



# Attribute importance segmentation of Norwegian seafood consumers: The inclusion of salient packaging attributes



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## ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to identify consumer segments based on the importance of product attributes when buying seafood for homemade meals on weekdays. There is a particular focus on the relative importance of the packaging attributes of fresh seafood. The results are based on a representative survey of 840 Norwegian consumers between 18 and 80 years of age. This study found that taste, freshness, nutritional value and naturalness are the most important attributes for the home consumption of seafood. Except for the high importance of information about expiration date, most other packaging attributes have only medium importance. Three consumer segments are identified based on the importance of 33 attributes associated with seafood: Perfectionists, Quality Conscious and Careless Consumers. The Quality Conscious consumers feel more self-confident in their evaluation of quality, and are less concerned with packaging, branding, convenience and emotional benefits compared to the Perfectionists. Careless Consumers are important as regular consumers of convenient and pre-packed seafood products and value recipe information on the packaging. The seafood industry may use the results provided in this study to strengthen their positioning of seafood across three different consumer segments.

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## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on the relative importance of product attributes as the basis for consumer segmentation. The importance that consumers attach to different product attributes is a good indicator of underlying motives when consumers wish to buy or consume products or services for general or specific purposes or goals. Despite the theoretical and practical relevance of segmentation based on attribute importance, it is rarely applied in the food domain (Verain, Aijtsema, & Antonides, 2016).

Consumers' food evaluations and choice depend on the type of product (Verain et al., 2016) and the type of context (Edwards, Meiselman, Edwards, & Lesher, 2003; Jaeger, Bava, Worch, Dawson, & Marshall, 2011). Because the importance of attributes may differ between different food contexts, this study examines attribute importance when consumers want to buy seafood for

home preparation and consumption for their everyday main meals (Monday-Friday). About 80% of the seafood consumed in Norway is consumed at home (Norwegian Seafood Council).

The seafood industry is considered to be less innovative in marketing, branding and new product and new packaging development compared to, for example, the meat and chicken industry in Norway. Packaging has an important role in influencing in-store purchasing decisions (Liao, Corsi, Chrysochou, & Lockshin, 2015), and more and more fresh seafood is sold as chilled pre-packed fillets in various packing materials and formats in supermarkets. In a recent review of what motivates consumers to buy fish and seafood, Carlucci et al. (2015) confirmed that packaging attributes seem not to have received enough attention by researchers. Taking into account the relatively low consumption of seafood among some segments of consumers (e.g., young consumers), it is advantageous to achieve a better understanding of similarities and differences among segments. Thus, this study aims to provide more detailed knowledge about the evaluation of product and packaging attribute importance across different consumer segments, allowing for a more efficient differentiating and marketing strategy for the seafood industry.

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This study contributes to the existing food segmentation literature by analyzing the relative importance of 33 attributes derived from previous studies on food choice in general (Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995), and seafood in particular (Carlucci et al., 2015). For example, Onwezen et al. (2012; 285) focused on intrinsic attributes of food (e.g., taste, nutritional value and convenience) and not on extrinsic attributes (e.g., packaging, labels, brand). Also, Verain et al. (2016; 105) ask for a broader set of attributes to be used in consumer segmentation of food. Thus, this study's inclusion of a wide range of packaging attributes for segmentation purposes is an extension of the extant literature (Ares, Besio, Giménez, & Deliza, 2010; Mueller & Szolnoki, 2010; Onwezen et al., 2012; Verain et al., 2016; Verbeke, Vermeir, & Brunsø, 2007). Another contribution is the introduction of some new profiling variables such as price-quality inference (Campbell, DiPietro, & Remar, 2014; Völckner & Hofmann, 2007) and attitudes towards luxury foods (Dubois, Czellar, & Laurent, 2005; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), not to our knowledge previously used for profiling food consumer segments. A discussion of the selection and categorization of attributes and profiling variables used in this study is presented in the following sections.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Categorization of attributes for everyday main meals of seafood

Attributes are here defined as those characteristics of products or services that consumers find relevant as predictors of the desired consumption experience (Smith & Deppa, 2009). Attribute importance segmentation is an attitudinal approach to identify consumers' motivation to buy or consume (Verain et al., 2016). Prior to consumption, such as going into a store to buy ingredients for home meal consumption, consumers base their attribute evaluation on the expected benefits from the products they consider and buy. The links between expected attribute performance, benefits and values link the perception of products to the basic motivation emanating from a consumer's value system (Grunert, 2010; Gutman, 1982).

Technical, functional and informative *packaging attributes* are given a specific focus in this study. Packaging has an important role in influencing in-store purchasing decisions, especially for food products where purchase decisions are characterized by low involvement, habits or impulsive processes (Liao et al., 2015). Nowadays, more and more fresh seafood is sold as chilled pre-packed fillets in various packing materials and formats in supermarkets compared to the traditional fresh fish counters and fish shops. In Norway, the salmon industry has been the innovator in the seafood segment. This has increased consumption of prepacked salmon fillets from 106 tonnes in 2005 to 4146 tonnes in 2015 (Norwegian Seafood Council<sup>1</sup>). During the last 2–3 years, suppliers and distributors of chilled cod fillets and other fish (e.g., pollock, halibut) have started to copy the success of the salmon industry. In a recent review of what motivates consumers to buy fish and seafood, Carlucci et al. (2015) concluded that packaging attributes do not have received enough attention by researchers. Only two studies are included in their review. For example, Birch and Lawley (2012) found that a majority (50–60%) of regular fish consumers in Australia preferred to buy unpacked seafood because of price, freshness and local origin. The remaining consumers wanted packaged fish because of availability/convenience and availability of information on assurance of freshness (use-by date), assurance of quality (branding), price per portion, etc. Packaging attributes used in this study include the size, visual characteristics (design, colour,

visibility of the core product), labelling (recipe, shelf life, product information) and whether the package signals a well-known brand (Jinkarn & Suwannaporn, 2015; Koutsimanis, Getter, Behe, Harte, & Almenar, 2012; Liao et al., 2015; Verbeke et al., 2007).

Freshness, taste and nutritional value are considered to be three of the most important attributes associated with a general perception of the *quality* of fish or seafood (Carlucci et al., 2015; Olsen, 2004). Some studies have investigated the associations consumers have with freshness in food consumption (Østli, Esaiassen, Garitta, Nøstvold, & Hough, 2013). Common associations to freshness are “minimally processed”, “close to original form”, “natural” and “healthy” (Zhang, Lusk, Miroso, & Oey, 2016). Its meaning differs across products and situations (Heenan, Hamid, Dufour, Harvey, & Delahunty, 2009). Thus, freshness is complex because it involves interactions with other aspects of product quality. This study measures the importance of quality attributes by asking respondents for their evaluation of “mild taste”, “natural taste”, and “fresh smell” in addition to the traditional quality benefits such as “good taste”, “good quality” and “pleasant experience” (Carlucci et al., 2015). For example, “mild taste” is used to promote codfish in Norway. To assess nutritional benefits, this study uses “healthy”, “nutritious” and “natural – without additives” (Aikman, Crites, & Fabrigar, 2006; Carlucci et al., 2015).

Consumers' desire to save time and effort, seems to be more and more important, and especially during busy weekdays (Buckley, Cowan, & McCarthy, 2007), and leads to the importance of convenience-related attributes. Fish and seafood are among foods that many consumers perceived to be inconvenient compared to other protein sources (Olsen, Scholderer, Brunso, & Verbeke, 2007). In addition to traditional convenience attributes (fast, easy and in-store availability), this study also includes attributes specific for some seafood products. Consumers often feel that fish is problematic to prepare because of smell/odour and spill/dripping. In addition, bones make it inconvenient to prepare and problematic to consume (Olsen et al., 2007). Thus, this study also included those attributes.

*Affective, emotional and exclusivity* attributes are becoming increasingly important for competitive advantage in food markets, because most products are similar with respect to standard quality, convenience and price (Schifferstein, Fenko, Desmet, Labbe, & Martin, 2013). Desmet and Schifferstein (2008) have measured emotions with positive and negative words in two main dimensions; pleasant and unpleasant. This study includes two positive affective/emotional attributes (“exciting/enjoyable” and “popular/desirable”) and one negative affective/emotional attribute (“feeling guilt/shame”). In addition, we include “exclusivity” to assess an association with premium or luxury (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Finally, this study includes three attributes associated with price and value; “low priced, fair priced and value for money” (Xia, Monroe, & Cox, 2004). Fig. 1 categorizes and summarizes the 33 different attributes used in this study.

### 2.2. Associations with general attitudinal and motivational variables

Individual differences in consumer attribute importance are suggested to be related to more general attitudinal and motivational variables. In accordance with previous research, this study includes *product involvement* (Ares et al., 2010; Verbeke et al., 2007), *product knowledge* (Rortveit & Olsen, 2007), *health involvement* (Onwezen et al., 2012), *willingness to pay* (Bredert, Hahsler, & Reutterer, 2006), and *product preferences/evaluation* (Mueller & Szolnoki, 2010) as profiling variables. In addition, we also measure *frequency of consumption* (Koutsimanis et al., 2012; Verbeke et al., 2007). A combination of these variables has previously

<sup>1</sup> These data have been retrieved from the Norwegian Seafood Council at <https://seafood.no/markedsinnsikt/>.

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