



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Food Quality and Preference

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/foodqual

Drink to get drunk or stay healthy? Exploring consumers' perceptions, motives and preferences for light beer

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 January 2012

Received in revised form 19 July 2013

Accepted 19 August 2013

Available online 8 September 2013

Keywords:

Light beer

Alcohol

Perceptions

Motives

Preferences

Best–Worst Scaling method

ABSTRACT

Although low calorie content is perceived as an important choice driver for light food and drink products, in the case of low-alcohol beverages the low alcohol content is equally important. Thus, low-alcohol beverages can be considered either as healthier alternatives, or as substitutes to alcoholic beverages and drinks. This paper investigates consumers' perceptions, motives and preferences for low-alcohol beverages, using light beer as an exemplary case. The Best–Worst Scaling (BWS) is used to measure preferences, while complementary methods are used to measure perceptions and motives. The study is conducted with an online sample of Icelandic beer consumers. The findings show that light beer is perceived as healthier than regular beer, while the most important motives behind purchase are taste, health and weight management. Light beer is further perceived as less tasty, but at the same time healthier, than regular beer, while the most important motives relate to taste, health and weight management. Motives related to the low calorie content are more important than motives related to the low alcohol content. Preferences for light beer are driven mostly by taste, prior experience and brand. Finally, compared to low alcohol content, low calorie content is a more important driver of preferences for light beer.

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1. Introduction

Low-alcohol beverages, such as light beer and reduced-alcohol wine, have gained widespread acceptance in many countries, while forecasts suggest a continuous growth (Euromonitor, 2010a; Euromonitor, 2010b). This growth can be explained in relation to two primary reasons. First, low-alcohol beverages are perceived as a response to alcohol-related control policies (Howley & Young, 1992; Schaefer, 1987; World Health Organisation, 2011). Hence, they form substitutes for regular alcoholic beverages and drinks for consumers who aim to reduce their consumption of alcohol and, in turn, avoid getting drunk. Second, low-alcohol beverages are perceived as a response to the increased prevalence of dietary-related diseases (World Health Organisation, 2003), and increased health awareness among consumers and society at a large (Liverpool John Moores University Centre for Public Health, 2012). Hence, they form healthier alternatives to regular alcoholic beverages and drinks for consumers who aim to maintain a healthy diet.

The above two explanations suggest that consumers' preferences for low-alcohol beverages are driven by two motives: (a) the low alcohol content, which prevents consumers from getting

drunk, and (b) the low calorie content, which helps consumers maintain a healthy diet and manage their weight. Apparently, both motives have their relative importance in influencing consumers' preferences and there is reason to believe that consumers form a trade-off between them. To date, prior consumer research on low-alcohol beverages is scarce and primarily focuses on the case of de-alcoholised wine (d'Hauteville, 1994; Howley & Young, 1992; Meillon, Dugas, Urbano, & Schlich, 2010a). In addition, to the author's knowledge, these two motives have not been explored systematically in a single study.

This paper aims to obtain a deeper understanding of the importance of the two aforementioned motives – low calorie content and low alcohol content – in influencing consumers' preferences for low-alcohol beverages. More specifically, by taking a rather holistic approach, this paper explores consumers' motives, perceptions and preferences for low-alcohol beverages. The study uses light beer as an exemplary case of a low-alcohol beverage, and is conducted with Icelandic consumers of beer.

1.1. Consumer response to low-alcohol beverages

Low-alcohol beverages have been on the market for many years. They offer several benefits for the beverage industry (Porretta & Donadini, 2008), which can be grouped into marketing-related (e.g. enabling distribution and consumption in places in which

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alcohol is not permitted), communication-related (e.g. enabling the promotion of the product and its health benefits), and targeting-related (e.g. expanding the consumer base, such as younger people, females or consumers who do not like the taste of regular alcoholic beverages).

Low alcohol content is among the most important driver for drinking low-alcohol beverages. Consumption of these beverages is recommended at times when alcohol is not desired or is not socially acceptable (Schaefer, 1987; Segal & Stockwell, 2009), and thus are often seen as a response to alcohol control policies (Hellman, 2012). Consequences related to the low alcohol content constitute additional motives, such as avoiding getting drunk and being able to drive (Meillon, Urbano, Guillot, & Schlich, 2010b; Meillon et al., 2010a; Thompson & Thompson, 1996). Nevertheless, these two motives are often strongly interrelated, and are perceived to be almost identical by consumers (Thompson & Thompson, 1996).

Low-alcohol beverages are perceived as a way to reduce the negative health-related consequences caused by consumption of – high-amounts of – alcohol. Weight management and the fact that these beverages are a healthier alternative have often been reported as important motives (Meillon et al., 2010a; Thompson & Thompson, 1996). The origin of these motives can be explained as the result of the fact that low-alcohol beverages belong to the strategic group of light food products (e.g. low-fat, low-sugar). In fact, earlier research postulates that light food products are more healthful than their regular counterparts (Oakes, 2003), and are associated with physical wellbeing, health support and weight management (Niva, Jauho, & Mäkelä, 2013). Overall, health and weight management explain why low-alcohol beverages receive great success among health-conscious consumers (Hill & Casswell, 2004).

Another important motive for consuming low-alcohol beverages relates to taste. Following earlier research which postulates that light food products will be perceived as less tasty (Kähkönen & Tuorila, 1999; Solheim & Lawless, 1996; Stubenitsky, Aaron, Catt, & Mela, 1999), low-alcohol beverages are perceived to be less tasty as well (Porretta & Donadini, 2008). Therefore, lack of taste forms an important drawback for low-alcohol beverages, and has been suggested to influence perceptions of quality (Meillon et al., 2010a). Previous research suggests that, together with health, taste is a more important motive driving preferences for low-alcohol beverages than consequences related to the low alcohol content, such as avoiding getting drunk, and being able to drive (Thompson & Thompson, 1996).

Other drivers of consumer preferences for low-alcohol beverages have been suggested by earlier research conducted on alcoholic beverages, such as cost, mood and occasion (Casini, Corsi, & Goodman, 2009; Goodman, Lockshin, & Cohen, 2007). Moreover, it is argued that, compared to alcohol content, these drivers are more important in influencing consumer preferences (Liverpool John Moores University Centre for Public Health, 2012).

1.2. The light beer market

Light beer is a lower-alcohol and/or lower-calorie beer compared to regular beer. In terms of alcohol content, the definition of light beer varies across countries. In the US, a beer is considered and marketed as light when the alcohol by volume (ABV) is 4.2%; in Australia the ABV must be between 2.2% and 3.2%; and in Canada the ABV should be between 2.6% and 4.0%. These variations often result from country-specific alcohol policies that permit retail stores to sell alcoholic beverages that do not exceed a certain percentage of alcohol content. Finally, light beer has fewer calories due to the low content in terms of carbohydrates and alcohol.

Light beer has received widespread acceptance in many countries, while forecasts suggest a continuous growth (Euromonitor., 2010a; Euromonitor., 2010b). According to Euromonitor's GMID database (www.Euromonitor.com), between 2006 and 2011 global consumption of light beer increased by 47.2% in volume. Looking at different regions, the US showed a significant growth of 175.2%, whereas in Europe this growth was only 7.3%. This growth is evident in the market structure of beer brands. For example, in the US in 2010, among the five biggest brands in terms of market share, four were light beer variants (Euromonitor., 2010b).

In Iceland, where this study took place, the beer market is different to that in other countries due to political, historical and market related reasons (Ólafsdóttir, 2012). Beer was prohibited in 1915 as the result of a referendum in 1908. However, wine began to be legally imported in 1922, and all other alcoholic beverages were imported from 1934 (Gunnlaugsson & Galliher, 1986). The reason for this prohibition was mainly related to controlling alcohol consumption, and the fact that it remained strict for beer was due to the belief that it could be a stepping stone to other, stronger alcoholic beverages (Ólafsdóttir & Leifman, 2002). The ban lasted for 74 years and was lifted in 1989, after a long period of controversial public discourse and political debate (Ólafsdóttir, 2012).

Since the repeal of the ban, alcohol consumption has shifted from strong alcoholic drinks to drinks with a lower amount of alcohol, such as wine and beer. According to Statistics Iceland (www.hagstofa.is), between 1989 and 2007 consumption of spirits reduced from 2.14 l to 1.15 l of alcohol per capita. For the same period, consumption of beer increased from 1.42 l to 3.12 l of alcohol per capita, while beer sales increased from 6.9 million litres to 19.4 million litres. In Iceland, light beer is that which has less than 4.5% ABV; according to the State Alcohol and Tobacco Company of Iceland (www.vinbudin.is), in 2010 the volume market share for this beer type was approximately 13.9%. For regular beer, the ABV ranges from 4.5% to 10%, and the volume market share was 86.1% in 2010.

The Icelandic State has a monopoly on the retail sales of alcoholic beverages and drinks, which are sold in state-run liquor shops (*Vínbúðin*). According to alcohol legislation, since 1998 all advertising of alcohol above 2.25% ABV has been forbidden. In response to this, some breweries have begun to manufacture low-alcohol beer (*"Léttöl"*) with less than 2.25% alcohol content. This type of beer is often used as a way to bypass the advertising prohibition, enabling breweries to promote their regular beer brands, since the word *Léttöl* is part of the family brand name. In fact, both sales and availability of this type of beer are limited. These methods have been controversial, and Iceland has played witness to great debate on the matter (The Icelandic Directorate of Health, 2001).

2. Method

Due to the inductive nature of the study and the absence of prior literature in the field, a qualitative phase preceded the main survey. The purpose of the qualitative phase was to explore perceptions and motives with regards to light beer, and generate a list of attributes by which to measure preferences for light beer during the quantitative phase. All studies took place in Iceland, and material was first translated into Icelandic.

2.1. Semi-structured interviews and pre-test

Five semi-structured interviews were carried out with five Icelandic male respondents, aged between 24 and 30 years old, who frequently consumed light beer. The number of interviews was considered sufficient in order to provide the desired level of

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