

Europeans and Traditional Foods: Definition and Image from the Consumers' Perspective

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Abstract— This paper provides a consumer-driven definition of traditional food products (TFP) and investigates the image European consumers have about this food product category. Data were collected from representative consumer samples in six European countries, including Belgium, France, Italy, Norway, Poland and Spain, with a total sample size of 4,828 participants. European consumers define traditional foods as well-know products, products that one can eat very frequently, and products that were already eaten by grandparents. Although positive, association of TFP with naturalness and low processing is less pronounced. Sensory, health- and environment-related attribute perceptions contribute positively to the image of TFP, whereas perceived convenience, price, and availability contribute negatively to the TFP image. Finally, TFP are mainly pictured as foods that agree well with people who love national or regional cuisine, with people living in the countryside, equally so with men and women, though more so with families with children rather than singles or household without children. The empirical findings provide insights with particular relevance for TFP positioning, marketing communications around TFP and further development of the TFP market in Europe.

Keywords— Traditional food, Consumer, Europe .

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional food products (TFP) are closely related to cultural identity and heritage, which make it a rather complex concept. In the literature, only a very limited number of attempts have been made to define the concept. Moreover, the ones available are designed from a food scientist's or food technologist's perspective, while the interpretation from the

consumer's point of view is missing. Yet, a definition where consumers' perceptions and beliefs towards TFP are revealed, together with the expected benefits from these products, can be very relevant from a food-marketing point of view, especially given that TFP represent a growing market segment, as well as a segment with considerable relevance to agricultural and rural livelihood and policy.

In this study, a consumer-driven definition of the concept of 'traditional food products' will be presented, together with a discussion on the image traditional food has. Also, the results will allow to gain insight in how a traditional food consumer is identified in terms of personality and personality traits. Given the strong correlation between traditional food and cultural heritage, six European countries which clearly differ in terms of cultural background were included in the study: Belgium (Be), France (Fr), Italy (It), Norway (Nw), Poland (P) and Spain (Es).

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In each of these countries, representative consumer samples were gathered in November 2007 through a web-based survey, resulting in a total sample of 4,828 subjects (800 per country). Regarding the aim to define the concept of traditional food, the starting point was a definition obtained from a preliminary qualitative study. This definition was subdivided into separate statements on which respondents could express their (dis)agreement on its association with their perception of traditional food. Next, the respondent's general image toward traditional food was measured on a seven-point scale ranging from

“negative” to “positive”. In the same vein, respondents were asked to score 15 different product attributes in relation with traditional foods. Partial Least Squares regression models were used to relate these consumers’ attribute perceptions to the general image of traditional foods in each country. Furthermore, respondents were confronted with a list of 18 expressions that described different types of persons or personalities. On each of them, they could indicate the extent to which this person or personality matched with a typical traditional food consumer or a typical non-traditional food consumer.

III. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The working definition, obtained from the qualitative pre-study, was largely confirmed in this quantitative study (Table 1). This confirmation was most strongly pronounced in Poland, Spain, Italy and France.

Table 1 Mean sample values on the thirteen statements considered for the definition of the concept of traditional food products (7-point scale).

Item	Mean	SD
Grandparents already ate it	5.93	1.17
Well-known	5.66	1.25
Authentic recipe	5.54	1.33
Specific sensory properties	5.51	1.31
Dependent on the season	5.50	1.42
In grandmothers way	5.34	1.42
Authentic origin of raw material	5.30	1.36
Can often eat	5.22	1.45
Authentic production process	5.11	1.40
Contain a story	5.07	1.60
Local	4.85	1.57
Special occasions	4.70	1.68
Natural, low processed	4.66	1.68

Only in the Belgian sample, mean values below the mid-point of the agreement scale were found (more particularly for the items “contain a story” and “special occasions”). European consumers seemed to define traditional foods as “well-known” foods, that one “can eat often” and that were eaten already by “our grand-parents”. Conversely, traditional foods were less strongly associated with being “natural and

low-processed”. With regard to cross-country differences, the least discrepancy was found for statements related to the common character of the product and its long existence, hence the statements that were most strongly associated with traditional foods (results not shown). Issues that were subject to the highest between-country discrepancy were related to the special character of the product. Especially in Poland, and to a lower extent in Italy, France and Spain, consumers were found to associate “specific sensory properties” significantly more with traditional foods than in Belgium and Norway. The same appeared for the association with “special occasions” and “contain a story”, even more pronounced in the Polish sample.

Throughout the sample, a positive appreciation was found for the general image of traditional food products. The highest mean values were found in Spain, Poland and Italy, followed by Norway, France and Belgium (results not shown). Regarding the influence of the 15 product attributes included in the study, all of them showed to significantly impact on the general image of TFP. In combination, these attributes explain 32% of the general image of TFP. With regard to the direction of the impact, the attributes “quality”, “special taste”, “taste”, “constant quality”, “safety”, “nutritional value”, “environment-friendly”, “supportive for local economy”, “appearance”, “healthy” and “assortment” reinforced the image of TFP, while perceptions on the attributes “time of preparation”, “ease of preparation”, “availability” and “low price” negatively associated its image. Concerning country peculiarities, we found Belgium to be the only country with a non-significant effect of ‘supportive of local economy’ and a negative impact of ‘ease of preparation’. France was the only country with a non-significant impact of ‘special taste’ and ‘safety’. Poland appeared as the only country with a positive impact of ‘healthy’, and Spain was the only country indicating a negative impact of ‘low time for preparation’ (Table 2).

Table 2 Attribute perception effects on the general image of TFP: overview table (+, -, NS signal a positive, negative or insignificant effect, respectively, of attribute perceptions on overall TFP image)

	Be	Fr	It	Nw	P	Es	All
Quality	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Special taste	+	NS	+	+	+	+	+
Taste	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Consistent quality	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Nutritional value	+	NS	+	+	+	NS	+
Safety	+	NS	+	+	+	+	+
Environment-friendly	NS	+	+	+	+	NS	+
Supportive for local economy	NS	+	+	+	+	+	+
Appearance	NS	NS	+	+	+	NS	+
Healthy	NS	NS	NS	NS	+	NS	+
Assortment	+	+	NS	NS	NS	+	+
Ease of preparation	-	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	-
Low time of preparation	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	-	-
Availability	NS	NS	-	NS	-	NS	-
Low price	NS	-	NS	-	-	NS	-

Regarding the image of a typical traditional food consumer, a quite consistent picture across country was obtained (results not shown). A strong association is made with “people loving the national/regional cuisine” and with “people living in the countryside”. Further consistency was found for personalities that did not comply with a typical traditional food consumer (i.e. “occupied people” and “people with little time available”). Differences between countries pertained to Norwegians indicating a negative association with “health-concerned people”, while other countries denoted a positive association. In Italy and France a comparative stronger association with a person “who really loves to cook” and “who enjoys eating” was found, while a comparative weaker association appeared for “housewives”. Other findings revealed that “households with children” were attributed a stronger association as compared to “singles” or “households without children”, and that

both females as well as males were equally associated with being typical traditional food consumers.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides interesting insights for future developments of TFP markets. First of all, the definition reveals what consumers in different European countries bear in mind when conceptualising traditional food products. Secondly, an overall positive perception and image structure of traditional foods is found across Europe. Insights are gathered in each country on which product attributes positively or negatively impact on the general image of traditional food products. The attributes can serve as anchors for promoting TFP in Europe, while efforts could be made to diminish the negative attributes associated with TFP (either through real or perceived repositioning strategies). Finally, the image Europeans have about a typical traditional food consumer provide valuable information with respect to product positioning and marketing communications..

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