. In addition, the lush green nature surrounding the people plays an important visual role in the video (1:00). The anchoring to naturalness is further emphasised by the narrator’s statement: “*for humans, making a fire and cooking meat is instinctive*” (0:52–0:54); this description of meat preparation presents it as a biologically inscribed human trait.

Excerpt 1

Rapeseed Pork From Aura (Rypsiporsas Aurasta) (HKScan, 2018)

Time	Picture	Narration	Text	Audio / music
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0:52	Close-up of the grill. Cheng Kam Fu (CKF) lowers a marinated steak onto the grill.	Narrator (CKF): in Cantonese	Subtitles: “For humans, making a fire and cooking meat is instinctive.”	Simple, Asian-inspired music. Birdsong. Sizzle of meat on the grill.
0:56	CKF turning steaks on a wood-fired grill built from red bricks. Lush landscape of green fields in the background.	Narrator (CKF): in Cantonese	Subtitles: “The skill of cooking meat has been passed down from our ancestors, from one generation to another.”	
0:58	Close-up of the meat cooking on the grill.			
1:00	People sitting at a table under a blossoming apple tree in a farmhouse garden. CKF grilling meat next to the table. In the background, the sun is setting behind the treetops.	Narrator (CKF): in Cantonese	Subtitles: “It’s about living in harmony with the nature.”	Simple, Asian-inspired music. Birdsong. Hum of bubbling conversation.
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A similar reasoning is used throughout the material; for example, *Grilling throughout the ages (Grillausta kautta aikain; Atria, 2019)* shows a caveman, a Viking warrior, a Nefertiti-like character, and a medieval knight meeting at a campfire in a twilight forest to grill meat. The narration guides the interpretation of the scene: “*Fire has drawn people around it throughout the ages: at the campfire, we have met, become acquainted, contemplated, and sometimes fallen in love. As the flames have danced, we have grilled, flame-cooked, seasoned...*” (0:01–0:20). In addition to the visual mode, the material also uses auditory signals of fire (e.g., fire crackling) and metaphorical modes (“*For fiery grillers*”) to invoke associations between preparing meat and a long cultural heritage. The narration ties the multimodal threads – the fire, the forest (nature), the past generations – together to form an anchor to naturalness: fire acts as a visual objectification of a long history of cooking meat while the characters from different eras represent the past generations. Similarly, the narration in *Excerpt 1* ties the textual threads together as an argument: meat-eating is biologically and historically embedded in being human: “*it’s about living in harmony with nature*” (1:00–1:04).

The naturalness of meat-eating is also advocated by associating humans with a carnivorous nature either explicitly (“*For A-class carnivores*”; *Tältä kuulostaa Atria Wilhelm; Atria, 2013, 0:09–0:15*) or implicitly. For example, in a set of nature documentary-like advertisements by Atria, bears are used as personifications of meat-eating humans. In one of these advertisements (*Makkaraa metsän kuninkaalle; Atria, 2015*), a brown bear is shown picking up a scent and hunting its prey (sausages) in snowy terrain; the bear then takes a bite of a sausage (0:33). The narrator describes the events with a calm declaratory tone: “*Although the bear also eats berries and other vegetables, meat makes up an important part of its diet* (0:18–0:26)”. The narration alludes to the fact that humans, like bears, are omnivores, and meat is an important dietary component. The advertisement’s documentary format further reinforces the message: the argument is presented as fact rather than the advertiser’s opinion – the message is that this is how nature works.

From the perspective of dialogical approach, anchoring to naturalness taps into schematic understandings of the human past. Although the presupposed counterargument – *meat-eating is unecological and not necessary for the human diet* – is not explicitly raised in the advertisements, the methods used in the videos to anchor meat-eating to naturalness illustrate how dialogical communication is constructed in relation to alter (“non-meat-eaters”). The idea of naturalness links the advertisements to lay knowledge about meat-eating and its history, which stems from the thema of *edible/inedible*. It is important to point out that in addition to a foodstuff’s composition of nutrients, considerations of *edibility* are also related to cultural evaluation (Beardsworth & Keil, 2002). Some foods that would nutritionally be excellent sustenance for humans are considered culturally inedible. In Finland, for example, the use of insects, dogs, cats or human flesh as food is considered inappropriate, and thus inedible. On the other hand, foods that are nutritionally largely inedible, harmful, or unnecessary – such as sweets (a mixture of sugars, fats and chemicals) – are not only

considered edible but generally viewed as delicacies. We suggest that concerns about meat-eating have created tension which allows labelling meat as a potentially *inedible* food. The advertisements tap into this question and draw attention to the distinction between edible and inedible; they present an argument for a naturalised perspective that considers meat as edible in Finnish – as well as foreign – culture. Reducing the tension between edible/inedible serves the economic interests of meat producers and also provides support for meat-eaters' dietary behaviour.

Eating Meat Is Enjoyable (human/animal)

Along with naturalness, meat-eating is anchored to enjoyment, or culinary pleasure, through objectifications of family, friends, laughing people and meat that is aesthetically presented. The advertisements suggested that enjoyment is an essential part of meat-eating, such as in [Excerpt 2](#) from the video *The Masters of HK and Tomi Björck grilling (HK:n mestarit ja Tomi Björck grillaa; HKScan, 2015)*. In this advertisement, a Finnish celebrity chef prepares meat with his friends in the Finnish archipelago on a summer day.

Excerpt 2

The Masters of HK and Tomi Björck Grilling (HK:n mestarit ja Tomi Björck grillaa; HKScan, 2015)

Time	Picture	Narration	Text	Audio / music
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0:11	Close-up of Tomi Björck, smiling by the kettle-grill next to his friends.	Narrator: "... When you have all these top products then you can just enjoy the ember and the great feeling..."		Calm music. Bubbling conversation.
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0:13	Close-up of Björck's arm: serves food on to a woman's plate.	Narrator: "... and you also have your dear friends around you..."		Calm music. Bubbling conversation. Clanging of cutlery.
0:14	People on a narrow rocky spit. Björck and three men are standing by the grill. Two women are having a friendly conversation by the water. At a nearby table, two women are sitting, and a man is standing. Beside the trees, a couple are having a conversation, and children are playing in the foreground. Two canoeists are in the background.			Calm music. Bubbling conversation. Song of a cuckoo in the distance.
0:16	The group of 15 people are shown in a portrait-like shot. In the middle, Björck and two other men hold wooden boxes full of meat. Everyone has a sunny smile. The archipelago is in the background.	Narrator: "... that is the perfect moment."		Calm music. Roars of laughter. Song of a cuckoo in the distance.
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The atmosphere in the scene is light: people are socialising on a sunny summer day, and children are running and playing (0:14–0:15). In the background there is a bubbling conversation (0:10–0:14), laughter (0:16), and the song of a cuckoo in the distance, a characteristic sound of Finnish summers (0:14–0:16). The advertisement's multimodal elements construct an image of delight that is confirmed by the narrator: "*When you have all these top products, then you can just enjoy the ember and the great feeling, and you also have your dear friends around you – that is the perfect moment*" (0:08–0:16). Meat-eating in the advertisements is not just about providing nutrition, the social *act of eating* and the associated lifestyle are strongly emphasised. The anchoring to enjoyment echoes the historically high status and exclusivity of meat as a nutritional source (Fiddes, 2004); this is accentuated by the celebrity chef acting as the video's protagonist

(00:11). The advertisement represents eating quality meat (“top products”, 00:11) as a special occasion which should be properly enjoyed.

Anchoring to enjoyment is also achieved by suppressing other elements integral to meat-eating, namely the *presence of animals*. The absence of certain elements helps to shape a coherent social reality by excluding “others” (Barreiro & Castorina, 2016). Harming animals generally carries negative associations, especially in relation to large mammals, such as cows and pigs. However, the flesh of large mammals is also often accorded a high social status (Beardsworth & Keil, 2002, pp. 153–156). This creates a dilemma called the *meat paradox*: although humans disapprove of harming animals, they will still eat their flesh (Bastian et al., 2012). Only a small number of advertisements (4 out of 65) show farm animals – for the majority, the animals are absent. Moreover, the meat shown in almost every advertisement is devoid of any features that would identify the animal, such as the head, blood, hair, limbs, or bones. According to Grauerholz (2007), the meat is *beautified* by using an attractive presentation; for example, the product is shown alongside smiling people in a natural landscape in *Excerpt 2* (00:16), and in other advertisements, the meat is often presented as part of a decorative and carefully laid out table setting.

We argue that the associations of meat-eating with enjoyment and the absence of the animal both stem from the same theme – *human/animal* – which echoes the meat paradox (Bastian et al., 2012): on one hand, meat-eating is anchored to human pleasure and on the other hand objectified to the absence of the animal, with the latter enabling the former.

Eating Meat Is Finnish (us/them)

Finally, meat-eating is anchored to Finnishness in the advertisements by employing objectifications of iconic Finnish natural landscapes, such as lush green forests and fields, lakeshores, and archipelagos (see *Excerpts 1* and *2*), as well as deeply rooted cultural and national milieus, such as summer cottages. In the advertisements, these landscapes and locations offer contexts for meat consumption. For example, in Finnish culture, summer cottages carry positive meanings of holidays and togetherness and are part of a prototypical Finnish landscape (Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2019). Alongside the imagery, the generous use of slogans, such as “*Always Finnish meat*” or “*Purely Finnish*”, explicitly connect meat-eating to Finnishness. In addition to these contextualising cues, the advertisements emphasise the connection between Finnish work and meat; for example, working days on three Finnish farms are depicted in *Excerpt 3* from the advertisement *Purely Finnish since 1903 (Puhtaasti suomalainen vuodesta 1903; Atria, 2014)*.

Excerpt 3

Atria – Purely Finnish Since 1903 (Atria – Puhtaasti suomalainen vuodesta 1903; Atria, 2014)

Time	Picture	Narration	Text	Audio / music
0:00	Sun rising behind the treetops. Lush green field in the foreground.			Emotion-provoking, simple and melancholic piano music.
0:01	Elderly man (farmer 1) opening the double doors of an old wooden barn in the morning twilight to reveal a tractor.			
0:03	Young man (farmer 2) opening curtains in the morning twilight, boldly looking out. Behind the window there is an old brick barn with 1903 on the gable.	A low, masculine voice:	“Where the doors are not locked for the night...”	
0:06	Woman (farmer 3) wearing a wool shirt and a beanie calmly walking out of a farmhouse towards a man (farmer 4) who is standing steadfast in front of a house with his back towards the woman. Both have a cup of coffee in their hands. Morning twilight.	“... where the starry sky isn’t blanketed by light pollution.”		
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Time	Picture	Narration	Text	Audio / music
0:09	Elderly man (farmer 1) starts up a tractor, its headlights illuminating the yard. Lights turning on in a cow shed. A few cows turn their heads. Farmers 2 and 3 walking in the sheds. Tractor dispensing fodder for the cows.	"An uncompromising group of us Finns start their day at 4:45 am..."		
0:15	A woman (farmer 3) smiles as she puts cows to pasture. Cows calmly running.	"...rain or shine."		Piano-music intensifies.
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0:39	An elderly man (farmer 1) and a woman (farmer 5) working in the cow shed.	"For them, it is a matter of honour to..."		
0:41	A man (farmer 2) hammering a fence post in a muddy field.	"...continue the work of past..."		
0:42	Close-up of two boys on the farm.	"generations..."		
0:43	Man (farmer 4) petting a cow. A woman is in the foreground (farmer 3).	"despite the machines..."		
0:44	A woman (farmer 2) doing paperwork in the home office. Some folders, a laptop, and office equipment on the table. Kids' drawings on the wall.	"...always as craftsmen."		
0:46	A man and a woman (farmer 1 and 5) sit next to each other, smiling. The sun is shining. The woman lays her head on the man's shoulder. Old wooden barn wall in the background.	"They have founded us..."		
0:48	Hay swaying in the wind. Sun setting. Field in the background.	"...and differentiate..."		
0:49	A man (farmer 2) looks at the sunset, smiling gently. A field with a completed fence in the background.	"...us from others, even today."		
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During the day, the farmers are shown hard at work, either persevering with a grimace on their face (00:34) or smiling contentedly (00:46). The day starts at dawn (00:11) and does not end until sundown (00:49), indicating the effort required by the farmers. Using an emotional tone, the narrator provides a description: *"An uncompromising group of us Finns start their day at 4:45 am, rain or shine"* (00:09–0:15). The protagonists and the viewers are presented as members of the same ingroup ("us", 00:46–00:49), the Finns. The idea of craftsmanship is introduced in the advertisement: *"For them, it is a matter of honour to continue the work of the past generations (...) always as craftsmen"* (00:39–0:45). The images show farmers – and their children as future farmers (00:42) – working in cow sheds, fields, and in a home office. While the visuals guiding the interpretation of the narration are modest and gritty, the emotion-evoking piano music intensifies the narrative's atmosphere, completing the objectification of farming families as working heroes. The narrator's statement *"They have founded us and differentiate us from others, even today"* (0:46–0:50) summons images of the long history of the Finnish agricultural industry and explicitly emphasises the difference between "us" and the undefined "others".

Objectifying meat-eating in relation to Finnish craftsmanship also invokes images of a romanticised national past. In the *Atria Family Farms* advertisement (*Atria Perhetilat: Viljaporsaan Sisäfile*; Atria, 2017), a family sits while the father removes a roast from the oven and brings it to the table (0:01–0:03). A teenage boy in the family complains: *"I'd like to eat food from a real farm"* (0:03–0:05). The father calmly answers: *"Then you're in luck – this is exactly from one of those, from Vuorinen's [Finnish surname] farm, that is"* (0:06–0:09). The narrator continues: *"Atria pork tenderloin from family farms – home food from families to families"* (0:10–0:14). The advertisement connects modern meat-eating to the pre-industrialised era of meat: the call for *"food from a real farm"* invites the viewer to consider small scale,

non-industrial animal farming. The father's answer closes the loop: the meat does indeed come from such a farm. The farm is named after its assumed owner, *Vuorinen*, which further contributes to the image of a *real farm* that employs *real* craftsmen, as depicted in [Excerpt 3](#). Moreover, the association with craftsmanship and the statement “*food from families to families*” obscures the industrialised processes behind meat production and summons images of small-scale, local production, a feature of the pre-industrial era (see [Sage, 2016](#)).

Anchoring to Finnishness, we argue, stems from the thema of *us/them*, a dyadic opposition constituting *social identity* (e.g., [Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#)), which serves the function of positive group identification (e.g., “*An uncompromising group of us Finns*”, 0:09). The stability in social reality is always achieved “*at the cost of suppression of some other – something banished to the ‘wrong’ side of the binary*” ([Burman & MacLure, 2011](#), p. 287; [Duveen, 1998](#)). Likewise, social representations that are drawn from the thema of *us/them* define borders in social reality. By presenting meat-eating as a positive feature of Finnishness, critical remarks directed at meat production or consumption are implicitly framed negatively and become a potential threat towards *us*. Thus, the dichotomy implies that non-meat-eaters – *alter* – are not proper Finns, as they do not support the continuation of “the work of past generations” (0:41) or respect *our* nation's founders (“They have founded us...”; 0:46).

Discussion: Making Sense of Meat-Eating

Our analysis of Finnish meat product advertisements has answered two questions. First, by employing multimodal discourse analysis ([Kress, 2013](#)), we have shown that the advertisements objectify meat-eating through nature, fire and its long history of meat preparation, family and friends, beautified meat, an absence of animals, and the use of iconic Finnish scenes, such as the countryside, to mention the most frequent objectifications. These objectifications anchor meat-eating to ideas of naturalness, enjoyment, and Finnishness. Second, by employing deconstructive reading ([Burman & MacLure, 2011](#)), we identified three themata that constitute the social representation of meat-eating in the material: edible/inedible, human/animal, and *us/them*.

Our study is based on the concept that the public debate surrounding meat-eating in Finland disrupts the normative functioning of the established social representations of meat-eating and requires a reorganisation of social knowledge. Following the dialogical approach ([Marková, 2000, 2003, 2006](#)), we have argued that the public discussion has thematised the salient taken-for-granted dyadic oppositions (proto-themata) in people's thinking. Once thematised, these dichotomies cease to be implicit meaning potentials; instead, they are transformed into explicit themata that enter the dialogue between ego and alter. Themata then govern the reconstruction of the social representations through the processes of objectification and anchoring ([Marková, 2006](#)).

In the dialogical triad, the object (meat-eating) and the subjects (meat-eaters and non-meat-eaters) are constructed. Our study demonstrates how the advertisements make use of argumentative strategies ([Shelley, 1996](#)) in the social construction of object, ego, and alter. The videos provide the advertisers with a versatile medium for developing these meaning-making processes. Overall, the results demonstrate how the advertisements consolidate the pre-existing, naturalised social representation of meat-eating instead of attaching entirely new meanings. As suggested by [Hakoköngäs and Sakki \(2016\)](#), not only do social representations facilitate the transformation of the unfamiliar to the familiar, but they may also contribute to maintaining the familiarity of an already established phenomena. In the present study, the changing social context – and the alternative perspectives stemming from it – necessitates the advertisers' use of truisms, such as *meat-eating is natural* or *proper Finns eat meat*, to advocate a trouble-free image of meat-eating.

It should be reiterated that from a dialogical perspective, the advertisements reflect the explicit intentions of the advertiser while also incorporating aspects from the associated public debate ([Bordwell, 1991](#)). The dialogical triad presupposes interdependence between ego and alter ([Marková, 2000](#)): in our case, what is meat-eating in relation to not eating meat. The participants not only bring their past and present experiences into the dialogue, but also their expectations about the future. Moreover, they can focus on themselves and, above all, express their own interests ([Marková, 2003](#), pp. 156-157). Therefore, the advertisements reflect a sample of shared lay knowledge about meat-eating in a Finnish context; in addition, we see several argumentative strategies employed by ego in an attempt to maintain a coherent social reality.

Thus, as well as focusing on *what is thematised in the reconstruction of meat-eating*, we have also addressed *what is omitted from the dialogue*; for example, the advertisements carefully obscure the role of animals. As Derrida (2006/2019) has observed, animal is animal only in relation to human. Attributes such as language, culture, and abstract thinking are generally thought to separate humans from animals: living organisms without these traits, be it an insect or a farm animal, are considered non-human, animals. Derrida has argued that the Cartesian ontology constitutes the difference: *I think, therefore I am*. Conversely, what does not think, does not exist, at least not in the same way the humans do. Meat-eating in industrial food systems assumes a clear distinction in the human/animal dichotomy: eating human flesh is a near universal taboo (Beardsworth & Keil, 2002, p. 52), while our research – among others (e.g., Stibbe, 2004; Grauerholz, 2007; Rothgerber, 2013) – has demonstrated that eating farm animals is often considered unproblematic and can even be associated with enjoyment.

It has been argued that the “[...] repression or exclusion of some meanings from the representational field is by no means coincidental or casual. They are excluded because they challenge the dominant ideological vision of the social world and, in that sense, they become threatening for social groups.” (Barreiro & Castorina, 2016, pp. 18-19). From this perspective, the advertisements promote an unproblematised view of meat-eating; the content of the videos is generally unaffected by concerns relating to high meat consumption, its environmental impact and health-related or moral issues (e.g., FAO, 2013; Friel et al., 2009; Vinnari & Vinnari, 2014). Thus, we can view this approach as an example of collective symbolic coping (Wagner & Kronberger, 2001). The advertisements can be viewed as belonging to the collective activity of a group (ego), which aims to maintain the integrity of its worldview (edible/inedible, human/animal) and its social identity (us/them). The objectifications and anchorings present in the advertisements function as strategies that ease the possible conflicts that arise in everyday thinking and resolve the collision of pre-existing social conceptions and new concerns. Previous research has indicated potential changes in the social groupings related to farming animals in Finland (Kupsala et al., 2015) and a mistrust of meat substitutes (Marcu et al., 2015); however, more research is needed to unravel the ongoing and emerging discussions that negotiate the social representations of meat-eating.

Although we have explored the social representations of meat-eating in a Finnish context, meat-eating in industrialised food systems is not a localised phenomenon. In fact, localisation and nationalisation of practices related to environmental behaviour may be harmful by disrupting the efforts at global solidarity (e.g., Pettersson et al., 2022). Between 2010 and 2050, the global demand for meat is projected to grow by 73 percent (FAO, 2011); therefore, the emerging debates are likely to be further explicated over the coming decades. Climate change, for example, poses a threat to the very existence of our planet’s ecosystems (IPCC, 2018). As highlighted by Grant (2011), climate change is largely caused by excessive and growing consumption practices that are aggravated by a rapidly expanding world population. In this regard, some of the problems inherent with industrialised meat are part of a broader paradox that adheres to the core concept of growth economy: endless growth with finite resources. Advertising can be seen to maintain this cycle, as its effectiveness is achieved by associating marketed products with intangible and priceless meanings people value, such as love, friendship, or joy – or in the case of meat-eating, naturalness, enjoyability, or nationality. Thus, the advertisements convey a message, that the good things in life are intrinsically connected to material consumption (Grant, 2011, p. 257).

In this research, we have explored the social representation of meat-eating through multimodal advertisements. We have argued that within the SRT framework, a dialogical approach provides a pertinent perspective to analyse the role of the advertisements in the construction, dissemination, and reflection of social representations. We suggest that by analysing advertising that addresses debated or emerging topics, we can examine the communicative practices in advertisements and unravel the social meaning-making processes – guided by certain social contexts – that surround a marketed product. As highlighted by Batel et al. (2016), research on salient social representations – such as the examples studied in this paper – contribute to the understanding of the opportunities and barriers relating to social change and the shift towards more sustainable societies.

Conclusions and Limitations

In this paper, we have argued that our approach grants us access to the dialogical meaning-making processes of meat-eating on a societal level. We have demonstrated how the current concerns surrounding meat-eating merge into

the dialogue between ego and alter through ego's attempt to maintain the integrity of its worldview and social identity. Furthermore, we have explicated the role of advertisements as material for social representations research. Methodologically, we have outlined a qualitative approach that combines multimodal discourse analysis and deconstructive reading, which can be used in future research to help identify the objectifications, anchorings, and themata used in video material such as advertisements.

It should be noted that the present study only focused on a select segment of the advertisements produced by Finnish meat producers. As our primary interest was social representations, we can justify limiting our view to include only the rhetorical mode of multimodal communication (Shelley, 1996; see also Hakoköngäs & Sakki, 2019), as it allowed the analysis of the portrayal of the product users, the associated lifestyles, and the general contexts in which the products and the related activities were presented. Accordingly, the results cannot necessarily be generalised outside a Finnish context. This is, however, characteristic of social representations research, which addresses social knowledge in a certain social milieu. Overall, our research sheds light on the process of dialogical negotiation regarding the shape of social knowledge, a process that is not necessarily limited to a specific context.

Notably, any analysis of qualitative material is inevitably dependent on the researchers' interpretations. While we followed a data-driven approach, the analysis cannot be completely detached from the authors' positions. As stated earlier in this paper, many people in the Global North – including the Finnish authors of the paper – can freely choose the food they eat. In this context, food is transformed from mere nutrition to an instrumental resource that can be used to represent certain identities, values, and lifestyles. This position has enabled us to take a critical perspective on meat-eating that may not be viable in many parts of the world, where approximately 800 million people (FAO, 2021) suffer from hunger each year. Appreciating this overwhelming contrast embedded in the phenomenon of meat-eating, we argue that the analysis of social representations of meat-eating in Finnish society provides a critical contribution to the global discussion by contrasting the privileged and unprivileged positions in respect of food consumption.

We also want to emphasise that according to a dialogical approach (Marková, 2003), social representations are dynamic constructs in constant movement: the meanings of phenomena are negotiated in an endless dialogue within and between individuals, groups, and societies. From this point of view, the authors of this paper should not be seen as *knowing subjects*, but rather as *participants* in an ongoing dialogue, through whom the meanings of meat-eating unfold. A different reading of the material is also possible. For example, the association between gender and meat-eating, addressed in other contexts (e.g., Stibbe, 2004; Rothgerber, 2013), would require a deeper analysis, as male characters appear to play a central role in Finnish meat advertisements. In terms of legitimising eating practices through national identity, the role of emotions, such as nostalgia, also requires further analysis.

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