



Yogurt's flexible image during its rise in popularity in post-war Belgium



Jon Verriet ^{a, *}, Frédéric Leroy ^b

^a Food Studies Research Group (FOST), Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

^b Research Group of Industrial Microbiology and Food Biotechnology (IMDO), Faculty of Sciences and Bioengineering Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 July 2016

Received in revised form

2 September 2016

Accepted 24 September 2016

Available online 26 September 2016

Keywords:

Yogurt

Marketing

Product differentiation

Health food

Advertisements

Women's magazines

ABSTRACT

The consumption of yogurt in Western countries has risen for over a century, first slowly, then more rapidly. The purpose of the present study was to investigate this prolonged phase of growth, by examining the popularity and the projected image of yogurt. A particular focus was on the way these aspects were reflected in consumption patterns and media representations. The data showed how during its period of rapid popularization, yogurt's visibility in the media greatly increased. It was concluded that the product's image was highly flexible in post-war decades, evidenced by the multi-pronged approach taken by marketers. Yogurt was not only advertised as both tasty and healthy, but also as natural and convenient, a strategy that appears to have been informed by consumers' preferences and existing cultural values. This demonstrates how a high degree of product differentiation and diversification during a product's growth stage can result in a heterogeneous image, allowing for a broad range of marketing strategies.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Since its introduction to Western European and U.S. markets over a century ago, yogurt's rising consumption has been remarkable, now being part of everyday life for many Westerners (Tamime & Robinson, 2007). As such, it is a unique dairy product, with a Product Life Cycle (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013) that is significantly stretched and shows little signs of decline. Yet while there is an extensive literature on the preferences and the lifestyles of contemporary yogurt consumers (e.g., Ares, Giménez, & Deliza, 2010; Mawad, Trias, Giménez, Maiche, & Ares, 2015; Possa, de Castro, Marchioni, Fisberg, & Fisberg, 2015; Vecchio, van Loo, & Annunziata, 2016), the product's extraordinary history has often been neglected by scholars. Monographs on yogurt, generally written by food scientists instead of historians, limit their attention to its millennia-old origins (e.g., Chandan, 2007; Tamime & Robinson, 2007). Some smaller works focus on the ancient past of yogurt as part of the 'fermented milk complex' within the region stretching from the South coast of the Mediterranean to Central

Asia (Fisberg & Machado, 2015; Gouin, 1997; James, 1975, p. 32; Nair & Prajapati, 2003). However yogurt's prodigious commercial successes have hardly been broached in scholarly works, two exceptions being an article by Spiekermann (2009) and a PhD thesis by Stoilova (2014). The latter corroborates the above by judging the historiography of yogurt to be 'small and specialized' and 'underdeveloped in applying a broader social analysis to the historical facts' (Stoilova, 2014, p. 22). Spiekermann mostly focuses on the limited pre-war success of yogurt in Germany, while Stoilova provides a technological history, and details the promotion of yogurt as a specifically *Bulgarian* product. She succeeds in laying bare the intricate relations between scientists, governmental agencies, manufacturers, and consumers that resulted in yogurt's complex image. However, she fails, like Spiekermann, to account for the post-war advance of the product in Western countries, and the role of marketers in that process.

The purpose of the present study, then, was to investigate the historical popularity and the image of yogurt in Belgium, as reflected in consumption patterns, media representations, and marketing reports. First and foremost, such an analysis can offer insight into historical food marketing: what strategies were deployed, and why? Secondly, this study's aim was to help understand historical consumer preferences, which have both been shaped by, and have

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Jon.Verriet@vub.ac.be (J. Verriet), Frederic.Leroy@vub.ac.be (F. Leroy).

shaped, producers' successes and failures. Examining the complex role of media and other cultural mediators in food discourses reminds us that food consumption is influenced by more than just economics (Cronin, 2004; Oldenziel & de la Bruhèze, 2009, pp. 9–39), but also determined by the immediate concerns of a society and its tastemakers (Trubek, 2008).

Belgium is a country that holds a cultural, social, economic and political 'intermediate position' in Europe (Scholliers, 2009, p. 2). Its post-war food industry and consumption patterns saw trends comparable to those of Northwestern Europe in general: a *Green Revolution*, the internationalization of consumer goods, the popularization of convenience foods, and an increasing prominence of cookery and food products in media by way of both editorial content and advertising and commercials (Geyzen, 2014). Focus for this study was on the period 1950–1980. Although yogurt consumption kept rising after 1980 to a current per capita consumption of 16.5 kg per year (GfK Belgium, 2016), this 30-year period is taken as the vital phase within yogurt's ongoing growth stage. It corresponds with a rapid increase in sales volume and increasing public awareness of the product (Van Heghe, 1990; Wegnez, 1995). Moreover, within the broader field of the history of consumption, the period 1950–1980 is of great interest because of societal changes in Western Europe. Such changes encompass the increasing globalization of food production, the rising employment rate among women, and the immense growth in the purchasing power of the average citizen (Scholliers, 1993, pp. 191–193 and 219).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Quantitative analysis of yogurt consumption

In this paper, 'yogurt' was defined according to Belgian food legislation (MEZ-MD, 1980). More specifically, it refers to milk-based foods that have been fermented by the combined action of *Streptococcus thermophilus* and *Lactobacillus delbrueckii* subsp. *bulgaricus*, which have to remain alive in the end-product (thus excluding heat-treated fermented milks). According to the legal stipulations, products in which the amount of fat had been reduced or that contained added aromas, gelatin, starch, sugar, honey, or fruit in amounts below 30% were still considered 'yogurt'. To quantitatively study the popularity of yogurt over the years, consumption figures from a variety of sources, including data from several governmental organizations, were examined to cover the periods 1950–1965 (Ackerman & Verkinderen, 1970), 1966–1981 and 1985 (Tamime & Robinson, 1985; 2007), 1988–1994 (Wegnez, 1995), 1995–2001 (Centrum voor Landbouweconomie, 2000), 2002–2014 (FOD Statbel, 2013), and 2015 (GfK Belgium, 2016). Data for the periods 1982–1984 and 1986–1987 were missing.

To enable comparison with other Western countries, yogurt consumption patterns for Northwestern Europe and the U.S. were charted. Consumption data were available for France for the periods 1966–1981 (Tamime & Robinson, 1985) and 1982–2004 (Insee 2015), for the Netherlands for 1966–1979 (Tamime & Robinson, 1985) and 1980–2005 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2010), for the United Kingdom for 1966–1981 (Tamime & Robinson, 1985) and 1982–2011 (DEFRA, 2012), for (West) Germany for 1966–1981 (Tamime & Robinson, 1985), 1990–1993 (Tamime & Robinson, 2007), 1988 (Van Heghe, 1990), and 2000–2013 (Bundesanstalt für Landwirtschaft und Ernährung, 2014), and for the U.S. for 1966–1974 (Tamime & Robinson, 1985) and 1975–2013 (USDA, 2014).

Sources used unequivocally refer to their data as presenting solely yogurt consumption, except for French figures (1966–1981: yogurt and other fermented milk-based drinks; 1982–2014: yogurt

and fresh milk desserts) and the first two West-German years (1966–1967: yogurt and other fermented milk-based drinks). Transitions between data used by Tamime and Robinson (1985; 2007) and that of national organizations are generally quite smooth, indicating relative consistency of measurements. German figures seem *too* gradual around 1990, when the addition of East German consumption makes little impact – though it is possible yogurt was considerably less popular in this region, or that home production was more common.

As for Belgium, all data allegedly refers to just yogurt as well, and transitions appear to be smooth, though figures from Tamime and Robinson (1985; 2007) are comparatively high. Belgian data of 1950–1965 actually represents domestic production, which according to their source was equivalent to consumption (Ackerman & Verkinderen, 1970). While this is plausible – Stoilova claims exporting yogurt before the late 1960s was 'not possible' (2014, p. 167) – it would perhaps be best to regard consumption figures cited as merely a reasonably accurate approximation for signaling general trends.

2.2. Sources and method for content-based Belgian media analysis

For an analysis of the strategies used by yogurt marketers, advertisements by yogurt manufacturers in a women's magazine and a newspaper were analyzed, as well as the editorial content of both media. For the 1950s to the 1980s, most advertisers opted for magazines and newspapers to reach consumers, as TV and radio commercials were not yet allowed in Belgium. In 1960, 53% of the promotional budget for products was spent on publicity in either magazines or newspapers, whereas by 1969 this number had dropped slightly to 45% (Nederlandsche Kamer van Koophandel, 1973, p. 82). Naturally, both types of 'texts' do not perfectly mirror the hopes and fears of society, but they are at least indicative of certain societal sentiments and may even contribute to their formation (Knijn & Verheijen, 1982; Verriet, 2013). Journalists wrote for an 'implied audience' that, for their part, spent considerable time and money engaging with the values propagated in these media (Livingstone, 1998). Advertisements were not that different: a significant amount of time and money was spent on connecting with an audience (Matheson, 2005). Consequently, although deviations from the norms exhibited in the magazines are not to be excluded, the readership is generally to be considered as receptive (Verriet, 2015). Of course, while both advertisers and editors will sometimes try to stimulate certain attitudes among the population, in trying to create popular products or media it is often more pragmatic for them to draw on existing values.

The women's magazine, of a commercial nature and targeting a broad audience, was titled *Het Rijk der Vrouw* (HRdV, 'Women's Realm'; 1931–1990). Both the content of the food columns and the advertising policies were identical to its sister publication *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui*, targeting the French-speaking population in Belgium ('Women of Today'; 1933–now). The number of copies sold of HRdV, the Dutch variant, fluctuated between about 105,000 (1961) and 165,000 (1980); figures for *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui* are unknown, but if the percentage of readers in the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders is extrapolated to French-speaking Wallonia, then one would expect a combined readership between 200,000 and 300,000 in those years (Flour, Jacques, Marissal, Gubin, & Van Molle, 1994a, b). The content – both editorials and advertisements – was sampled every five years.

The newspaper used was *Het Belang van Limburg* (HBvL, 'Limburg's Interest', 1933–now), a daily Dutch-language regional journal with a catholic background. Since the region of Limburg was a mining area with significant agrarian activity, this newspaper provided a good counterbalance to the more urban, middle-class

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5044396>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5044396>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)