

Verbalizing sensory experiences: A netnography on snacks in consumers' everyday lives

Abstract

In this paper, we examine how consumers verbally describe the sensory perceptions of snacks in their everyday consumption. This netnographic study was carried out in Finland, in an on-line consumer community. We asked participants to focus on different sensory properties while they were dealing with snacks. The work-in-progress paper highlights two kinds of preliminary findings: we introduce the most commonly mentioned as snacks (sandwiches, dairy products and fruits) and their related sensory descriptions as well as discuss consumers' ability to verbally describe the sensations they perceive via five senses. We conclude that in order to get a multisided description of consumers' sensory experiences, a combination of a variety of methodologies provides most insightful possibilities.

Keywords: consumer, snacks, sensory experience, individual perception

Introduction

In this paper, we examine how consumers verbally describe the sensory perceptions of snacks in their everyday consumption. Understanding consumers' daily challenges and desires leads to a better success for a product as it matches those mundane occasions more fluently. Food companies are indeed constantly spotting new ways to answer the changing market demands through development of innovative snacks concepts. In this development, investigation of the consumers' responses to the variety of sensory stimuli is pivotal as these types of mistakes, such as unfit smell or undesirable outlook may lead to product failures. Thus, it is particularly evident to find out what is the role of sensations such as taste and smells in snacking.

While most of the extant research on consumers' sensory perceptions rely on quantitative methodology (Lawless and Heymann 2010), the current paper departs from this stream of studies by approaching qualitatively consumers' meaning-making of their sensorial experiences. Relying on netnographic research, our study aims to shed light on consumers' sensory perceptions evoked by selecting, preparing and consuming snacks during their everyday life practises. The work-in-progress study highlights two kinds of preliminary findings. Firstly, we showcase thematic findings of our research in regard to the most common snacks, and their related sensory descriptions. Secondly, we tackle with consumers' ability to verbally describe the sensations they perceive via five senses while

snacking. Through these findings, we discuss the possibilities of employing this type of methodological approach in research aiming at contributing to product development.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on netnographic research tradition (Kozinets, 2015), which means that the data were generated by participating in and observing social interaction in an online consumer community. The consumer community lasted for sixteen weeks in autumn 2016. The community participants were recruited from an existing commercial panel of 15,000 Finnish consumers, and they were divided in three subgroups. The groups included 1) parents – consumers with at least one child living with them (n = 16), 2) health conscious consumers who exercise several times per week (n = 18) and 3) digital game-players who play several times per week (n = 16).

During the community, the participants discussed about topics related to snack consumption, game-playing and use of social media. Regarding to this study, we analysed discussion where participants were advised to pay attention for a few days to the sensory experiences perceived via all five senses while eating, drinking, preparing, or buying snacks. Study participants were asked to describe their personal sensory experiences related to food products they considered snacks. Thus, consumers were free to decide by themselves if the food they were handling could be considered as snack.

Findings and discussion

Overall, we found out that a term snack was understood in very different ways, ranging from light meals to chocolate bars. Also, it was quite challenging for participants to describe the snacks based on their own sensory experience. Our findings show that the products that were most often classified as snacks were sandwiches (n = 11), dairy products such as yoghurts and curds (N = 10) and fruits (n = 6). Descriptions were collected for these three main snack-groups and they are shown in Figures 1-3.



Figure 1. Wordcloud illustration for different sandwiches described by consumers (n = 11) of our study. The most widely used words were soft, crispy and rustle.



Figure 2. Wordcloud illustration for different dairy products described by consumers (n = 10) of our study. The most widely used words were smooth, artificial, sweet, sour, unseasoned, fresh and lump.



Figure 3. Wordcloud illustration for different fruit snacks described by consumers (n = 6) of our study. The most widely used words were fresh, sweet, fruity, juicy, tangy and colour.

People live in their own sensory worlds and consumers are different even at sensitivity level during perception (Puputti et al 2018). Based on our previously reported results (Authors 2017) focusing only on the olfaction and smelling while snacking, the snack products with strongest smell-related sensations were coffee, bakery products (e.g. fresh bread and coffee bread) and fruits (e.g. apples and citrus fruits). In addition, most of the smell sensations in snack contents described were associated to positive experiences.

It seems that sensory perceptions are important in every step of snacking (before, during and after). However, it is a difficult task for consumers to explain their sensations even when they were focusing on describing the snack currently in use. For this reason, it is useful to apply also analytical sensory evaluation tools in consumer-oriented food development together with qualitative consumer studies. Furthermore, multidisciplinary and co-creative collaboration is fruitful both for consumers, researchers, and companies. In conclusion, we suggest that to get a multisided, yet profound description of consumers' sensory experiences of mundane food products a combination of variety of methodologies (such as pre-developed questionnaire and freely evoking experiences) provides insightful possibilities.

References

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