

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF FOOD INNOVATION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

The success of newly developed food products on the market mainly depends on how they are perceived by consumers. Thus, the aim of this research paper is to explore consumer perception of food innovation in order to improve marketing strategies of new product development. This paper is part of an on-going doctoral research project POSDRU/ 107/ 1.5/ S/ 76888.

Methodology - Past behaviour, habits and hedonic appreciation appear in literature as good predictors of food choice. Thus, consumer ethnography drawing on eating habits is used to explore evolving consumer behaviour with regard to purchasing and consumption of novel food products. Triangulated qualitative in-depth interviews involving 12 participants in Bucharest, Romania, combined with in-home visits and 7-day food diaries, were employed.

Results and Discussion - Romanian consumers seem to explore less when buying or cooking food, as they struggle with lack of time and daily stress. In other words, consumers prefer the 'safer' and more time-efficient familiar foods to new culinary experiences. Nonetheless, consumers seek variety in their diets, but cautiously: products already tested and recommended by friends and family or slightly different forms of known foods (e.g. new flavours of preferred brand, frozen or pre-cooked familiar products). Food innovation is generally related to value-adding benefits in terms of health and convenience, and to some concerns regarding perceived naturalness and sensory qualities, as it is the case of functional food products.

Conclusions - The study concludes that in a fairly traditional culture as the case of Romania, positioning new food products as line extensions of well-known brands or as new value-added offers from typical food categories could ease innovation adoption and increase consumer acceptance. This study adds to the scarce literature that focuses on Romanian consumers' views, attitudes and perceptions with regard to food innovation.

Key words: consumer behaviour, diffusion of innovation, functional food products, novel food, Romania.

INTRODUCTION

Launching new functional food products on the market may prove to be a challenging task for marketers. According to Rogers (2003), the success on the market of such products depends on how consumers perceive (i.e. accept or reject) food innovation as: relative advantage (the perceived marginal value of the novel food relative to the current), compatibility (with acceptable behaviour, norms, values of a particular culture), complexity (associated with product use), trialability (the degree of economic and/ or social risk associated with product use) and observability (the ease with which the benefits can be communicated). These five characteristics of innovation can determine the attributes of food products that cause market resistance and affect the rate of

acceptance. In general, the rate of innovation diffusion is positively related to relative advantage, compatibility, trialability and observability, and negatively related to complexity.

Starting from these five characteristics of innovation, the aim of this research paper is to explore in-depth consumer perception of food innovation in order to improve marketing strategies of new functional foods in Romania with respect to innovation diffusion rates. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because: firstly, there is scarce literature on consumer acceptance of innovation in Romania, mainly studies related to consumer acceptance of biotechnology and functional food (Curtis and Moeltner, 2007; Curtis and Moeltner, 2006; Ionescu et al., 2004); and secondly, an important factor affecting the

adoption rate of any innovation is its compatibility with the cultural beliefs of the social system (Popa and Popa, 2011; Guerrero et al., 2009; Ronteltap et al., 2007; Lusk and Rozan, 2005; Rogers, 2003; Dunphy and Herbig, 1995; Ram and Sheth, 1989).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Past behaviour, habits and hedonic appreciation appear in literature as good predictors of food choice (Köster, 2009) which are usually better explored and explained by qualitative research methods even though these methods are not statistically representative. Drawing on literature recommendations (Köster, 2009; van Kleef et al., 2005; Mariampolsky, 2001), in-depth interviewing and consumer ethnography are used to explore evolving consumer behaviour with regard to purchasing and consumption of novel food products. The focus on in-depth exploration that describes the development of food buying and consumption habits allows the researchers to identify and extrapolate potential trends with reference to future demand of novel food.

Triangulated qualitative in-depth interviews involving 12 participants in Bucharest, Romania, combined with ethnographic in-home visits and 7-days food diaries, were employed during February 2011. The interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes each. The methodological purpose of the triangulation was to examine validity by converging, corroborating and establishing correspondence of results which differed in type (open expression versus participatory observation).

Each in-depth interview took place at the participants' homes, namely in the kitchen. This contextual inquiry, as ethnographic interviewing technique, gives participants the opportunity to express themselves in a more authentic way providing an image of their attitude and behaviour in a real context. The discussion was a follow-up of the 7-days food diary for self-recorded observations regarding eating habits (i.e. time of day, setting, actual menu). In addition, a special task was introduced in the diary, named 'new culinary experience', where participants were asked to buy and consume an entirely new product, and then to describe the experience in the diary.

Photographic observations of kitchen, refrigerator and freezer were also collected for triangulation purposes.

Participants, all of whom were mainly or jointly responsible for shopping and food preparation in their household, were recruited on the basis of a snowball sample. The sample included a homogenous population to be researched (see Table 1), 'young professional women' with ages between 20 and 30 years old, residents in Bucharest, working full time (more than 30 hours per week), university graduates, living alone or with their life partners. The participants were also recruited so that there are no children (under 18 years old) in their care. Bucharest was chosen as the city with the highest average disposable income and the largest market potential. The study focused on young professional women as transition to financial independence appears an important point for changes in food consumption (Midmore et al., 2008).

A semi-structured discussion guide was prepared for the interviews. The structure was flexible to enable probing, to explore the meaning of questions and answers. Questions covered aspects related to shopping and meal preparation in order to identify relevant benefits looked for in food products and to observe any exploratory behaviours regarding food. More in-depth questions on innovation and novel foods followed, starting the discussion based on the 'new culinary experience' task in the diary. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to enhance researchers' understanding and capacity for data analysis (Bryman and Bell, 2003). Participants were informed in advance about recording and their consent was received. The transcriptions obtained were submitted to a thematic content analysis (Spiggle, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in order to identify the overall conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Young professional women appeared to have a rather low involvement when buying or cooking food, as they struggle with lack of time and daily stress. These findings are in line with the results emerged from an exploratory study on Romanian consumers' food related

behaviour (Popa et al., 2009). In other words, the researched population prefer the more time-efficient and 'safer' familiar food products over new culinary experiences. As a consequence, most participants appear to display strong brand loyalty towards day-by-day food products, especially dairy products and water, mainly due to an inertia effect.

The in-depth interviews revealed that the participants are strongly influenced by childhood meals and own mothers' cooking style, similar to Italian consumers that give strong approval to traditional meals and cooking (Midmore et al., 2008).

The participants perceived themselves as seeking variety in their diets with caution: products already tested and recommended by friends and family or products with perceived lower levels of novelty (e.g. new aromas of preferred brand, frozen or pre-cooked variants of familiar products). This could be translated as low consumer confidence related to risk perception and to a low level of information regarding food aspects as revealed in the literature (Curtis and Moeltner, 2007; Ronteltap et al., 2007; Siegrist et al., 2007; Cardello et al., 2007; Cox et al., 2007; Curtis and Moeltner, 2006; Cardello, 2003).

While at individual level, involvement in food selection varies (Bell and Marshall, 2003), consumers are becoming more conscious of their food selection and more demanding (Popa et al., 2009), in contrast with another consumer study from 2007 (Curtis and Moeltner, 2007). Participants actually take into consideration value-added benefits (e.g. health, environmental, economic) when it comes to food products. Young professional women look for healthy food in terms of low fat content, rich nutritional values as functional food products, and low processing levels to avoid highly feared E numbers (von Alvensleben, 2001). Also, participants reported occasional consumption of organic produce for both of its health and environmental benefits. It appears that some young professional women look as well to encourage local economy by purchasing fresh produce from open markets, traditional or "made in Romania" products.

Food innovation was generally related by participants to value-adding benefits in terms of convenience (e.g. individual portions, frozen

food, pre-cooked food, ready-to-eat meals), health (e.g. low fat content, addition of beneficial ingredients as functional food, low salt content, organically produced), packaging (e.g. see-through packaging) and assortment expansion (e.g. more variety as ethnic and exotic flavours, new combinations of ingredients), in conformity with the categorisation of innovations adapted from the literature (Guerrero et al., 2009; Kühne et al., 2010). Individual portions, low fat content, functional food, organic food, see-through packaging and more variety as exotic flavours appear highly valued by participants. Likewise, Romanian young professional women seem to appreciate less frozen and pre-cooked food as perceived of inferior quality when compared to freshly cooked meals. There were also some concerns regarding perceived naturalness, related to perceived complexity of the innovation (Rogers, 2003) e.g. UHT packaging. Other important concern regarded sensory qualities of novel foods as an unsatisfactory previous product experience (trial) mainly as taste, versus conventional variant.

In general, novel food products were regarded as complementing the regular diet or fit for occasional consumption, associated with expectations for higher price values compared to the conventional alternatives.

As health problems trigger changes in the food habits of some households (Midmore et al., 2008), there were some participants with recent health problems in their family history (e.g. cardiovascular diseases), who were more open to functional food products with targeted health benefits e.g. free of cholesterol or low salt content.

It has been reported (Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996) that consumer behaviours with exploratory components include risk taking in product choices, innovativeness in the adoption of new, variety seeking in purchase behaviour, browsing, looking at window/ shelf displays, and curiosity-motivated information acquisition evidenced for instance in talking to others about purchases. Young professional women, faced with time pressure and above average stress levels, appeared to explore less when buying or cooking food. Their exploratory behaviour in relation to food is limited to occasionally browsing through shelf

displays and to curiosity-motivated information acquisition evidenced in talking to peers about new culinary experiences (new cooking recipes or new product trials) and in internet browsing for new recipes, mainly from international cuisines. As young professional women established their own household, the new food habits formed (Midmore et al., 2008) include mainly the experimentation with international cuisines.

When asked about who would be interested in purchasing and consuming novel foods in Romania, the participants described the typical novel food consumer as a person with an exploratory mind-set: young to middle aged,

well informed and up-to-date, health-conscious, open-minded and genuinely curious. These characteristics were in line with a study (Baumgartner and Steenkamp, 1996) where it has been hypothesised that exploratory behaviours tend to adopt innovations faster.

As consumer awareness and markets co-evolve, consumer attitudes with reference to food related issues tend to change gradually (Midmore et al., 2008), as it is the case with products already established on the market, like functional dairies or products with low sugar or low fat content. This may occur also because innovation is mostly understood by consumers as novelty, new products on the market.

Table 1. Characteristics of the young professional women who participated in the study

No ref.	Gender	Age	Monthly disposable income/ household*	The new culinary experience**
1		25 y.o.	>3001 RON	pre-cooked rice in individual portions
2		25 y.o.	>3001 RON	yoghurt with low fat content
3		26 y.o.	1001-3000 RON	soy milk with vanilla flavour
4		28 y.o.	1001-3000 RON	milk fortified with omega3 fatty acid
5		23 y.o.	1001-3000 RON	soft spreadable cheese with added herbs
6	women	27 y.o.	1001-3000 RON	cholesterol-free tofu
7		29 y.o.	1001-3000 RON	cocoa flavoured milk
8		26 y.o.	1001-3000 RON	ready-to-eat hummus salad
9		26 y.o.	>3001 RON	margarine with added omega3&6 fatty acids
10		29 y.o.	1001-3000 RON	frozen seafood in see-through pack
11		27 y.o.	>3001 RON	UHT milk fortified with calcium
12		25 y.o.	>3001 RON	pre-cooked pasta made from rice flour

*exchange rate €1= RON4.13 (National Romanian Bank, 27/05/11). For comparison, the average disposable income (for 2009) was RON1 352 (or €330) per month per household.

**the products chosen for the 'new culinary experience' task from the 7-days diary.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the researched subculture, i.e. young professional women, is fairly traditional as it is the case of Romanian culture in general. Consequently new functional foods could face rather low compatibility levels (Rogers, 2003) when launched in Romania. This contrasts with the initial researchers' hypothesis that young professionals could show more openness to innovation than the rest of Romanian consumers, owed to the transition to financial independence (Midmore et al., 2008), together

with a young age, urban lifestyle and easy access to latest information.

Positioning newfunctional food products as line extensions of already well-known and trusted brands, i.e. the diversification strategy (Diaconescu, 2005), could ease diffusion of innovation. Another potentially advantageous positioning of new functional foods could be as value-added products in widely used food categories, where there is little differentiation between brands. If adequate alternatives are already available or are perceived to exist on the market, the new proposal is less likely to fail (Dunphy and Herbig, 1995).

Food innovations that offer convenience and health related relative advantages appear to be mostly attractive and relevant to the researched population, as consumers accept easier those innovations that provide tangible (easily observable) and relevant benefits, without producing substantial changes in the product, specially in terms of sensory qualities (Guerrero et al., 2009). The convenience and health related innovations are perceived to have low complexity and high observability levels, thus revealing increasing chances on the market. In order to ease innovation adoption further, promotion activities at point of sale (e.g. sampling at the shelf) are also recommended.

In drawing conclusions, the researchers stress the exploratory nature and the limitations that emerge from the localized character of the study, the homogenous research population and the sampling technique used. While in-depth interviews are deliberately not representative, they do allow for an exploration of detailed perceptions, attitudes and opinions which generates insight into the potential for functional food products in Romania. It should be noted that the research did not concentrate on specific food categories. It remains to be determined to what extent the obtained insights apply to specific food categories. Nevertheless, the information obtained from this study adds to the scarce literature that focuses on Romanian consumers' views, attitudes and perceptions with regard to food innovation and can serve further to marketing strategies for functional foods on the Romanian market. Further validation of the qualitative exploratory insights as presented in this study, e.g. through quantitative research, with larger and more representative consumer samples, is recommended.

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