



Emotional responses to branded and unbranded foods



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ABSTRACT

Investigating the emotions elicited by a product considering only its sensory characteristics or both its sensory characteristics and packaging/branding can give a deeper insight into product perception and can help companies in the design and optimisation of products that meet consumer expectations. The aim of this study was to (i) measure how liking changes across blind, package (expected) and informed conditions, and (ii) measure how emotions change across blind and informed conditions, in products representing the widest range of sensory variability and brand identity in the market category of hazelnut and cocoa spreads. In the first session participants ($n = 120$) tasted each product in a blind condition, expressed their liking and rated emotions using the *EmoSensio* questionnaire specifically developed for this product category (Spinelli, Masi, Dinnella, Zoboli, & Monteleone, 2014). Then consumers were asked to rate their expected liking for the products, presented in the original packaging by means of photos (pack/expected condition). After one week, consumers tasted each product presented with its own packaging (informed condition), expressed their liking and rated emotions.

Emotions were very discriminating in both conditions: in the informed condition all the emotions significantly varied across samples, while in the blind condition 21 out of 23 (91.3%) varied.

Results showed a correlation between liking (blind, expected and informed) and emotions. Complete assimilation of liking toward expectations was associated to an overall improvement of the emotional performance of the product: positive emotions increased in the case of complete assimilation towards the expectations, while negative emotions decreased. When there was a mismatch between expected liking evoked by packaging and blind liking (disconfirmation) but an assimilation effect was not found, some positive emotions significantly decreased in the informed condition compared to the blind one.

This study suggests the importance of collecting emotion responses in both blind and informed conditions to detect changes in the emotional profile of products due to the brand/packaging providing information useful for product optimisation.

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years, measuring emotions elicited by products in addition to perceptions and preferences for their sensory properties has become more frequent. The reason for this growing interest can be found in the leading role played by emotions in the experience and, consequently, in the choice of products and consumer decisions (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999; Meiselman, 2013; Thomson, 2007). A number of approaches to investigating emotions elicited by products have been developed in the field of sensory and consumer science, making more and more emotions part of the “lexicon” shared by sensory and marketing studies.

Although, they are experienced as a whole, multiple layers can be distinguished in the definition of what constitutes a product: the physical object characterised by a specific sensory identity, the package, the brand name and marketing mix, and the context of usage or consumption (Schifferstein, 2010). Each of these layers can elicit specific emotions and can be attached to different meanings in the mind of consumers. Aligning the emotions communicated by the product (for its intrinsic sensory characteristics) and the pack with branding so that they are consistent augments and strengthens the brand greatly (Krishna, 2010; Lindstrom, 2005). This so-called “SensoEmotional optimisation” (Thomson, 2007) can be developed in two ways: either by aligning the sensory characteristics of the product with the defining emotional characteristics of the brand (brand-first strategy); or by determining in the first place whether or not any of the defining sensory

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characteristics of the products are emotionally active and on this basis completely (re)building, or otherwise re-shaping or augmenting, the brand (product-first strategy). In addition, investigating emotions elicited by the intrinsic sensory characteristics of the products or by its packaging and branding can help manufacturers understand problems in product performance and find out whether the problem lies with one or the other, or in the discrepancy between the two. Thus, products could elicit positive emotions for their sensory characteristics that are not coherent with the emotions elicited by the brand/packaging, or vice versa. Furthermore, periodically measuring the emotional product performance can allow predictions of decreasing acceptability or boredom for the product, which can result in product failing (Köster & Mojet, 2007).

Close attention has always been paid to the measurement of brand perception (in terms of emotions and conceptual contents) in marketing studies. Recently, several studies have investigated the emotions that are elicited by unbranded products within a product category, showing that products elicit emotions for their specific sensory characteristics, in absence of any other information (Cardello et al., 2012; King & Meiselman, 2010; Ng, Chaya, & Hort, 2013a; Porcherot, Delplanque, Gaudreau, & Cayeux, 2013; Spinelli, Masi, Dinnella, Zoboli, & Monteleone, 2014; Thomson & Crocker, 2014a; Thomson, Crocker, & Marketo, 2010). However, the emotions elicited by sensory and branding in combination has rarely been studied and few data have been available to help in understanding how these different product aspects affect consumer emotions, and how these in turn affect product expectations and overall liking (Ng, Chaya, & Hort, 2013b; Thomson & Crocker, 2015).

The role of manipulation of information in creating expectations that guide liking and sensory perception has been extensively studied (Caporale & Monteleone, 2004; Cardello, 2003; Deliza & MacFie, 1996; Kahkonen, Hakanpää, & Tuorila, 1999; Kahkonen & Tuorila, 1998, 1999; Kahkonen, Tuorila, & Rita, 1996; see also Cardello, 2007; Tuorila, Andersson, Martikainen, & Salovaara, 1998; Tuorila, Cardello, & Leshner, 1994 for an overview). Of particular interest are those cases in which there is a mismatch between incoming sensory information and expectations since this can lead to changes in product acceptability (Cardello, 2007). When there is a difference between the blind acceptability (B) and the expected acceptability (E) of a product, a *disconfirmation* occurs. The *disconfirmation* is defined as *positive* when expectations are lower than baseline product quality ($B - E > 0$) and, conversely, is *negative* when expectations are greater than baseline product quality ($B - E < 0$). In case of negative disconfirmation, an *assimilation* – liking moving to meet expectations – occurs if the informed liking is significantly higher than blind liking. The *assimilation* is *complete* if the informed liking is not significantly different from the expected liking, as informed liking scores were closer to the expected scores than the blind scores; inversely, consumers do not completely assimilate towards their expectations when the informed liking is significantly different from the expected liking (Caporale, Policastro, Carlucci, & Monteleone, 2006; Siret & Issanchou, 2000).

A growing number of studies have focused specifically on the impact of packaging in creating expectations. Packages, as a result of their own sensory properties (colours, shapes, etc.), can significantly contribute to build expectations towards the product, influencing liking and sensory perception (Ares & Deliza, 2010; Becker, van Rompay, Schifferstein, & Galetzka, 2011; Carrillo, Varela, & Fiszman, 2012; Delgado, Gomez-Rico, & Guinard, 2013; Labbe, Pineau, & Martin, 2013; Lange, Issanchou, & Combris, 2000; Mizutani et al., 2012; Piqueras-Fiszman, & Spence, 2012; Piqueras-Fiszman, Velasco, Salgado-Montejo, & Spence, 2013; Schifferstein, Fenko, Desmet, Labbe, & Martin, 2013; Schifferstein

& Spence, 2008) and also emotions (Ng et al., 2013b). Furthermore packages can shape expectations since they are an expression of the branding. Brands are perceived by consumers as everything is associated with them: in fact, a brand is defined as a “bundle of information” (Riezebos, 1994) representing a cluster of knowledge, experiences, and emotions that is stored in memory (Van Dam & Van Trijp, 2007). Branding is not a factor that has received relatively much attention in the sensory and consumer science field (Jaeger, 2006), with some exceptions. Several studies have measured the combined effect of brand with other extrinsic cues (e.g. price, package, name) on product evaluation, without aiming to disentangle their relative impact (Di Monaco, Cavella, Di Marzo, & Masi, 2004; Guinard, Uotani, & Schlich, 2001; Lange, Martin, Chabanet, Combris, & Issanchou, 2002; Mueller, Osidacz, Francis, & Lockshin, 2010; Varela, Ares, Giménez, & Gámbaro, 2010); only few attempts were made to investigate the relative influence of branding and packaging on liking (Mueller & Szolnoki, 2010). In fact, packages have often been specially designed for a study and manipulated to create experimental design based on the control of some variables. When existing commercial packages have been used, or the manipulation concerned more variables (e.g. the picture/image on the label), descriptive analysis (Murray & Delahunty, 2000a,b) and semiotic analysis (Ares et al., 2011; Piqueras-Fiszman, Ares, & Varela, 2011) were applied in pre-studies in order to map the differences amongst packages, with the aim to identify which characteristics would convey which expectation.

Investigating the emotions elicited by a product considering only its intrinsic sensory characteristics (blind condition) or both its intrinsic sensory characteristics and its packaging sensory characteristics and branding (informed condition) can give a deeper insight into product perception and can help companies in the design and optimisation of products that meet consumers expectations. This study aimed to: (i) measure how liking change across blind, package (expected) and informed conditions, and (ii) measure how emotions change across blind and informed conditions, in products representing the widest range of sensory variability and brand identity in a market category.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Experimental design

Consumers were asked to rate liking and to identify their emotional responses to six hazelnut and cocoa spreads using the *EmoSemo* questionnaire (Spinelli et al., 2014) under three conditions:

- *Blind condition*: consumers were asked to taste the unbranded products and to evaluate liking and emotions;
- *Expected condition*: consumers were presented with the photo of the packages and their name and were asked to express their expected liking score;
- *Informed condition*: consumers were asked to taste the products and to evaluate liking and emotions with the information of their name and presenting a photo of the package.

2.2. The products

Six commercial hazelnut and cocoa spreads were selected to represent the range of sensory variability and brand identity in the Italian market segment. The products were selected basing on the results of a previous study (Spinelli et al., 2014) in which a larger group of products representing the sensory variability in the hazelnut and cocoa spread category were evaluated using descriptive analysis.

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