Applying the food technology neophobia scale in a developing country context. A case-study on processed *matooke* (cooking banana) flour in Central Uganda

Hans De Steur a,*, Walter Odongo a, b, Xavier Gellynck a

a Department of Agricultural Economics, Faculty of Bioscience Engineering, Ghent University, Coupure Links 653, 9000, Gent, Belgium

b Department of Rural Development and Agribusiness, Faculty of Agriculture and Environment, Gulu University, P.O Box 166, Gulu, Uganda

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A B S T R A C T

The success of new food technologies largely depends on consumers’ behavioral responses to the innovation. In Eastern Africa, and Uganda in particular, a technology to process *matooke* into flour has been introduced with limited success. We measure and apply the Food Technology Neophobia Scale (FTNS) to this specific case. This technique has been increasingly used in consumer research to determine consumers’ fear for foods produced by novel technologies. Although it has been successful in developed countries, the low number and limited scope of past studies underlines the need for testing its applicability in a developing country context. Data was collected from 209 *matooke* consumers from Central Uganda. In general, respondents are relatively neophobic towards the new technology, with an average FTNS score of 58.7%, which hampers the success of processed *matooke* flour. Besides socio-demographic indicators, ‘risk perception’, ‘healthiness’ and the ‘necessity of technologies’ were key factors that influenced consumer’s preference of processed *matooke* flour. Benchmarking the findings against previous FTNS surveys allows to evaluate factor solutions, compare standardized FTNS scores and further lends support for the multidimensionality of the FTNS. Being the first application in a developing country context, this study provides a case for examining food technology neophobia for processed staple crops in various regions and cultures. Nevertheless, research is needed to replicate this method and evaluate the external validity of our findings.

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1. Introduction

Despite the high rate of market failures, new food technologies are still increasingly introduced, due to the anticipated range of benefits they can bring to the consumer and the food sector, particularly in developing regions (Rollin, Kennedy, & Wills, 2011). Nevertheless, consumers are traditionally concerned about the risks associated with such food applications, especially when there is a perceived lack of tangible benefits (Frewer et al., 2011; Rollin et al., 2011; Siegrist, 2008). This has led to a growing body of literature in consumer food research dealing with consumers’ fear of novel foods, also known as food neophobia (e.g. Caracciolo, Coppola, & Verneau, 2011; Chen, Anders, & An, 2013; Coppola, Verneau, & Caracciolo, 2014; Cox & Evans, 2008; Frewer et al., 2011; Matin et al., 2012; Pliner & Hobden, 1992; Siegrist, 2008; Verneau, Caracciolo, Coppola, & Lombardi, 2014). While it is generally characterized as a personality trait, i.e. a continuum along which people can be placed in terms of their tendency to be in favor of new foods or to be reluctant (Pliner & Salvy, 2006), food neophobia has also been treated as a form of behavior, involving the avoidance of novel foods in particular situations (Pliner & Salvy, 2006; Ritchey, Frank, Hursti, & Tuorila, 2003). As the success of new food technologies largely hinge on consumers’ behavioral responses in the market place (Chen et al., 2013), negative attitudes towards food technologies may prevent widespread adoption and result into product failures. Therefore, identifying population segments that are more or less food technology neophobic as well as segments of early adopters of innovative food technology is deemed useful from a marketing point of view (Evans, Kermarrec, Sable, & Cox, 2010).

Food neophobia does not only relate to consumers’ reluctance to
try new food products, but also to the acceptance of new technolo-
gies used in food production and processing, known as food 
technology neophobia (e.g. Backström, Pirtilä-Backman, & Tuorila, 
2004; Choe & Cho, 2011; Cox & Evans, 2008; Grunert, Bredahl, & 
Scholderer, 2003; Lähteennäki et al., 2002). Therefore it is 
deemed useful to make a distinction between the acceptance of 
new foods and the new technologies that are applied to develop 
those foods (Evans et al., 2010; Frewer et al., 2011; Grunert et al., 
2003; Siegrist, 2008). The key factors that contribute to con-
sumers’ resistance to try foods produced by new food technologies 
generally include functional barriers related to ease of use and 
usefulness, benefits and risk perceptions, knowledge and attitudes, 
socio-demographic indicators and lifestyle factors, as well as psy-
chological barriers (Chen et al., 2013; Frewer et al., 2013; Ronteltap, 
Van Trijp, Renes, & Frewer, 2007).

When looking at consumer research on food and food technol-
yology neophobia, the development of the Food Neophobia Scale 
(FNS) (Pliner & Hobden, 1992), which provides a standardized, 
validated measurement, is considered as the starting point for the 
increased attention on both phenomena, by which scientists 
particularly focused on evaluating the relationship between appe-
tite and food aversion (Choe & Cho, 2011; Olabi, Najm, Baghdadi, & 
morton, 2009). The FNS has been validated with general 
neophobia, trait anxiety and sensation seeking (Pliner & 
Hobden, 1992). Consequently, studies have shown that the FNS 
accurately predicts responses to novel or unfamiliar food (e.g. 
Lähteennäki et al., 2002; Ritchey et al., 2003).

However, while the FNS has been proven to be suitable for 
assessing consumer reactions towards ethnic or other culture foods 
(Pliner & Hobden, 1992), it seems not appropriate for examining 
acceptance of foods produced by novel technologies (Cox & Evans, 
2008; Frewer et al., 2011; Siegrist, 2008). Even though food tech-
nology neophobia is still poorly addressed in consumer research 
(Choe & Cho, 2011; Cox & Evans, 2008; Olabi et al., 2009), the Food 
Technology Neophobia Scale (FTNS) (Cox & Evans, 2008; Evans 
et al., 2010), is considered a more suitable tool than the food neo-
phobia scale (FNS) (Pliner & Hobden, 1992) to map consumer per-
cceptions of food technologies. The original FTNS consists of 13 
seven-point bi-polar scales, anchored from ‘totally disagree’ to 
‘totally agree’ with a neutral mid-point, which focus on food 
technology itself, rather than the (attributes of the) food product.
Since its introduction in 2008, seven consumer studies have 
measured the FTNS (for a review, see Table 1). Building upon the 
first application of Cox and Evans (2008), Evans et al. (2010) have 
retested the FTNS constructs by looking at the same processing 
technologies, products and research location as in their original 
work. Out of the remaining studies, two focused on food packaging 
in Canada (Chen et al., 2013; Matin et al., 2012), while three other 
studies applied FTNS to food processing in Italy (Caracciolo et al., 
2011; Coppola et al., 2014; Verneau et al., 2014). In general, the 
FTNS has been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of food 
technology neophobia. Although it has been tested and lauded for 
its consistency and stability (e.g. Chen et al., 2013; Evans et al., 
2010; Matin et al., 2012; Verneau et al., 2014), the low number 
and limited scope of FTNS applications do not allow validation of its 
use in different contexts. Firstly, the existing FTNS studies have only 
been conducted in developed countries, such as Australia (Cox & 
Evans, 2008; Evans et al., 2010), Canada (Chen et al., 2013; Matin 
et al., 2012) and Italy (Caracciolo et al., 2011; Coppola et al., 2014; 
Verneau et al., 2014). Secondly, besides the work of Cox and 
Evans, two other studies (Chen et al., 2013; Matin et al., 2012) also 
dealt with food-related packaging technology, rather than focusing 
on food technology. Consequently, there is a need to conduct more 
studies on the applicability of the FTNS in other sectors and con-
texts, especially in relation to food technology in developing 
regions.
Indeed, consumers have heterogeneous attitudes and prefer-
ences toward different, novel food technologies (Frewer et al., 2013; 
Pliner & Salvy, 2006; Ronteltap et al., 2007), which may affect 
their food choices. This study measures and applies the FTNS to assess 
consumer preference of *matooke* (fresh versus processed) in 
Uganda. *Matooke* is an East-African highlands cooking banana that 
is traditionally peeled, mashed and boiled or steamed in banana 
leaves after being harvested between three-quarters to full matur-
ity (Florence Isabirye Muranga, Sampath, Marlett, & Ntambi, 
2007). During this process, the color of the pulp changes from a 
creamy white to a yellowish color depending on original maturity of 
the bunch. Because *matooke* fruit is bulky and highly perishable, 
post-harvest losses are consistently high, up to a level of 45% 
(Florence I Muranga, Mutambuka, Nabugoomu, & Lindhauer, 2010; 
Florence I Muranga, Nabugoomu, & Katebarirwe, 2011). To sub-
stantially reduce the bulk of *matooke* starch, increase its shelf-life 
and diversify its use for bakery and confectionary industries, 
recent advances in processing (pre-gelatinization) have resulted in 
the development of banana flours, like raw, instant and extruded 
‘Tooke’ flour (Florence I Muranga et al., 2011).

With banana as its main staple crops, Uganda also became one of 
the world’s largest producers of *matooke*, ranking first in Sub-
Saharan Africa, with an estimated production of about 9.5 million 
tons (i.e. 26.4% of the global production), cultivated by 72% of 
farmers (Karugaba & Kimaru, 1999). While Uganda also has the 
highest per capita consumption of *matooke*, estimated at 191 kg per 
year, *Tooke* flour was less successful. Since its introduction in 2008, 
processed banana flour only obtained a market share between 20% 
and 30% (Florence I Muranga et al., 2010). The low adoption of the 
*Tooke* flour raises a food technology neophobia question. Emerging 
processed food products based on novel technologies sometimes 
tend to raise concerns amongst consumers, who perceive them as 
unsafe, unnatural and unpleasant, hence the need for applying the 
FTNS to the case of processed *matooke* (Cooking Banana) flour.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data collection method

By using convenience sampling, a sample was drawn from ba-
nana consumers in the central business districts of Kampala, 
Wakiso and Mukono in Central Uganda. The majority of the pop-
ulation in these areas are traditional *matooke* consumers. These are 
also locations where ‘Tooke’ flour has been introduced.

Based on a pretested, structured questionnaire, face-to-face in-
terviews were administered between April and May 2013. Out of 
the 220 respondents who completed the questionnaires, 209 questionnaires were considered useful for further analysis. There-
fore, four enumerators were hired and trained specifically for the 
purpose of the data collection. Respondents were briefed on the 
nature and context of the study. Even though all of them knew 
what *matooke* is, each enumerator carried a packet of the *Tooke* 
flour for each interview session to ensure that respondents do not 
mistake the *Tooke* flour for other types of flour.

The survey questionnaire was structured into two major parts. 
The first section focused on the socio-demographic profile of the 
respondents. The following indicators were included: gender, age, 
marital status, household size, income level, education level, 
employment status and distance to the market. The second part 
assessed respondents’ attitudes towards food technology using the 
13-item FTNS scale as validated in various studies (Chen et al., 
Evans et al., 2010; Verneau et al., 2014). The various statements, 
measured on a 5-point Likert scale (degree of agreement/ 
disagreement), refer to perceptions about new food technologies,
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