



Better the devil you know? How product familiarity affects usage versatility of foods and beverages



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ABSTRACT

Appropriateness of use evaluations can be used to explore consumers' associations between products and usage situations. The degree of familiarity consumers have with a certain product has recently been suggested as a mediator of these evaluations, influencing both the number and the type of associations consumers hold with food and beverages. In this work, we extend previous results across multiple product categories, hereby generalizing the findings. Four consumer studies were conducted using fruit names ($N = 246$), white wine images ($N = 112$), chocolate bar images ($N = 192$), and kiwifruit images ($N = 302$) as test stimuli. In each study, consumers rated their perceived familiarity with each stimulus and evaluated the appropriateness of use in a range of situations relevant to the product category. Familiarity was confirmed as a moderator of appropriateness of use evaluations, and was positively linked to product versatility. Since familiarity is related to an individual's exposure to a product, this could indicate that consumers use past experience with a product as a heuristic for their appropriateness evaluations. The variance in appropriateness evaluations explained by familiarity alone was, however, limited, and product-context associations were also contingent upon specific product characteristics. Taken together, the four studies reported here confirm that product familiarity is related to usage versatility, and indicate that consumers may find it challenging to envisage how unfamiliar food products can be incorporated into their existing dietary practices.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Product familiarity and appropriateness of use

The important role that situational variables play in shaping consumer preferences and choice is well documented by past research (e.g., Belk, 1974, 1975; Meiselman, 2008). The usage situations of a product is an ecological factor that can orient consumer choices by imposing constraints over the choice set and direct context-appropriate solutions (Ratneshwar &

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Shocker, 1991; Warlop & Ratneshwar, 1993). Accordingly, a basic tenet in food choice research is that food/beverage products are, at least in part, chosen (or not) because they are more (or less) appropriate for specific usage situations (Marshall, 1993, 1995; Meiselman, 2008).

Informed by this understanding, methods for investigating perceived product characteristics in specific usage situations have emerged. For instance, the item-by-use (IBU) appropriateness method (Schutz, 1988, 1994) has been applied to several food and beverage categories for evaluating how well a food product fit a range of possible usages (e.g., Jaeger, 2000, 2003; Lähteenmäki & Tuorila, 1997; Raats & Shepherd, 1992). In this analytical approach, one uses judgmental data to depict how consumers perceive a focal set of product alternatives in relation to specific situations. It is conceptually very similar to the substitution-in-use approach, which is well-known in the marketing literature (Ratneshwar & Shocker, 1991). The accepted view is that appropriateness measures are more predictive of behavior than simple acceptance testing (Marshall, 1995; Marshall & Bell, 2003), and the IBU method is considered a valid proxy for consumer food choice in specific use situations (Cardello & Schutz, 1996; Marshall, 1995; Schutz, 1988).

Knowledge of the product variables that moderate judgments of appropriateness of use is hitherto incomplete. However, it is probable that perceived appropriateness of a food/beverage is influenced by multiple factors – both intrinsic and extrinsic to the product – including cultural norms (Rozin, 2006), sensory preferences (Lähteenmäki & Tuorila, 1997), and specific sensory properties (Hersleth, Bergen, Westad, & Martens, 2005).

It has been suggested that product familiarity – defined here as a consumer's subjective evaluation about his or her knowledge about a product on the basis of previous experience (Park & Lessig, 1981) – is an important factor in shaping appropriateness of use evaluations (Giacalone et al., 2015; Jaeger, Rossiter, & Lau, 2005; Tuorila, Meiselman, Cardello, & Leshner, 1994). The rationale behind this assertion is that familiarity is strongly related to consumers' past experience with a product, and many people use their past behavior as a heuristic for later decisions (e.g., Albarracín & Wyer, 2000; Taylor, 1975). That is, when people are asked to make a behavioral decision (e.g., choosing between product alternatives), they generally assume the decision they made at an earlier point in time would similarly apply to the present situation, leading them to repeat the previous behavior. In psychology, this is known as “familiarity heuristic” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and its underlying mechanism is twofold. According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; Wicklund & Brehm, 1976) familiar products may be preferred based on the desire to be consistent and identify reasons legitimating previous acts. The dissonance reduction mechanism is based on an active search of memory and on recall of prior knowledge about a past behavior. However, the familiarity heuristic may work regardless of any deliberate cognitive effort (Albarracín & Wyer, 2000). For example, a consumer may simply reason that, if they used a given product in a given situation, it must be appropriate. Accordingly, it would be expected that, *ceteris paribus*, appropriateness evaluations for familiar products be higher than similar evaluations for unfamiliar products.

Perceived product appropriateness has several implications for economic behavior in the food and beverage domain. Several papers, chiefly in the wine literature, have documented a link between appropriateness for specific usage situation and consumer choice. This line of research points to situational fit being one of the most important considerations in product choice (Hall & Lockshin, 1999; Hall, Lockshin, & O'Mahony, 2001; Sirieix, Remaud, Lockshin, Thach, & Lease, 2011), and suggests that adding the usage situation to product and consumer characteristics can improve prediction of consumer behavior and provide a better basis for product positioning and advertising (Dubow, 1992).

Understanding the relationship between familiarity and appropriateness, on the other hand, might be highly relevant for explaining frequency of purchase. Generally, consumers have little incentive to sample unfamiliar foods and beverage, and therefore familiar products may be routinely chosen because they are more readily available and more likely to enter the consideration set because of e.g. previous satisfactory consumption experiences. On the other hand, when consumers are evaluating a product in relation to a specific usage, and/or are generally unfamiliar with the product category as a whole, a more cognitively effortful product evaluation (but one that is not biased by a simple heuristic) is likely to be attempted. If we accept this premise, product familiarity should likely be a strong predictor of repeat purchase at least when consumers make generic food provisioning decisions (“stocking up” the household pantry with no particular end usage in mind) (Giacalone et al., 2015). Although not usually considered at the level of specific products, such relationship is known to exist with regards to brands, where previous research suggests that familiarity with a brand increases the probability that it will be considered for purchase (e.g., Coates, Butler, & Berry, 2004; Gigerenzer & Gaissmeier, 2011; Hoyer & Brown, 1990).

1.2. Motivation for the present research

The influence of product familiarity on food-related behavior has previously been studied in relation to product preferences (e.g., Giacalone, Duerlund, Bøegh-Petersen, Bredie, & Frøst, 2014; Lévy, MacRae, & Köster, 2006), sensory perception (e.g., Labbe, Damevin, Vaccher, Morgenegg, & Martin, 2006) and risk perception (e.g., Fischer & Frewer, 2009; Jin & Han, 2014).

Only recently was the relationship between product familiarity and appropriateness of use explicitly considered in experimental research, namely in a series of studies focusing on consumers' evaluations of beer (Giacalone et al., 2015). It was found that as product familiarity increased, products were perceived as appropriate for a larger number of uses. Conversely, for unfamiliar beers consumers experienced greater difficulty in identifying appropriate uses. In other words, product familiarity was positively related to product *versatility*, defined in this context as the total number of situations a product is perceived as appropriate for.

These results suggested a tendency to use past behavior as a basis for inferring product appropriateness; a finding that aligns with the familiarity heuristic principle outlined above. A limitation of this initial work (Giacalone et al., 2015) was that

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