



Research report

The dynamics of consumer behaviour On habit, discontent, and other fish to fry

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has drawn attention to the role of past behaviour and habit in the overall structure of consumer behaviour. We argue that in cross-sectional data past behaviour and habit must be confounded with present beliefs and attitudes when the behaviour in question has been enacted numerous times before. To disentangle the effects, longitudinal data were collected from a large panel of Norwegian consumers (effective $N = 4184$) in 1996, 2000, and 2004. Cross-lagged panel analysis indicated that higher consumption of traditional seafood led to increasingly negative evaluations of the product supply. These negative evaluations, in turn, prompted substitution of traditional seafood with newly available, processed seafood products and an increasing dominance of aqua-cultured species. The theoretical discussion focuses on the inability of static models of consumer behaviour (in particular, the theory of planned behaviour) to capture such dynamic effects. Marketing and policy implications related to the changing structure of the seafood market are outlined.

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Introduction

Seafood consumption is a relatively recent topic of interest among consumer researchers. Only a handful of studies can be found in the literature up until 1995 (e.g., Kinnucan & Venkateswaran, 1990; Olsen, 1989; Peavey, Work, & Riley, 1994). Coinciding with, and partially prompted by, the re-organisation of seafood supply chains that began in the mid-1990s (Guillotreau, 2004), the preferences of consumers received more attention (Brunso, 2003). Partly, the shift was motivated by the dire need for information among fish processors who wished to develop value-added products for the markets of the future (Trondsen, 1997). Partly, it was prompted by public health considerations, following the mounting evidence that aquatic species rich in polyunsaturated fatty acids had protective effects against cardiovascular disease (e.g., Marckmann & Groenbaek, 1999; WHO, 1999, 2002).

Relatively soon, it became apparent that promotion efforts building on health and pleasure arguments were paying to the converted (e.g., Bredahl & Grunert, 1997; Grunert, Bisp, Bredahl,

Sørensen, & Nielsen, 1996): even in the early studies, it turned out that virtually all consumers were aware of the fact that fish was healthy, and that they were equally convinced that fish was tasty food. After this finding had been established, consumer research on seafood divided into three topical branches. A first branch of research maintained a focus on health and pleasure arguments, but tried to identify motivational conditions that led to a lack of consumer commitment (e.g., Foxall, Leek & Maddock, 1998; Juhl & Poulsen, 2000; Olsen, 2001, 2003; Pieniak, Verbeke, Vermeir, Brunso, & Olsen, 2006, 2007; Pieniak, Verbeke, Scholderer, Brunso, & Olsen, 2007; Trondsen, Braaten, Lund, & Eggen, 2004a, 2004b). A second branch tried to match patterns in consumer preferences to socio-demographic segments (e.g., Fagerli & Wandel, 1999; Nayga & Capps, 1995; Verbeke, Vermeir, & Brunso, 2007), sometimes in connection with quality assurance schemes (e.g., Jaffry, Pickering, Ghulam, Whitmarsh, & Wattage, 2004; Wessels, Johnston, & Donath, 1999). A third branch focused on barriers to consumption, trying to identify the exact reasons consumers had for not eating as much fish as they would actually like to, and finding ways to overcome these barriers (e.g., Leek, Maddock, & Foxall, 2000; Myrland, Trondsen, Johnston, & Lund, 2000; Olsen, Scholderer, Brunso, & Verbeke, 2007; Scholderer & Grunert, 2001, 2003; Trondsen, Scholderer, Lund, & Eggen, 2003).

A series of recent papers (Honkanen, Olsen, & Verplanken, 2005; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005) has shifted attention to the *non-plasticity*

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of consumer behaviour, focusing on the influence of habit. Although the shift was prompted by a general re-awakening of the habit concept in social psychology (e.g., Verplanken & Aarts, 1999), it may to a certain degree also reflect our frustration with the fact that, when answering a survey questionnaire, consumers find it very easy to report intentions to change their behaviour, whilst in a real-life food choice situation, these intentions rarely result in observable buying behaviour. Whilst this is easily explained in psychological terms (automaticity of habit, low situational accessibility of behavioural intentions), it also makes it very difficult to draw conclusions from cross-sectional survey studies.

The present paper will approach the issue from a longitudinal perspective. In the following sections, we will first review relevant theory and previous research. The focus will be on barriers to consumption, consumption habits, and the mutual influence they may have on each other. Then, we will report a three-wave panel study conducted in Norway in the years 1996, 2000, and 2004. Consumption will be analysed in terms of three generic categories which may partially substitute each other over time (fresh and frozen lean fish such as cod and saithe, fresh and frozen fatty fish such as salmon, trout, and herring, and higher-processed fish products such as fish fingers, cakes, and sticks). The mutual longitudinal influence of perceived barriers and category consumption will be estimated by means of cross-lagged panel models, allowing the identification of actual causal effects. Finally, we will discuss the implications of the results in terms of theory as well as practical guidance for marketing and public policy.

Theoretical frameworks in the analysis of seafood consumption

Most of the newer studies on seafood consumption have broken with the agricultural economics tradition, adopting social psychological models of the attitude–behaviour relationship such as Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour (e.g., Bredahl & Grunert, 1997; Grunert et al., 1996; Scholderer & Grunert, 2001; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005). The theory assumes that the likelihood of a certain behaviour is a function of the individual's conscious intention to perform it, which in turn is assumed to be a weighted average of three variables: (a) attitude toward the behaviour, determined by beliefs about its outcomes and evaluations of these outcomes, (b) subjective norm, determined by beliefs about the expectations of relevant others and the individual's motivation to comply, and (c) perceived behavioural control, determined by beliefs about the controllability of facilitating and inhibitory factors and the individual's self-efficacy.

The theory does not specify the actual content of the beliefs assumed to underlie attitude, subjective norm, and perceived control. However, since the early investigations by Olsen (1989) and Grunert et al. (1996), studies have found a relatively narrow set of beliefs that remained remarkably stable across cultures and over time. Outcome beliefs (i.e., the ones assumed to be the basis of the attitude) tend to manifest themselves as consumer expectations of health, quality, taste and pleasure, normative beliefs as expectations regarding the health, pleasure and preferences of other family members, and control beliefs as expectations of the adequacy of the product supply (such as price, variety, and availability) on the “external” side, and expectations of personal efficacy (having the skills to judge quality and prepare a tasty meal) on the “internal” side.

A regular finding in quantitative studies that included these beliefs as questionnaire items is that attitude has only weak effects or no effects at all on behavioural intentions (e.g., Scholderer & Grunert, 2001, 2003), that such effects can only be found for specific sub-categories of seafood (e.g., Bredahl & Grunert, 1997;

Grunert et al., 1996), or that the effect is suppressed when additional measures of past experience with seafood are included in the model (Honkanen et al., 2005; Scholderer et al., 2006; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005). Subjective norm, i.e., the influence of other family members, usually has a higher (Bredahl & Grunert, 1997; Grunert et al., 1996; Scholderer & Grunert, 2001, 2003) or at least equally high (Verbeke & Vackier, 2005) effect on behavioural intentions as compared to attitude. Perceived behavioural control regularly turns out to be the strongest determinant of behavioural intentions (Bredahl & Grunert, 1997; Grunert et al., 1996; Scholderer & Grunert, 2001, 2003; Verbeke & Vackier, 2005).

The theory of planned behaviour makes only few predictions that are empirically falsifiable. In research practice, it is therefore not so much used as a theory but more as a tool for structuring data analysis and reporting. Among the few predictions it actually makes is the prediction that the effects of attitude and social norm on behaviour are completely mediated by a process of conscious intention formation (hence the name, theory of *planned* behaviour). Only perceived behavioural control is assumed to influence behaviour directly (but indirectly as well). In the context of seafood consumption, only two studies have actually tested the prediction that the effects of attitude and social norm on behaviour are mediated by behavioural intention. These studies ended up with conflicting results. Scholderer and Grunert (2001) found the prediction violated, whereas Verbeke and Vackier (2005) found it confirmed in their data. One reason might be found in cross-cultural differences (the former study was conducted in Denmark, the latter in Belgium), another reason might be found in category specificity (Scholderer and Grunert asked their participants about fresh fish, whilst Verbeke and Vackier asked about fish in general), a third reason might be found in differences in consumer experience with seafood (Denmark traditionally has a much higher per capita consumption than Belgium).

Whatever the reason behind the divergent results, one lesson can be learned from applications of the theory of planned behaviour to seafood consumption: independent of the time, geographical location or particular category in which the study was conducted, perceived behavioural control turned out to be the strongest determinant of behavioural intention, followed by subjective norm. Furthermore, these two constructs tended to be highly correlated (e.g., $r = .56$ in the Scholderer & Grunert, 2001 study), and in qualitative investigations, consumers often state a dislike of fish by other family members as the main barrier preventing them from increasing their personal consumption (e.g., Grunert et al., 1996; Marshall, 1989; Valette-Florence, Sirieix, Grunert, & Nielsen, 2000). Apparently, the beliefs underlying subjective norm in the context of seafood have a dual character, actually functioning as control beliefs in families where at least one member is not particularly fond of fish.

Barriers to consumption

Several studies have investigated perceived behavioural control in detail, usually under the generic header “barriers to consumption of seafood”. At a first glance, the research may seem a bit a-theoretical. However, on the theory side, this was more a consequence of the lack of empirical distinctiveness that the constructs of the theory of planned behaviour exhibited when applied to seafood consumption (Myrland et al., 2000; Trondsen et al., 2003), and furthermore, of the peripheral role played by behavioural intentions: the overwhelming share of influence of perceived control on behaviour was direct, whilst indirect effects mediated by intention accounted for only small portions of additional variance (Scholderer & Grunert, 2001, 2003; result replicated by Verbeke & Vackier, 2005). On the practical side, the

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