The effect of gender, age and product type on the origin induced food product experience among young consumers in Finland

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1. Introduction

Increase in demand has been a trend among locally produced and sourced raw materials and food products in the US (Low et al., 2015), and Europe (Kneafsey et al., 2013). In practice, this can be seen as an increase in the number of farms selling products directly to consumers, but also in the more advanced supply chains of local food (Kneafsey et al., 2013; Low et al., 2015). The definition of local food is still rather vague and in some cases controversial. Typical examples are definitions related to physical distance or logistic steps between places of production and consumption (Peters, Bills, Wilkins, & Fick, 2009). The specific distances attached to the local origin vary from 10 miles up to a 100 miles (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). For example in a study by Adams and Adams (2011), three percent of respondents thought local food had to come from within 10 miles, 28 percent said within 30 miles, and 42 percent within 50 miles; however, 70 percent also considered that local products had to come from locally owned farms. In addition to proximity, local food is often referred to as a food produced on a small scale (Motta & Sharma, 2016). It seems that locality is a much more complicated concept than mere food miles.

Consumers’ motivations to use locally produced food are diverse. Typically, local food is associated as being better in quality, tastier, healthier, or more fresh (Campbell, DiPietro, & Remar, 2014; Motta & Sharma, 2016). The qualities attached to local food might infer that consumers who value the sensory properties of food are also drawn to local products. Consumers of local food may also become more emotionally attached to the produce, which can alter the product related experience (O’Kane, 2016). Food systems are becoming more complex, and the recently increased demand for local food can also be seen as a desire for regional self-reliance (Hinrichs, 2003). When no information about the origin of the food is available, the origin can be seen as neutral, in other words, food from nowhere (Schermer, 2015). Providing information about the product is a key factor when considering the consumers’ trust in the seller as well as the consumers’ ability to make judgments.
about possible food safety risks (Yoo, Parameswaran, & Kishore, 2015). The food origin can be considered domestic when it is consumed in the same country as it is produced. Domestic origin is often favored over imports or other less specific origins (Fernqvist & Ekelund, 2014). Gineihi, Schlegelmilch, and Aursuskevićiene (2017) showed that domestic products create a strong sense of ownership for consumers when purchasing products from their own country.

The product quality is based not only on perceived properties, but also the expectations placed on the product. Consumer expectations can be created by providing information about the product (Piquerass-Fiszman & Spence, 2015). Information not related to the actual physical product, such as labelling, is called an extrinsic cue (Deliza & MacFie, 1998). The geographical origin of the food can raise expectations which modify the perceived product quality (Fernqvist & Ekelund, 2014; Iacarino, Di Monaco, Minzione, Cavella, & Masi, 2006). Stefani, Romano, and Cavichioli (2006) showed that in the case of spelt, the narrower and more precise the description of the geographical origin of the food, the higher the quality expected. The effect of product origin may vary according to individual preferences (Cosmina, Gallenti, Marangon, & Troiano, 2016). Fernqvist and Ekelund (2014) concluded in their review that domestic products create higher hedonic evaluations as compared to products from elsewhere.

When examining food consumption patterns, age has a well-recognized role. The constructs of health and convenience differ among adolescents comparing to adults and the sensory aspects of food may not be equally important (Share & Stewart-Knox, 2012). This may indicate that motives for food choice change with age. During adolescence people may be more dependent on their families and reflect to some extent the eating patterns of their parents (Ambrosini et al., 2009; Pearson, Biddle, Corely, 2009). Food preferences are very dynamic during early ages and they can be influenced by ownership for consumers when purchasing products from their own country.

Based on previous research, we tested four hypotheses:

H1 (origin): A closer geographical origin has a positive effect on product perception.

H2 (gender): Information about the product's geographical origin has a greater impact on product perception among women as compared to men.

H3 (age): Information about product origin has a greater impact on the perception of the product among older consumers than younger consumers.

H4 (product type): The effect of origin on product perception is dependent on the product type.

To gain an understanding of the effect of age on origin induced expectations, two separate studies were conducted among different age groups. Young consumers in three groups at different stages of early adulthood participated in the study. The study was conducted among adolescents and university students to anticipate the future consumer trends. Adolescents are not the primary decision makers in their household, but they will be adults in a few years. University students will very soon gain a considerable increase in purchasing power and are already at the center of market interest. Consumers evaluated the product pleasantness, the probability to choose the product, the overall quality, and their willingness to pay. To gather information on whether the phenomenon is consistent, independent of the product category, three different types of products were tested. The tested components were meat, bread, and vegetables representing protein, grain/fiber and fruit/vegetable components respectively, which are typically included in the Finnish diet and were familiar to the participants. The tested products were chosen to simulate the different components of a typical school/workday lunch.

2. Study 1: the influence of product origin among the youngest consumers

The origin induced food product experience was studied with vegetables among two age groups of young consumers. At the beginning of the study the participants were provided with a questionnaire containing brief information about the food product. Each respondent then completed the questionnaire based on the information provided. The information focused on a product description containing one of the three types of origin (neutral, domestic, local). The objective of this study was to test the effect of the food product origin on the perceived product properties.

2.1. Participants

Eight hundred and sixty-one students at the 7th-12th grades (Finnish education system) filled out the forms during their classes. Since the results between educational levels (lower and upper) differed from each other significantly, both levels of education were analyzed separately. Of the students at the lower educational level (7th-9th grades) (N = 480) 46.0% of the respondents were male and 53.1% female (4 missing). The average age in this group was 15.2

Taskar, Nicklas, Yang, & Berenson, 2007). The gender differences have been studied thoroughly among adult populations, but we do not know yet if they exist among younger respondents.

It appears that the role of product origin in food product evaluation is complex and that it is related to socio-demographic characteristics, as well as food product characteristics. This current study fills the existing research gaps by exploring how the association between product origin and evaluation varies by gender, age, and product type. To test the consumer response to the product origin neutral, domestic, and local conditions were used. Because gender is a significant factor when considering food preferences, both genders were analyzed independently.

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