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Short Communication

Responses to different positioning strategies for unfamiliar food among food neophobics and neophilics

Claudio Aqueveque

Business School, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Av. Padre Hurtado 750, Viña del Mar, Región de Valparaíso, Chile

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ABSTRACT

Considering the relevance of product positioning for a new food product on its potential acceptance by consumers, this paper reports the results of an experiment conducted to test how food neophobic and food neophilics react to different new food positioning strategies. Two unfamiliar foods were used to examine the impact of three different product positioning strategies that stressed (1) utilitarian benefits, (2) hedonic benefits, and (3) symbolic benefits. The study used a 3×2 between-subjects quasi-experimental design (N = 180). The principal finding of the study is that for neophilic consumers, hedonic benefits seem to be significantly more attractive than utilitarian or symbolic benefits when the perceived level of unfamiliarity of the new food is high. For neophobic consumers, results provide partial evidence of more positive reactions to symbolic benefits compared to the other two benefits considered.

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the noteworthy growth in the number of new foods entering the market has led to significant progresses in food marketing and innovation (Bäckström, Pirttilä-Backman, & Tuorila, 2004), with the introduction of new food products in novel categories such as functional food, organic food, genetically modified food, and ethnic food, among others. Despite these progresses, numerous new food products are rejected by consumers, with authors reporting new food product failure rates around of 72–88% (Lord, 1999; Rudolph, 1995). Additionally, elements such as greater foreign trade, improvements in infrastructure (fostering tourism) and increased heterogeneity on preferences in food markets (Sloan, 2001) have determined that a substantial portion of these new foods are unfamiliar to the consumer. As a natural consequence, a large amount of research has been devoted to the study of consumer responses to unfamiliar foods (e.g. Fischer & Frewer, 2009; Tuorila & Mustonen, 2010).

Although significant advances have been made towards the understanding of unfamiliar food adoption processes, limited attention has been paid to the reactions of consumers to certain positioning strategies (e.g. utilitarian positioning) for unfamiliar food.

Product positioning – the act of creating and altering product perceptions in consumers' minds (Crawford, 1985) – has been recognized as a critical component in the process of adoption of new products (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). Consumers in the food industry, a sector in which thousands of new products are introduced to the market every year, are regularly exposed to new products with varied positioning strategies and value propositions. Different approaches to categorize positioning strategies have been developed during the last decades (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). One of these approaches classifies positioning strategies according to the motivation of the consumer in terms of the type of need satisfied by the product, and defines three main types of strategies: Utilitarian Positioning; Hedonic Positioning; and Symbolic Positioning (Bhat & Reddy, 1998; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000).

Utilitarian positioning: Under this strategy, goods are positioned as primarily instrumental and their purchase is motivated by functional product aspects. The consumption of utilitarian goods is more cognitively driven, instrumental, goal-oriented, and accomplishes a functional or practical task (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). In the food category, this type of positioning is strongly associated to functional foods, which are characterized by additional benefits beyond the nutritional value, which in turn are based on their functional ingredients (Verbeke, 2005).

Hedonic positioning: Under this strategy, goods are positioned as multisensory and provide for experiential consumption, pleasure, and excitement (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). The consumption of hedonic goods is primarily characterized by an affective and sensory experience of aesthetic or sensual pleasure, fantasy, and fun (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). This positioning strategy is present in the food category when hedonic-related characteristics of the

E-mail address: claudio.aqueveque@uai.cl

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food – such as taste, texture, or aroma – are highlighted as main features of the product.

Symbolic Positioning is oriented to position the product in terms of the product's capacity to fulfill symbolic needs. These symbolic needs are related to self-image and social image or social identification needs (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). In the food category, this type of positioning is present when food products are positioned as means to communicate status, prestige or achievement, especially when it is associated to conspicuous consumption.

Depending on the type of needs consumers want to fulfill with a product, they can be more or less responsive to these positioning strategies, and thus, more or less willing to adopt a product. Consequently, and trying to contribute to the knowledge on the area of consumers' acceptance of unfamiliar food, this research is primarily focused on the reactions of consumers to these different positioning strategies. Additionally to the main objective of this study, and considering the fact that previous research has found that personality traits can affect consumer food choices and intakes (Eertmans, Victoir, Vansant, & Van den Bergh, 2005), we also collected subjects information on their level of food neophobia.

Food neophobia has been defined as "the reluctance to eat and/or avoid novel foods" (Pliner & Hobden, 1992), and is considered a personality trait that influences everyday human food choices (Raudenbush & Frank, 1999). Therefore, the measure of this trait will permit a better comprehension of the effects of positioning strategies on the intention to try unfamiliar food.

Employing an experimental design, the aim of this study is to understand the role of product positioning on the potential acceptance of unfamiliar foods for food neophobics (people who are generally reluctant to try new foods) and neophilics (people who are generally willing to try new foods), considering different levels of food unfamiliarity.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and design

One hundred and eighty undergraduates and postgraduates, all enrolled at a large Chilean university, participated in the experiment. Participants were 88 men and 92 women aged 21–27 years (men: M = 23.6, SD = 1.22; women: M = 23.3, SD = 1.19). The study utilized a quasi-experimental design based upon a 3×2 between-subjects design. Positioning strategy (utilitarian/hedonic/symbolic) and level of unfamiliarity (low/high) were manipulated and food neophobia was measured (with the neophobic and neophilic conditions determined by a median split). The use of a between-subjects design is justified by the likely presence of carryover asymmetrical transfer effects since the stimuli considered are different advertising versions for the same products.

The questionnaire was administrated during students' normal class time by a research assistant. Participants volunteered to participate in the research, and were provided with a paper-and-pencil questionnaire that included one of the six treatments. Therefore, participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions, with an average of 30 subjects per condition. This cell size was defined based on Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2006) suggestion that the minimum cell size for an ANOVA is 20 observations. In addition, a power analysis was conducted and it showed that, for a confidence of 95% (alpha = 0.05), and a 3×2 design, a size of 30 observations per cell will provide a power over 90% for effect sizes over 0.5 (effect size of 0.75 is usually considered 'medium', while an effect size of 0.25 is considered 'small'). Therefore, for medium to large effects, the level of power provided by this sample size is, at least, adequate.

2.2. Materials

Two pilot studies and pre-tests were conducted with subjects from the population under study in order to develop the material. The first pilot study (N = 35) was conducted to select two different snack foods treatments matching the two unfamiliarity level conditions (low unfamiliarity and high unfamiliarity) and to identify relevant functional benefits. Respondents evaluated 30 different unfamiliar foods (existent products not present in the local market) in terms of level of unfamiliarity and consumption occasion (cocktail party). Based on the results, two foods ("squids in brine" and "emu pastries") were selected as appropriate since they significantly differ in terms of unfamiliarity, and were considered similar in terms of consumption situation.

For each one of these foods treatments, three different advertisings were created (utilitarian/hedonic/symbolic) with a total of six different treatments. The utilitarian advertising treatments were focused on the functional benefits of the product. In order to appeal to cognitive and instrumental motivations, the design of the advertising piece was simple and used a combination of white and green, highlighting the presence of vitamins and minerals in the product, and the benefits associated with the energy provided by the food (a benefit that pilot studies revealed to be important for the population under study). Hedonic advertising treatments used warm colors in order to stimulate a sensorial response, and highlighted the newness of the flavors and the resulting sensory stimuli derived from the consumption of the product. Symbolic advertising treatments used a degraded grey background and a picture portraying a conspicuous consumption situation, emphasizing the fact that the food was "for people that make the difference", therefore highlighting the symbolic benefit of the food. These treatments and the questionnaire were tested in a second pilot study (N = 36) and refined. Fig. 1 shows the final six treatments.

2.3. Measures

Respondents answered a series of scale items intended to measure their intention to try the food, and their level of food neophobia. Intention to try was measured as the mean of a three items scale adapted from the intention to buy scale used by Aqueveque (2006). Food neophobia was measured as the sum of the Food Neophobia Scale (FNS) developed by Pliner and Hobden (1992). All these scale items were translated into Spanish by two different individuals fluent in English and refined by a third individual all of whom were blind to the research design and objectives. The scales were subsequently tested in a small group of 10 subjects and refined again. Following the measure of the dependent and independent variables, participants respond to a set of items designed to assess the veracity of the level of unfamiliarity and positioning strategy manipulations. For degree of unfamiliarity, manipulation check consisted in a three item scales with straightforward questions. For positioning, manipulation check consisted in three scales, each one of them with two items, aimed to measure the perceived positioning of the advertised product. All the items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 7. Scales items and reliabilities are presented in Table 1. Providing evidence of reliability, coefficients alpha for all the scales were close or above the recommended 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Food neophobia scores ranged from 10 to 56, mean score was 29.41, median 29. In order to divide the sample into food neophobics and neophilics, respondents can be split by various cut-off points. Meiselman, King, and Gillette (2010) recommend using all subjects scoring above the mean as neophobics. In the current study, the split was done by the median of the sample (29), which was close to the mean (29.41). This division resulted in two roughly equal groups, neophilics (n = 94, M = 22.85, SD = 4.94)