

Exploring consumers' perceptions of local food with two different qualitative techniques: Laddering and word association

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Abstract

In recent years, a growing number of consumers in Finland have started to show interest in the origin of the foods they eat. Although the concept of local food has been launched to describe food produced near the consumer, it is not yet well-defined and consumers may understand it in different ways. The aim of the study was to establish the personal values, meanings and specific benefits consumers relate to local food products by comparing two different qualitative interview techniques: laddering and word association methods. Product names, presented as cards for participants, were used as stimulus material. In the word association ($n = 25$), four product categories (general term, fresh pork meat, marinated pork slices, and pork sausage) and of four types of production method or production location (locally, organically, conventionally and intensively produced) were presented. In laddering ($n = 30$), the production methods were the same as in the word association method, with the exception that there were only two product categories, instead of four. The content analysis of the participants' responses resulted in very similar categories in both studies, such as "quality", "locality", "vitality of rural areas", "short transportation distances", "freshness", and "animal well-being". Only the laddering study, however, revealed cognitive structures, i.e., links between such constructs as "short transport" and "animal welfare". Word association was found to be an efficient and rapid method for gathering information on consumer perceptions of local foods. Laddering interviews, which were time-consuming and required laborious analysis, provided us with important information on the relationship between perceived attributes and the reasons for choices.

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1. Introduction

Interest in the origin of foods and in the production method has increased among Finnish consumers in recent years. The concept of local food has been launched to describe local food systems or short food chains where the food is produced near the consumer; this could contribute to rural development and labor markets to promote local economies (Urban–Rural Interaction, 2001). This concept is not, however, well-defined

yet, due to which it can mean different things to different consumers. It is not clear what consumers exactly appreciate in local foods and whether these valuations differ from those that they associate with organic foods. In order to promote marketing possibilities for local foods, it is important that we understand how consumers perceive the concept of local food and what advantages or disadvantages and values they relate to the concept.

In the case of a new concept, qualitative methods are suitable tools for revealing how consumers view and perceive that concept. Word association techniques, which are commonly applied in psychology, are qualitative methods that could serve as quick and convenient

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tools in exploring consumer perceptions for new and undefined concepts such as local food. Word association may be less laborious than many other qualitative methods, such as personal interviews. Most importantly, indirect associative techniques are able to grasp affective and less conscious aspects of respondents' mindsets better than methods that use more direct questioning (Szalay & Deese, 1978). Based on the expectancy-value theories of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980), the most salient associations or beliefs that the consumers has about the attitude object in question are the best predictors of the consumer's behaviour related to that attitude object. Thus, the associations that first come to the respondent's mind are the ones that should be the most relevant for consumer choice and product purchase. Slovic et al. (1991) and Benthin et al. (1995) have demonstrated an application of a word association technique where respondents are asked, not only about their associations, but also to score their responses as regards to their valuations. Thus, the method applied in this fashion provides both a qualitative understanding of the beliefs behind the attitudes as well as quantitative estimates of the attitude valence (unfavourable/favourable). At its best, this method could provide fast and convenient tool for exploring the motives behind food choice. At its worst, though, it could provide results that are shallow and difficult to interpret.

Laddering interviews are another qualitative method that can provide both the perceptions of the local food concept and a comprehensive investigation of the structure of the concepts that are relevant for the respondent. It provides a method that can capture the salient attributes of product choices, which then lead to the benefits and values that these attributes signify to a person. It is based on the means-end theory, which is a model of the consumers' cognitive structures that focuses on how product attributes (the "means") are linked to self-relevant consequences and personal values (the "ends") (Olson, 1989; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Laddering provides a rich and useful understanding of consumers' perceptions of products and the basis for their purchase decisions. The advantage of the laddering technique over other qualitative approaches is that the meanings in a means-end chain are personally relevant; therefore, laddering could provide results that are more closely related to preference and choice behaviour (Olson, 1989). This approach has previously been shown to be useful tool in analysing consumer behaviour in the food domain (Baker, Thompson, & Engelken, 2004; Grunert et al., 2001; Makatouni, 2002; Nielsen, Bech-Larsen, & Grunert, 1998; Roininen, Lähteenmäki, & Tuorila, 2000; Urala & Lähteenmäki, 2003).

The aim of this study was to establish the personal values, meanings and specific benefits consumers relate to local food products by comparing word association and laddering methods as elicitation techniques.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

This study consisted of two parts: word association and laddering interviews. Both parts were conducted in two different locations, Mikkeli and Espoo, in Finland. Mikkeli is a small town in eastern Finland and Espoo is part of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. Espoo was chosen to represent an urban area that is far from production and Mikkeli to represent as location that is in the middle of a rural, agricultural area. For the word association interviews ($n = 25$; 15 participants from Espoo and 10 from Mikkeli; 40% of which were males and 60%, females), the mean age of the participants in Espoo was 39 (range: 19–68) and in Mikkeli, 42 (range: 18–68). In the laddering interviews ($n = 30$; 15 participants in Espoo and 15 participants in Mikkeli; 54% of which were males and 46%, females), the mean age of the participants in Espoo was 49 (range: 18–67) and in Mikkeli, 44 (range: 20–64).

2.2. Word association

The applied method relies on the word association method demonstrated by Slovic et al. (1991) and Benthin et al. (1995). It involves presenting subjects with a target stimulus and asking them to provide the first thoughts or images that come to mind. In this study, the target stimuli were written descriptions of pork meat products. The descriptions were combinations of three types of products with varying levels of processing (fresh pork meat, marinated pork slices, and pork sausage) and of four types of production method or production location (locally, organically, conventionally and intensively produced), such as "locally produced sausage" or "conventionally produced marinated pork slices". In addition, the four production methods were presented as general descriptions without any reference to a specific product, e.g., "organically produced food". Each of the ($n = 25$) respondents were shown (4×4) 16 cards, one at a time, in a random order. The respondents were asked to write down the first four images, associations, thoughts or feelings that came to mind. After going through the 16 stimulus descriptions, the participant was asked to rate each association that he or she had written on the questionnaire on a scale from 1 (very negative/bad) to 5 (very positive/good). At the end, the participants answered a few background questions about their age, gender, education, and familiarity of terms local and organic food (on scale from 1 = very unfamiliar to 5 = very familiar).

The data were collected in Espoo and Mikkeli during autumn 2003. In both places, the interviews took place in coffeehouses. After completing the task, each respondent received a gift voucher, ranging in value from EUR

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