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From perception to expectations: the chicken-egg question at the individual level

Rizzo-Ivanoff Sabine 1,2,3
Rogeaux Michel 1
Boesen-Mariani Sabine 1
Giboreau Agnes 2,3

1. Sensory and Behavior Science, Danone Nutricia Research, RD 128, 91767 Palaiseau Cedex, France
2. Research Center for Food and Hospitality Research, Institut Paul Bocuse, 69130 Ecully, France
3. Universite Lyon 1, CRNL

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Abstract: Food perception is partly based on top-down processes, meaning that the same product can be perceived in different ways by different consumers. Expectations are among the factors influencing consumer perception. The aim of the research is to study how the link between expectations and perception vary according to subjects characteristics.

Expectations related to a food product are built from external information such as brand, product name, packaging, but also from internal information and previous experiences stored in subjects' memory. Memory is structured into categories, meaning grouping together objects sharing similar criteria. Categories can be structured based on sensory properties, beliefs, affective responses, implication. As previously shown in different studies, categories evolve as a function of contexts and subjects. Therefore, considering expectations are based on categories, we are interested in studying how expectations evolve as a function of individuals.

The test procedure is based on a common psychological methodology, a free sorting task. It is used to spontaneously reveal generated categories in a subject's memory and unveil consumer expectations.

This approach was tested with 214 Polish consumers testing a new type of drink. First, a free sorting task with 11 different products was conducted. Then, a free verbalization of the characteristics of each category was completed and finally, an association of each category with one board of expectations was asked (board being previously obtained through a qualitative study). Boards of expectations reflected context of consumption, beliefs and emotional responses.

Results allowed clustering consumers on their product categorization and showing different associations between expectations and perceived products. . Four relevant clusters of consumers were found, each with different perceptions of the product range as well as specific associations with expectations. Therefore, we were able to show different link between product perception and consumers' expectations linked to each category in terms of sensory properties, context uses, and benefits

Keywords: Expectation, perception, categorization, sorting, food

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Institut Paul Bocuse

Château du Vivier - Ecully - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 72 18 02 20

20, place Bellecour - Lyon - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 78 37 23 02

Contact

Raphaëlle Mouillefarine
Partnerships Development
[Send an email](#)
+33 (0)4 26 20 97 63

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