



Linking sensory characteristics to emotions: An example using dark chocolate

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ABSTRACT

The conceptual profile of an unbranded product arises via three sources of influence: (i) category effect – how consumers conceptualise the product category; (ii) sensory effect – how the sensory characteristics of a particular product differentiate it from other products in the category; (iii) liking effect – the disposition of consumers to the category and how much they like a particular product. Assuming that category effects (conceptualisation and disposition) are constant across the set of products, it is anticipated that the conceptual differences apparent across the set of unbranded products would be driven, at least in part, by sensory differences. This study describes the application of best–worst scaling to conceptual profiling of unbranded dark chocolates and outlines novel data modelling procedures used to explore sensory/conceptual relationships.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Conceptualisation

We become aware of all objects via our peripheral senses. The incoming sensory information is processed in the mind and consequently the nature of the object becomes apparent to us. The identity that we assign to this object (e.g. 'it's chocolate') is based largely on learning.

With increasing familiarity, we make associations between the identity of a particular object and other conceptual associations held in the mind. For example we may think that chocolate is 'comforting', 'fattening', 'will help me to relax', 'is a treat' and so forth. Some of these conceptual associations are learned from external sources (including marketing, advertising and hearsay) and some are based on internal experiences. The notion of being *comforting*, *fattening*, *relaxing*, *a treat* are all conceptualisations; i.e. constructions created in the mind that allow us to interpret, understand and otherwise assign meaning to what we experience.

Inevitably, the identity of the object ('it's chocolate') and the associated conceptualisations ('it's comforting', 'it's fattening', 'it's relaxing', 'it's a treat') coalesce and become as-one in the mind of the individual. This means that when we experience a product, we don't just react to the product itself but also to the associated

conceptualisations. It's via this route that sensory characteristics, which are intrinsic to the product and therefore part of its identity, become linked with conceptualisations. This is represented in Fig. 1.

Conceptualisations, although infinitely diverse can be reduced down to three broad categories; functional (e.g. 'will refresh me', 'will wash my clothes cleaner', 'will kill germs', etc.), emotional (e.g. 'will make me happy', 'will calm me', 'will annoy me', etc.) and abstract (e.g. 'is sophisticated', 'is trustworthy', 'is feminine', etc.) conceptualisations. Some abstract conceptualisations may impact on our emotions. For example, choosing a product that consumers conceptualise as sophisticated could promote feelings of 'being classy', 'being superior', 'being successful', etc. In other words, sophisticated (abstract conceptualisation) has emotional connotations that may, in turn, lead to emotional consequences. Likewise, if a product is conceptualised as trustworthy (for example) this may be based, at least in part, on that product's reputation for being 'full of goodness', implying perhaps that the product might be 'wholesome' or otherwise 'good for you' (functional conceptualisations). As a consequence, trustworthiness has functional connotations although it has emotional connotations too.

This suggests that abstract conceptualisations are analogous to stepping stones that lead eventually to emotional and/or functional conceptualisations and that all conceptualisations may eventually fall into one or other of two categories (Thomson, 2010):

- Conceptualisations that have immediate or eventual emotional connotations (emotionality).
- Conceptualisations that have immediate or eventual functional connotations (functionality).

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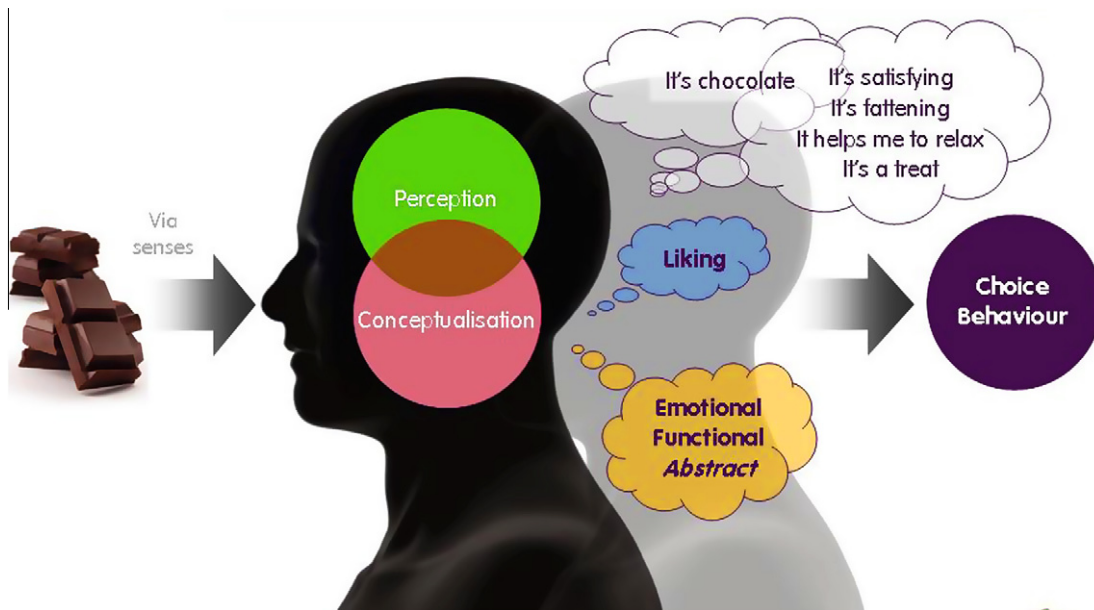


Fig. 1. Perception and conceptualisation.

1.2. Emotional consequences vs. emotional conceptualisations

It is generally recognised that the product itself, and not just the branding, the packaging or the manner in which it is presented, can have emotional consequences. Aligning the emotional messages communicated by the product and the pack with branding so that they are consonant, augments and strengthens the brand greatly (Lindstrom, 2005).

Measuring the emotional consequences engendered by unbranded products is often futile because they may be subtle, may occur some time later and may not be immediately apparent to the person concerned. As a consequence, most 'emotional measurement' tools don't access emotional consequences but emotional conceptualisations (or emotional associations). This means that when someone tells us that a product makes them feel 'happy', 'passionate', etc., it's more likely that they are reflecting what the product is communicating to them (emotional conceptualisations) rather than doing to them (emotional consequences). This distinction is important, especially when developing measurement processes.

1.3. Measuring conceptual associations

Three practical problems are often encountered when attempting to capture and measure conceptual associations:

- (i) Some conceptualisations are readily accessible, others less so, whilst some may be completely hidden to us (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Research participants can usually allude quickly to conceptualisations that are readily accessible to them but, when stumped to explain why they chose something, the rational part of the mind automatically takes over and they unwittingly look for logical associations (Ariely, 2008). Whilst these associations may seem plausible and intuitive, sometimes they will have little or no bearing on reality.
- (ii) People form an impression very quickly and easily about whether or not they like something and to what extent, without necessarily needing to stop and think about what the object is or what it means to them (Zajonc, 1980). In this context, liking is defined (by the authors) as the immediate

enjoyment experienced when consuming and otherwise interacting with the product or object in question. Unfortunately, liking may have a pernicious effect on the ability of researchers to access the deeper and less accessible yet highly influential conceptualisations triggered by an object. This is because the easiest and sometimes the only option open to research participants is to associate positive conceptualisations or images with things that they like and, conversely, negative conceptualisations or images with things that they dislike. This 'easy way out' prevents researchers from accessing the true but often hidden conceptualisations associated with the object and it is one of the reasons why ratings of emotion terms and liking are often correlated.

- (iii) Some of the most influential conceptualisations may seem counterintuitive. For example, it isn't obvious that the taste of dark chocolate would engender 'trustworthiness', and it would seem counterintuitive to ask consumers about this directly (i.e. 'How trustworthy does this chocolate taste?') yet 'trustworthiness' is one of the key conceptualisations engendered by the taste of dark chocolate (see below).

The challenge for researchers is to develop methods that probe beyond what is obvious, apparently intuitive and otherwise associated with immediate liking, to access the deeper conceptualisations that genuinely influence choice and to do so without creating distortions or aberrations.

1.4. Accessing conceptualisations using words and best-worst scaling

Words carry both literal and metaphorical (figurative) meaning. For example, the literal meaning of the word trustworthy is 'worthy of trust' or 'something that can be relied upon' but the word also carries metaphorical meaning that extends well beyond this. It is this mixture of literal and metaphorical meaning that brings such richness to language. Combinations of words bring both subtlety of meaning and precision. As a consequence, the spoken, sung and written word has evolved into the most widely used medium in everyday life for communicating feelings and experiences.

Paradoxically, the use of words in emotion research is often criticised because it is assumed, quite wrongly, that in so doing each word should be associated with some form of measurement scale.

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