



Product uniqueness: Further exploration and application of a consumer-based methodology



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ABSTRACT

In a recent study, we examined the concept of product “uniqueness” in New Zealand beers by identifying unique patterns of consumer responses from among a wide range of consumer-based attitudinal, cognitive and emotional measures (Cardello et al., 2016). In the present study we seek to: 1) extend and validate the approach using a different product category, 2) assess the utility of the method using different ranges and types of products within the new category, and 3) examine the concept of uniqueness both from the overall pattern of consumer-based responses, and from the perspective of consumers’ direct judgments of “uniqueness.” Two experiments were conducted with chocolate confections as the product category. In both experiments, a similar methodological approach was used as in our previous research. Consumers assessed the chocolates by: i) answering a set of affective/descriptive/attitudinal questions about them, ii) judging their appropriateness for use in a number of common consumption/use situations, iii) identifying emotional associations to them. In addition, a direct measure of product “uniqueness” was included to compare these judgments to the results obtained using our previously established method for identifying unique products. Results showed each of the dependent variables to be important product differentiators. Furthermore, both studies revealed highly similar relationships among the tested variables. As in our previous research, it was possible to identify products in each sample set that were highly differentiated from all other samples on the basis of being characterized by: 1) an unfamiliar/unusual/novel character, 2) a high degree of liking, 3) appropriateness for use in a wide range of consumption situations, and 4) a positive/active emotional profile. We characterize these products as being unique from a marketing and multivariate consumer response perspective. Lastly, from an analysis of consumer’s direct judgments, we conclude that consumers conceptualize product “uniqueness” as being undifferentiated from the concept of an “unusual” product, and that their perceptions of uniqueness are not associated with positive affect or value.

1. Introduction

In recent research (Cardello et al., 2016), we investigated the concept of product “uniqueness.” We began by taking a marketing-based perspective, in which unique products are defined as “those that are highly differentiated from other products in their category on the basis of perceivable sensory, image, functional, emotional or other product characteristics that are positively valued by the consumer” (Cardello et al., 2016). This perspective for defining uniqueness is based on the fact that product differentiation is essential to product and brand success (van Trijp & van Kleef, 2008) and that, to be useful, such differentiation must be: 1) perceivable by the consumer in terms of

sensory, functional, image and emotional attributes of the products (Choi & Coughlan, 2006; Choi & Stack, 2005; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Alemán, 2001; Ries & Trout, 1986), and 2) important to consumers in terms of adding positive value to the product (Carpenter, Glazer, & Nakamoto, 1994).

The concept of uniqueness, as characterized above, evokes positive connotations related to the desirability of the product for consumers, and can be contrasted to the Oxford dictionary meaning of uniqueness, which is simply “the quality of being one of a kind; unlike anything else.” In both definitions, one criteria that is required for “uniqueness” is that the object or product must be “different” from others of its kind. This is consistent with marketing principles that identify product

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“differentiation” as critical to market success. However, the word “uniqueness,” in both its dictionary and marketing meanings, implies another quality, beyond being different. A unique product is also “one of a kind” and, in that sense, it may be considered “unusual” or “novel” in some way. It follows from this that a highly unusual or novel food or beverage meets a common criterion for being “unique,” within both the dictionary and marketing definitions of this concept. However, it is here that the dictionary definition of “uniqueness” and the marketing definition begin to diverge. The reason for this is that an unusual or novel product does not always translate into positive market value or success, especially if the product is so unusual or novel that it evokes a neophobic response, or if it is simply disliked by large segments of the population. There are many products that fall into these categories, e.g. highly novel products like dog meat, cooked intestines and insects (Martins & Pliner, 2005, 2006; Tan et al., 2015), and items that are generally disliked by large numbers of people, e.g. brussel sprouts and liver (Kluter, Leshner, & Vanca, 1994). These products may be different, unusual and novel, but they are not well liked, chosen or consumed by the majority of consumers in the marketplace. Marketing researchers interested in developing unique and highly differentiated products that have a high potential for market success therefore include the caveat that the characteristics of the product that highly differentiate them from other products in their category must also deliver “positive value” to the consumer (Carpenter et al., 1994).

Another characteristic that is commonly associated with the market success of a product is the breadth and extent of its purchase, use or consumption situations. Schutz and co-workers (see Schutz, 1988; Schutz, Rucker, & Russell, 1975) addressed this critical characteristic of products using the measurement construct of “appropriateness for use,” and it has been used extensively to identify and discriminate products that have greater or lesser versatility of use in different consumption situations (see examples of its application in Cardello & Schutz, 1996; Elzerman, Hoek, van Boekel, & Luning, 2011, 2015; Giacalone & Jaeger, 2016; Giacalone et al., 2015; Jaeger, 2000, Jaeger & MacFie, 2001; Lähteenmäki & Tuorila, 1995, 1997; Raats & Shepherd, 1991; Schutz, Cardello, & Winterhalter, 2005). In addition, the advantage of segmenting consumers on the basis of use situations for the purpose of product marketing was introduced by Dickson (1982), who realized that, to the extent that any product appeals to a greater number of consumer segments, greater market success is likely to follow. In essence, while an unusual but well liked product that appeals to a limited segment of consumers might find a market niche that supports profitable market share, exceptional market success requires that the product appeal to the greatest number of consumption and use segments.

From a contemporary product research standpoint, the concepts of product differentiation and uniqueness cannot be discussed without a consideration of the emotional impact that the product delivers. It is clear that consumers’ emotional responses to products are an important measure by which to differentiate among them (Chaya et al., 2015), and to characterize them in terms of important drivers of purchase and choice. Beginning with the work of King and Meiselman (2010), a large number of studies in sensory and consumer behavior have utilized product emotion questionnaires to investigate affective responses that go beyond simple liking and disliking (see reviews by Cardello and Jaeger, 2016, and Jaeger & Cardello, 2016). Other, more instrumental, measures of emotional responding also have been utilized in the attempt to differentiate products that may, otherwise, be equally liked or equally acceptable (see text by Meiselman, 2016, for a comprehensive review of methods for emotion measurement). It is also of some note that, in previous research on beer, the evocation of active and positive emotions among consumers was a critical element in identifying products that could be considered “unique” from a marketing perspective (Cardello et al., 2016).

Our previously established approach to identifying important sensory, image, functional, emotional and other attributes that define a

unique product was a consumer-based methodology in which unique patterns were sought within a broad array of attitudinal, cognitive and emotional variables. This approach, while consistent with other approaches to addressing product uniqueness that have been reported in the sensory and consumer literature (Favalli, Skov, & Byrne, 2013; Lanza, Mazzaglia, & Pagliarini, 2011; Rason, Martin, Dufour, & Lebecque, 2007; Stolzenbach, Byrne, & Bredie, 2011), was different in the breadth of the consumer-based measures that were examined. Using it, a pattern of critical consumer-based characteristics could be identified that were consistent with the definition of uniqueness in terms of sensory, functional, image and emotional attributes that are positively valued and that differentiate the product from others in the category. This pattern of characteristics included that the product was well liked, was novel or unusual within its product category, was appropriate for use in a wide range of use situations, and evoked positive/active emotions.

Although this research was seminal in defining a novel approach for identifying unique products, the study was limited by examining only a single product category. In addition, the approach did not allow for an examination of how this methodology compared to direct ratings of uniqueness by the consumer. That is, while the developed methods were useful in identifying products whose unique pattern of consumer-based characteristics were consistent with a marketing definition of product uniqueness, it was not clear whether or not these products were considered unique by the consumer. It could, in fact, be the case that, while consumers liked the products, considered them novel and intriguing, enjoyed consuming them in a variety of situations, and derived positive emotions from them, they may not have actually used the word “unique” to describe them. Perhaps, the word “unique” has a different meaning to consumers, e.g. being synonymous with “unusual,” “novel” or simply “interesting.”

In order to further explore the concept of product uniqueness, both from a methodological perspective, as well as a consumer perspective, we sought to apply our previously developed methodology to a different product category. In addition, we sought to demonstrate the generalizability of the approach by applying it to two different product sub-categories with different user groups. Lastly, we further sought to examine the meaning of product “uniqueness” to consumers by having consumers directly judge the uniqueness of the test products and relating these judgments to specific attitudinal, situational, emotional and other consumer-based measures of the product.

The product category used in the current research is chocolate confections. Chocolate was chosen because it is a common and widely available product that is generally well liked in terms of taste (Chiva, 1999; Macht & Dettmer, 2006). In addition, chocolate is a frequently craved food, especially among women (Hill & Heaton-Brown, 1994; Macdiarmid & Hetherington, 1995; Pelchat, 1997; Rogers & Smit, 2000; Rozin, Levine, & Stoess, 1991; Weingarten & Elston, 1991); it elicits strong emotions, both positive and negative (e.g. guilt) (Macht & Dettmer, 2006); and it frequently serves as a form of comfort food (Wansink, Cheney, & Chan, 2003). It has also been shown that the most important criteria influencing chocolate purchase is its taste, one’s previous experience with the product, and its quality (Dick, Jain, & Richardson, 1995; Lybeck, Holmlund-Rytkönen, & Sääksjärvi, 2006). Lastly, chocolate is now available in a large number and variety of brands and styles and with a wide variety of flavors and other sensory characteristics. In sum, the overall importance of chocolates as a source of sensory pleasure, comfort and strong emotions to the consumer, as well as its availability in a wide array of brands, styles and flavors, makes it a product category for which uniqueness may be an essential element for both the manufacturer and for consumer choice, purchase and consumption.

2. Experiment 1

The first experiment sought to extend our previously developed

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