



General image and attribute perceptions of traditional food in six European countries

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the image of traditional food at pan-European and national levels in six countries: Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, Poland and Spain. A consumer survey about traditional food products (TFP) was conducted. The respondents ($n = 4828$) indicated their personal general opinion and feelings about TFP and characterised TFP according to 15 intrinsic and extrinsic product attributes. Traditional food is found to have a unanimously positive general image across Europe. The main patterns of product attribute perceptions are coherent in the six countries. The results show that European consumers trade-off the relative expensiveness and time-consuming preparation of traditional food for the specific taste, quality, appearance, nutritional value, healthiness and safety they find in TFP. Further, the general image of TFP relates to attributes typical of a festive consumption of traditional foods rather than a consumption of daily character. The implications of our findings for the future market of traditional food are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Product image has a powerful influence on consumer behaviour. Studies on brand image have shown that brand exposure impacts on our product choice behaviour (Guinard, Uotani, & Schlich, 2001; Pohjanheimo & Sandell, 2009) and even on our overall behaviour (Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008). Marketers have long exploited the power of brand image to sell their products, and there is an emergence of marketing efforts focusing on whole product categories, such as campaigns inviting to a daily consumption of fruits and vegetables, for example in Norway and France. A positive image creates positive consumer expectations, which in turn may lead to product purchase. According to Deliza and MacFie (1996), it is necessary that consumers' expectations are met upon product consumption to yield satisfaction and ensure re-purchase of the product. If consumers' expectations fail to be met, a negative disconfirmation occurs and the product might never be purchased again. Consequently, in order to be successful on the market a product or product category needs to both benefit from a positive general image and offer product qualities that match or surpass consumers' expectations. These two pieces of information, i.e., image and

perception of product attributes, are therefore important to collect and study.

This paper investigates the general image of traditional food products (TFP). TFP have per definition a long history on the food market, and accordingly every consumer has a relationship to this product category. Published definitions of traditional foods include temporal, territorial and cultural dimensions (Bertozzi, 1998; EU, 2006; Jordana, 2000), the idea of a transmission from generation to generation (EU, 2006; Trichopoulou, Soukara, & Vasilopoulou, 2007) and, more recently, elaborative statements about traditional ingredients, traditional composition and traditional production and/or processing (Weichselbaum, Benelam, & Soares Costa, 2009). These definitions take source in food professionals' perspectives, but do not necessarily correspond to consumers' envision of traditional food. Consumer studies on traditional food have recently been conducted in order to define and characterise the concept of TFP seen from a European consumers' perspective (Guerrero et al., 2009, 2010; Vanhonacker, Verbeke, et al., 2010). According to Vanhonacker, Verbeke, et al. (2010), European consumers define traditional foods as "frequently consumed or associated to specific celebrations and/or seasons, transmitted from one generation to another, made in a specific way according to the gastronomic heritage, naturally processed, distinguished and known because of their sensory properties and associated to a certain local area, region or country". This definition reflects the broadness of TFP as

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a concept, and a large amount of subjectivity is shown in European consumers' definition of TFP (Vanhonacker, Verbeke, et al., 2010). Further, when investigating the association between traditional food consumption and motives for food choice in Europe, Pieniak, Verbeke, Vanhonacker, Guerrero, and Hersleth (2009) found healthiness and convenience constructs to have significant negative associations with traditional food consumption, while familiarity and natural content constructs showed positive significant associations. These results corroborate Vanhonacker, Lengard, Hersleth, and Verbeke (2010) whom in their work of profiling European traditional food consumers found that the attitudes and behaviours of traditional food consumers significantly differed from those of non-traditional food consumers in diverse domains including health, cooking, food shopping, convenience and ethnocentrism. These publications give information about European consumers' definition of, associations to and consumption attitudes for TFP, but they neither give information about the standing and the reputation of TFP in the food market, nor about the consumers' perceptions of TFP attributes.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal the general image of traditional food in six geographically spread European countries, and to explore consumers' perceptions of specific product attributes of TFP covering a selection of sensory, health, ethics, purchasing and convenience factors. Correlations between the overall image of TFP and the attributes perceptions will be examined in a multivariate approach. By mapping consumers' perception and overall evaluation of TFP, insight will be gained on consumers' expectations and intention to purchase this product category, and relevant information will be gathered with respect to future product positioning and marketing communications.

To achieve our goal, cross-cultural data collected from Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, Poland and Spain were studied. The selection of countries was done with the aim to cover the geographical North–South and East–West axes of Europe. As these data contain a high amount of collinearity, and as our purpose invites for an exploratory approach, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and Partial Least Squares Regression (PLSR) multivariate modelling were used. Because these models do not require any hard-modelling inputs from the researcher, such that no assumptions on data relationships are required, they have been applied extensively in sensory and consumer hedonic studies. PLSR in particular is said to be a versatile and cognitive method (Martens, 2001), yet it has remained largely out of the scene when it comes to the analysis of consumer attitudinal and behavioural data (for an exception, see Vanhonacker, Lengard, et al. (2010)), where the stepwise linear regression and PLS Path Modelling (PLS-PM) methods are more of-

ten used (Guinot, Latreille, & Tenenhaus, 2001; Tenenhaus, Vinzi, Chatelin, & Lauro, 2005). A side-objective of this paper will be to illustrate the possibilities of using PCA and PLSR on attitudinal consumer survey data, and possibly to raise an interest in these methods among food consumer researchers.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research approach and sampling

Quantitative descriptive data were collected in October–November 2007 through a cross-sectional self-administered consumer survey with samples representative for age, gender and region in Norway, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy and Poland. The age range of the population was defined as 20–70 years. The total sample size was 4828 respondents, i.e., around 800 respondents in each of the six considered European countries. Participants were randomly selected from the representative TNS European Online Access Panel (Malhotra & Peterson, 2006) in line with the national population distributions with respect to age, gender and region.

Detailed socio-demographic characteristics of the national and pooled samples are provided in Table 1. Gender is equally distributed, which reflects that the population was intentionally not restricted to the main responsible person for food purchasing. Age distributions, mean age and mean household sizes match closely with the national census data of the respective countries. Table 1 also presents an indicator of socio-economic class, which was a subjective assessment of the household's financial situation (Chittleborough, Baum, Taylor, & Hiller, 2008). The measurement was given on a seven-point interval scale ranging from "difficult" to "well off". Subdivisions were made between respondents who perceived their financial situation as rather unsatisfactory (answering 1, 2 or 3 on the seven-point scale), moderate (answering 4) or satisfactory (answering 5, 6 or 7). Although this subjective measure may not necessarily reflect the actual financial situation or socio-economic class of the households, its distribution suggests that different socio-economic classes were represented in the sample. The sample is slightly biased towards higher education, which may be attributed to the use of an electronic data collection method.

2.2. Measurement and scaling

The questionnaire consisted of five sections: (1) behavioural and attitudinal items relating to food purchasing in general, (2) items probing for consumers' definition, attitude and perceptions

Table 1
Selected socio-demographic characteristics of the samples.

	Pooled sample (n = 4828)	Norway (n = 798)	Belgium (n = 826)	France (n = 801)	Spain (n = 800)	Italy (n = 800)	Poland (n = 803)
<i>Gender (%)</i>							
Female	49.2	49.1	49.4	51.9	47.4	47.3	50.2
Male	50.8	50.9	50.6	48.1	52.6	52.7	49.8
<i>Age (years)</i>							
<35	34.1	34.1	28.5	33.7	35.5	35.0	37.9
35–55	46.4	47.5	46.4	46.4	47.4	45.8	44.8
>55	19.5	18.4	25.1	19.9	17.1	19.2	17.3
Mean	41.5	41.4	43.7	41.4	40.7	41.2	40.6
S.D.	12.8	12.5	13.3	12.8	12.3	12.8	12.8
<i>Household size (number)</i>							
Mean	2.9	2.6	2.7	2.7	3.1	3.2	3.0
S.D.	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.4
<i>Financial situation (%)</i>							
Difficult – moderate	24.6	24.8	17.8	35.5	18.9	29.8	21.3
Moderate	32.1	31.5	28.6	32.5	36.2	32.8	31.0
Moderate – well off	43.3	43.7	53.6	32.0	44.9	37.4	47.7

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