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Consumer perceptions of indulgence: A case study with cookies

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ABSTRACT

Food indulgence has been widely studied in psychology and related sciences. However, how it is perceived by consumers has rarely been examined in the field of Food Science. This paper presents a case study with 17 different types of cookies. Two different exploratory studies were performed with two groups of consumers. In the first, 90 consumers performed projective mappings, placing the samples according to the similarities or differences they found a) based on the packaging alone and b) based on tasting alone (the tasks were performed one month apart). The consumers were also asked to describe the single packages/cookies and groups of packages/cookies on the map. The maps obtained from the packaging and tasting tasks were fairly similar, indicating that in general the images, information, and package design raised expectations that were confirmed upon tasting the cookies. Qualitative analysis of the terms used to describe the maps of the two scenarios showed that chocolate (dark or milk) and type of cookie were the principal classification factors, while less or no importance was placed on energy content or uses. Consequently, in the second study 8 of the initial 17 cookies were selected as representing the 8 cookie types detected through separate hierarchical clustering analyses of the results from the package and cookie scenarios. A group of 100 consumers tasted each type of cookie, scored them on "acceptability," "perceived healthiness," and "familiarity," and answered a CATA questionnaire listing eating motivations and occasions.

1. Introduction

A food product is not indulgent per se; "indulgence" is related to consumers' inner motivations and is a primary driver of consumption of so-called "indulgent food," which has its own place in the market. According to Luomala, Laaksonen, and Leipamaa (2004), food is one of the most fundamental sources of hedonic experiences in human life. Even though there is an increased awareness of healthy eating, consumers will always allow themselves to indulge from time to time.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary (Merriam-Webster Dictionary., 2017) defines indulgence as: 1. the behavior or attitude of people who allow themselves to do what they want; 2. the act of doing something that you enjoy, but that is usually thought of as wrong or unhealthy; 3. something that is done or enjoyed as a special pleasure. Whereas the first meaning does not directly imply any negative connotation, the second one introduces the concept of "despite," in other words "sacrificing this to obtain that." Looking at the synonyms for indulgence proposed by the same dictionary ("benevolence, boon, courtesy, grace, favor, kindness, mercy, service, turn"), there seem to be no negative consequences of indulgence, but looking at the antonyms proposed ("basic, essential, fundamental, must, necessity, requirement"), their opposite again presents the item obtained as *unnecessary*. Transferring these concepts to the context of food, indulgence is inescapably associated with unhealthy and caloric, but tasty. Cheng, Huang, Chuang, and Ju (2015) stated that food indulgence is subtle and difficult to observe. While there is no single definition of "indulgent food," consumers recognize it when they see, smell and taste it (Cargill, 2017), and consider it highly pleasurable. Some concepts that have been related to foods for indulgent consumption are: a way to satisfy cravings, pursue hedonism, splurge on special occasions, enjoy premium products, experiment with food culture, and use food as a status symbol (Palmer, 2008). In turn, indulgence in food products is related to time-pressured, stressed, and tired consumers seeking pleasure, relaxation or self-reward. According to Pool, Brosch, Delplanque, and Sander (2014) stress can increase reward pursuits, traditionally seen as an attempt to relieve negative affect through the hedonic properties of a reward. However, reward pursuit is not always proportional to the pleasure experienced, because reward processing involves distinct components, including the motivation to obtain a reward (i.e. wanting) and the hedonic pleasure experienced during consumption of the reward (i.e. liking).

In this context, ascertaining the occasions and motivations that consumers identify for food products associated with indulgence could greatly enhance our knowledge concerning this area of food product development.

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It is not surprising that a large body of research dealing with indulgence comes from psychology, marketing and related fields. Studies on indulgent consumption have investigated the effect of a number of factors, including the perception of deservingness (Cavanaugh, 2014), the pressure of public scrutiny (Cheng et al., 2015), the influence of impulsive personality traits (Ramanathan & Williams, 2007), positive or negative mood (Gardner, Wansink, Kim, & Park, 2014), and impulsive buying (Miao & Mattila, 2013), among others.

However, research on food products designed "for a treat" and how consumers perceive them is scarce in Food Science and Technology literature. This may be due to recent and current trends toward the development of healthy options. Nonetheless, indulgence food products occupy a place in the market and their sensory space is worth studying.

Within the framework of qualitative research, projective mapping has become increasingly popular for investigating and trying to understand consumer attitudes (Vidal, Ares, & Gimenez, 2013) as it allows (dis)similarities within a set of products to be collected with a holistic sample approach (Dehlholm, 2014). As a case study, the present authors considered it would be interesting to apply this technique to a broad, but deliberate selection of cookies as an example of indulgence products belonging to the same food category. Despite the fact that all the products were considered to be cookies, they constituted a very inhomogeneous sample set due to the variety of their ingredients and compositions. In such cases, it is essential for consumers to have a holistic perception. The dimensions obtained should provide a wealth of information about the structure of the sensory space of cookies for indulgence in the consumers' minds. In addition, exploring the consumers' inner motivations and occasions for eating cookies might provide further insight into this food category, which could be a valuable aid to food developers.

Check all that apply (CATA) has been identified as a method that allows multiple options to be selected. Consumers are presented with a list of terms and asked to indicate which words or phrases appropriately describe their experience with the sample being evaluated. The terms might include not only sensory attributes but also emotional responses, purchase intention, potential applications, or product positioning (Meyners & Castura, 2014).

The aim of the present study was to investigate consumer perceptions of a broad set of cookies in two different scenarios: considering only the packaging and tasting the cookies under blind conditions. In addition, analyses of indulgence as a driver of motivations and occasions for cookie consumption, and its relation to acceptability, familiarity, and perceived healthiness would contribute to understanding the sensory space of this food category.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Samples

The samples consisted of 17 types of cookies, all containing appealing ingredients (chocolate, almonds, cream layers, *etc*.), bought in several local supermarkets. All the products displayed the nutritional facts and the list of ingredients on the package in accordance with the font size and specifications of current European legislation. Three tables were drawn up to describe the samples. Table 1 lists the denomination, and information for each cookie given by the manufacturer on the front of the package, as well as the images shown (all 17 packages showed pictures of the cookies). In addition, this table gives the simplified codes (from 1 to 17) used to identify the samples throughout the present paper. Supplementary Table A gives any extra description or information about the cookie composition shown on other parts of the package. The 17 packages and 17 types of cookies were used in the two parts of Study 1, respectively (see below).

2.2. Sensory tests

Two studies were conducted.

2.2.1. Study 1. Projective mappings

Study 1 was conducted in two separate parts, one month apart, with the same 90 consumers. In the first part, the participants only assessed the 17 cookie packages. After one month, in the second part of the test, they evaluated the 17 cookies under blind conditions (without the packages). In each part of the test, the samples were coded with random 3-digit numbers and were identified using stickers. The numbers were different in the two parts of the test. The consumers were provided with a pen and a size-A0 sheet of paper and were instructed to examine the packages/taste the cookies and place them on the sheet of paper according to their similarities and differences. They were told to place the samples they considered similar near each other and the samples they perceived as different at a distance from each other. All the participants were instructed to use the entire surface of the paper. They were free to examine the samples (observe, read, and handle the packages in the first part of the test, and observe and taste the cookies in the second part) in any order and as many times as they wanted. After placing the samples on the sheet of paper, the consumers had to write down the terms that described each sample or group of samples, with no time limit for completing the task (Marcano, Ares, & Fiszman, 2015). The consumers took between 15 and 30 min to complete each projective mapping task.

During the tests, the participants' privacy and comfort were guaranteed in the spaces set aside for the activities. In the second part of the test, bottled water was available for rinsing between samples, but this was not obligatory.

2.2.2. Study 2. Acceptability, familiarity, perception of healthiness, and occasions and motivations for eating cookies

The acceptability and familiarity of 8 selected cookies (samples 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 14, representing different types of cookies) (Table 1), and how healthy the consumers considered them to be, were evaluated by 100 consumers (a different group from that in Study 1). Acceptability and perceived healthiness were assessed using nine-point scales (from *Dislike extremely* to *Like extremely* and from *Very unhealthy* to V*ery healthy*), and familiarity was assessed on a continuous line scale (from 0 = *Very unfamiliar* to 10 = *Very familiar)*. To discover the occasions and motivations for consuming each type of cookie, after observing and tasting the cookie the participants were asked to answer two CATA questions: "Please tick all the motivations for you to eat this cookie" and "Please tick all the occasions when you would eat this cookie." The list of terms (Supplementary Tables B and C) was adapted from Jack, O'Neill, Piacentini, and Schröder (1997), who compared the suitability of a number of fruit pieces and savory snacks for different uses. The lists of motivations and eating occasions presented in the CATA questionnaire were randomized across the consumers, but not across the samples.

2.3. Consumers

The consumers who participated in the two studies were recruited from the staff and student body of the Institute of Agrochemistry and Food Technology (IATA-CSIC) and the Polytechnic University of Valencia, who consumed cookies at least twice a week. Study 1 was conducted with 90 consumers, 58 women and 32 men, with ages ranging between 23 and 67 years. Study 2 was conducted with 100 consumers, 68 women and 32 men, with ages ranging from 19 to 63 years, none of whom had participated in Study 1.

2.4. Data analysis

The abscissa (X) and ordinate (Y) values of each sample on each

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