

Contents lists available at [SciVerse ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Food Quality and Preference

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

Cross-cultural conceptualization of the words *Traditional* and *Innovation* in a food context by means of sorting task and hedonic evaluation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2011

Received in revised form 5 January 2012

Accepted 21 January 2012

Available online 31 January 2012

Keywords:

Traditional food product

Innovation

Sorting task

Hedonic score

Conceptualization

Consumer

ABSTRACT

Traditional food products (TFPs) are an important element of human culture, identity and heritage. However, their production still relies on traditional manufacturing practices, often with low competitiveness, efficiency and R&D investment. The introduction of innovations could help producers to increase the market share of TFP, although some innovations could have a negative impact on their traditional character and image.

The objective of this study was to understand the meaning of the concepts “Traditional” and “Innovation” in a cross-cultural context by means of a sorting task.

The study was done in four regions of four European countries (Belgium, France, Norway and Spain). A total of 476 participants performed a sorting task with 13 different key words written on cards (one word per card), including the words “Traditional” and “Innovation”. An additional affective evaluation was carried out by each participant by assessing how they perceived each key word in a food context.

The sorting task proved to be an efficient method to conceptualize the words “Traditional” and “Innovation” from a consumer perspective. The affective test complemented the sorting task and helped to better understand the groups obtained. A noticeable incompatibility between the two concepts, “Traditional” and “Innovation” was detected as well as the relative unhealthy character of some traditional food products. The information provided in this study may help producers of TFP to improve the image of this category of foods and to implement potentially successful innovations in the European traditional food sector.

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1. Introduction

Innovation is widely accepted as one of the keys to being successful. However, companies can innovate and still fail if markets are not ready or willing to accept the innovation. According to Stevens and Burley (1997) approximately 3000 new ideas must be generated to have one commercial success. The acceptance or rejection of innovations can be regarded as the result of a complex decision-making process which involves an assessment of the perceived risks/benefits associated with the innovation and with the existing alternatives (Henson, 1995).

In general, the acceptance of an innovation depends on the innovation itself as well as on the carrier product to which it is applied, especially in the food domain (Guerrero et al., 2009). As stated by Moskowitz and Hartmann (2008), the food industry has

a rather slow-moving nature, given that it is not subject to the innovation pressure that other sectors are subjected to. This is particularly accentuated in traditional food products (TFPs) because consumers perceive traditional foods as having a strong distinctive character linked to the cultural heritage (Guerrero et al., 2009, 2010; Trichopoulou, Soukara, & Vasilopoulou, 2007), thus being perceived as something to preserve intact for future generations. This may obviously be contradictory to the idea of innovation.

The traditional food sector in the European Union (EU) consists mainly of Small or Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) (Molnar, Gellynck, Vanhonacker, Gagalyuk, & Verbeke, 2011), representing more than 99% of the companies and about 60% of the employment in the European food and drink industry (CIAA, 2006). Additionally, TFP are an important element of European culture, identity and heritage, thus contributing to the development and sustainability of rural areas and increasing the variety of food choice for consumers. However, the production of traditional food still relies on traditional manufacturing practices, often with low competitiveness

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and poor efficiency (Fito & Toldra, 2006), and usually with low internal investment in research and development (R&D) (Kühne, Vanhonacker, Gellynck, & Verbeke, 2010). Traditional food producers have been recommended to extend their skills in modern production techniques, management and marketing, as well as in promoting the aspects of their products related to nutritional and health issues (European Communities, 2007). In order to maintain and even increase their market share, TFP need to be improved by introducing innovations that fulfill the European consumers' demand for better TFP from different perspectives, including for example health, safety, taste and convenience characteristics (Cayot, 2007). The actual challenge is knowing whether such food innovations will or will not modify the perceived traditional character and image of these products, which could have a negative impact on one of their main competitive advantages, notably their character and image related to tradition, authenticity and heritage.

One of the most appropriated initial approaches for predicting and understanding the potential applicability of an innovation in TFP is to know the meaning that these concepts have in the consumers' minds and their possible incompatibility. Among different options, a sorting task is a user-friendly and straightforward procedure for assessing the perceived similarity/dissimilarity among a set of products or concepts, and it is less tedious and time-consuming than other equivalent methods (Abdi, Valentin, Chollet, & Chrea, 2007). A sorting task is based on categorization which is a natural cognitive process that does not imply any sort of quantification (Lelièvre, Chollet, Abdi, & Valentin, 2008). Categorization, defined as a mental representation used to classify entities, is one of the constituents of the cognitive processes involved in concept formation, but not unique. In fact, concepts seem to depend on multiple functions which interact to affect conceptual structure and processing (Solomon, Medin, & Lynch, 1999). In this sense, the combination of different complementary approaches to categorization (sorting task) might improve the insight and knowledge regarding the concepts examined.

A sorting task is especially useful to obtain perceptual maps with untrained participants, and is therefore of great interest when dealing with naive consumers (Cartier et al., 2006; Faye et al., 2004; Lawless, Sheng, & Knoops, 1995; MacRae, Howgate, & Geelhoed, 1990; Qannari, Cariou, Teillet, & Schlich, 2010). However, the implementation of a sorting task entails particular challenges too. The different identified perceived dimensions might have a clear meaning only for those individuals involved in the study, thus it is necessary to obtain further information from them to better interpret the perceptive space obtained (Faye et al., 2004). In this sense, quite often, after a sorting process, participants are also asked to describe each group made with words. This description can then be projected into the same perceptual map. However, especially when dealing with abstract concepts, this descriptive task may be difficult to perform. According to Prabhu (1987) working with concepts is always more complex than working with the names of objects or actions. In addition, some problems can arise when trying to analyze the vocabulary used to describe the different groups of concepts by untrained participants due to the number of terms to process, high inter-individual variability or lack of precision of the terms used (Lelièvre et al., 2008).

It is important to bear in mind that categorization is a complex process that involves at least two distinct types of processing: integration (finding a relationship that meaningfully links two concepts together, e.g. cow and milk) and comparison (grouping two concepts based on their similarities and differences, e.g. horse and zebra) (Wisniewski, 1996). According to Salomon et al. (1999), concepts cannot be studied through categorization alone; consequently and in order to better understand the group formation of the different products or concepts in a sorting task some additional measures should be included. For example, Abdi et al.

(2007) used the hedonic score and the alcoholic content of different beers to gain knowledge about the differences detected among samples in a sorting experiment. Affective evaluation for the different products or concepts might be another valuable tool to better understand qualitative results (Roininen, Arvola, & Lähteenmäki, 2006) including sorting task.

The overall objective of this study was to gain knowledge about the conceptualization of the words "Traditional" and "Innovation" in a food context by consumers from different European regions, by means of a sorting task, in order to assess their potential incompatibility. In addition, and to better interpret the perceptual maps obtained, the usefulness of a hedonic evaluation was also examined. This approach allowed quantitatively testing the qualitative definition previously obtained for the concept of "Innovation" (Guerrero et al., 2009) and checking the robustness of the concept of "Traditional" reported by Guerrero et al. (2010), through applying a less rational technique such as sorting task. A direct comparison of the two concepts, traditional and innovation, was also envisaged.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The study was carried out in four different regions of four European countries: Flanders in Belgium, Burgundy (Dijon) in France, the counties of Akershus and Østfold in Norway and Catalonia in Spain. Participants were selected within each area or region using a convenient intentional and reasoned sampling with predetermined quota (Pedret, Sanier, García, & Morell, 2003). This sampling method is recommended during exploratory research activities since it allows a gross estimate of the results at a relatively low cost (Pla, 1999). Convenience sampling is frequently used in behavioral science research (Gravetter & Forzano, 2008).

A total of 476 participants were recruited from previous databases and/or through different advertising systems. Participants did not have any relationship with the research centre/university where the test was carried out. The first criterion for selecting the participants was their involvement in decisions regarding food shopping and food preparation at home. Only consumers who stated involvement in these two activities were included. Secondly, the different quotas for selecting participants were age (a minimum of 15% of participants in each decade from 20 to 60 years old) and gender (a minimum of 25% of individuals of each gender within each age group). Next to age and gender as quota control criteria, additional information about education level and number of children was recorded for each participant. Table 1 shows the distribution of the recruited participants per quota and region. In each country, all participants lived in the same geographical area or region. At the recruitment stage, participants were not informed on the specific objective of the study. No mention was made of the words "Traditional" or "Innovation" when recruiting them.

2.2. Procedure

Thirteen different key words were selected as stimuli for this study: traditional, innovation, childhood, natural, ready-to-eat meals, change, good for your health, tasty, variety, quality, origin, food habits and technology. The key words were selected by open discussion of the researchers involved in this activity and based on the results of 12 focus group discussions carried out previously. The selected words were those linked to the different dimensions obtained in these focus groups for both concepts (four dimensions for "Traditional" namely habit/natural, origin/locality, processing/elaboration and sensory properties; and five dimensions for "Innovation" specifically novelty/change, variety, processing/technol-

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