

IDENTIFICATION AND PERCEPTION OF IDENTICAL TASTE FOOD PRODUCTS AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

One of the key marketing strategies is to maintain positional values of their products when several similar products placed in the competitive market. Apart from the price factor, the general perception of the consumers will be always towards taste of the product. We attempted in our experiments to find out how two identical two branded food products (biscuits) differ in terms of taste attributes through realization and taste sequence patterns. Two sample groups were formed for treatments of the experimental design. The study disproved the hypothesis that there is no significant difference between two identical food products in terms of taste attributes. The implication of the study is that both food products should give more priority on unique taste attributes rather than common taste to sustain its products in the long-run in the increasing competitive markets.

Keywords: Attributes; Identical; Realization; Experience; Taste Composition; Products; Positioning.

INTRODUCTION

In marketing and business strategy, the consumers' perception of a brand or a product partly determines the positioning of its product under competitive environment. The purpose of a positioning strategy is that it allows a company to spotlight specific areas where they can outshine and beat their competition. To put it simply, "Product positioning refers to consumers' perceptions of a product's attributes, uses, quality, and advantages and disadvantages relative to competing brands"¹

In common parlance, taste implies judgment about the quality of objects and a person's ability to examine the product that they use from a store of knowledge for making appropriate decision for its value. At large, the taste decides the preference for the consumers, considering its superiority over other similar products in the market. Looking at the significant determinant of the taste of a product, marketers have always been evolving new products through an innovative combination of taste attributes to keep their product at a higher stake in the market. Therefore, the product developers conducted various tests on taste attribute before launching the products, as it helps them to convince the consumers on the superiority of their product over other similar products while marketing. Also, research indicates that, the usefulness of taste analyzes can measure consumer feeling about the taste of different brands.

BRAND POSITIONING: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Positioning of a product mainly deals with consumer's mind, through various communications. Therefore, a brand's position is related to what the consumer thinks about the brand in his mind when several similar products peaked in the market. In this backdrop, this paper presents very briefly, the theoretical framework of brand positioning of an alternative strategy for consumers' choice through taste attributes for two identical food products.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

At present, mass marketing for food products is no longer a viable option for the majority of competitors. Mass marketing is a strategy, which focus total market as a single segment. It develops single product and single price structure and one distribution system for its products. It is not a successful strategy in the long-run under increasing multi-product marketing

environment. Marketers must, therefore, focus on alternative strategies of brand positioning considering consumers' perception about liking and disliking of a product through their taste preferences. Hence, marketers should keep their mind about the consumer's requirement in such a way that there cannot be any substitute for their branded product.

The concept of taste of a product governs how good the product is well positioned in the market among the similar different products. An innovative strategy is to find out consumers' abilities to sense the dissimilarities in taste of other brands. This taste realization would build a rapport relationship between the product and consumer and, thereby, the marketer can understand the consumers' choice of his product and can fix target marketing effectively. Studies proved that demand for a product is determined by a set of attributes like quality, availability, attraction, etc. The other would be realization of the product when the consumer feels the total satisfaction of a product over other similar products. Therefore, the main task of the marketer is to find out how his product differentiated when marked.

At large, taste of the food product seems to be an important component of product differentiation between similar products and keeps continuous leadership of that product. So, the most important activity of marketers would be to analyze the taste composition of different products through various measurements and tests. One such innovative and unique test has become a convincing tool mainly aimed at attracting large consumers to choose that a particular product over others. This would help to understand the consumer feeling about taste of different products.

RATIONAL OF THE STUDY

Positioning, therefore, starts with consumer's mental perceptions of products. Though the consumer has drawn his or her mental map of his desire to choose a product given the availability of different similarity branded products to satisfy the needs, the strategy must, therefore, be to create a perception about the brand in the consumer's mind so that it stands forever. Of several conceptual strategies, we choose to one to study how two identical products differ in terms of positioning and market segmentation when they are marketed. In this context, we consider taste as a significant attribute of a food product keeping other factors/attributes are unchanging and its differentiation of consumer's perception from product to product when

several similar products marketed. In the following paragraphs, some illustrations are being presented to strengthen our proposal on taste as the conceptual innovative strategy which is an alternative to other strategies for positioning the product.

Looking at the examples like toothsome products where taste has become an important determinant for choosing a brand product by the consumers over other products. The well known brand Coco Cola has a unique identity for itself by using the taste aspects of products². In England, virgin cola challenged both the famous cola companies, i.e. Coke and Pepsi to capture the notable cola market³. Noticeably, the application and report of blind taste tests can be effective at persuading consumers and capturing market share⁴, as well as shaping a key competitor's strategic response⁵, but the use of blind taste tests to develop a marketers' strategy and pioneer a new product can have unintended and potentially devastating consequences⁶.

Burger King's taste test of its fries against Mc Donald's, Papa John's pizza against the Pizza hut in the American market^{7,8,9}. In the case, product development stage taste test also increased the market for products, for instance Minute Maid orange soda was introduced in the Canadian market after a blind taste test¹⁰. In the same way in Asian market also the Campbell soup company did a taste test in Hong Kong market for its soup¹¹. In the European market, Smith's Crisps was tested in a taste test in Holland to identify brand preference against Crock¹². It is curious that blind taste tests continue to be used by marketers to silhouette marketing strategy¹³, and to develop new products^{14,15}, and advertise product pre-eminence claims^{16,17,18}.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The theoretical perspective of taste, as an attribute as perused by the consumers while choosing their product, is a difficult task to examine empirically. Also, it would be a cumbersome to understand the perception of the consumer, their mental attitude and the interaction of taste attributes before choosing a food product. Rabino and Moskowitz rightly mention that in food product, interactions among several continuous product attributes are important in generating consumer choice¹⁹. Hence, the present study is looking at studying consumer's consciousness level about the uniqueness in the taste aspect of the product. This would help to identify an extraneous taste dimension on the basis of which consumers distinguish between brand²⁰.

As said above, taste is the ultimate decision by the consumers for choosing the most of the brand food products while making purchase decision. The study is expected to address whether consumers can differentiate the taste of one brand product from that other category of similar product. Also, it seeks to examine consumers' abilities to sense the dissimilarities in taste between different brands¹⁸. The taste realization for any food product can build a relationship between the product and consumer. These equations can be used ultimately to find out the effectiveness of brand positioning of food products.

In sum, the major task of research work is to find out how the taste consciousness level of the consumers discriminates the positioning values with reference to taste aspects of two leading identical taste nature of branded biscuits (BIT and ITC).

HYPOTHESIS

The first hypothesis states that there is no difference between taste attributes of two identical food products (biscuits). This assumption is being framed to testify how taste composition of two food products with similar attributes can influence the brand positioning and the level of consumers' realization for the two identical biscuits.

In the second hypothesis, it is assumed that at different stages of eating process (biting, chewing and swallowing); the respondents will not find different taste realization for two branded food products biscuits.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

The uniformity of successive products refers to successful products in the market that is fairly customary. The classification of positional attributes of successive products is extremely tricky as both the products have similar attributes. The study considered the two leading bakery (biscuits) industries of India such as, Britannia Industries Limited (BIL) and Imperial Tobacco Company (ITC). They brought out a very novel tasted biscuits, namely, Britannia 50:50 Sweet & Salty of BIL; and Sunfeast Sweet 'n' salt of ITC biscuit in 1993 and 2003 respectively. The taste aspects of both the biscuits were highly decorated as a core attribute of the biscuit in the way of the combined taste of contradictory flavours sweet and salt collectively. The BIL product highlighted the taste aspect of biscuit as "deliciously sweet and scrumptious

salt"²¹, while ITC advertised that salt and sweet in the same bite"²². Hence, the both products highlighted their inimitable nature of sweet and salty, even though there had differences in the peripheral aspects of both the products; they had similar in shape, design and taste attributes of both biscuits.

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The research experiment considered two food products which have larger segmentation in the Indian food market. They are BIL and ITC brands (biscuits). We had chosen students as the sample respondents who had previous experience of eating such branded biscuits. To facilitate the experiments, 100 male and 100 female students were drawn from faculty of Commerce and Management from the Periyar University, Salem, Tamilnadu, India. Using a lottery system, two groups were formed, viz., group A (50 male and 50 female) and B (50 male and 50 female) for conducting the experiments. The total duration of the experiments was about 6 months. Both the groups were given a pack of biscuits without mentioning the brand of the food products. Each respondent has given liberty to taste the biscuits more than once. This would ensure the reliability of the experiments.

It is assumed that the two products had similar identify of taste. Hence, the core issue of the study is to test whether two products have similar taste or differ as perused by sample respondents. This has been attempted through positioning values which refer to taste composition that are ultimately realized by the sample respondents at the end of the experiments. The experiments consist of three stages. At the first stage, it is ensured the respondents' realization level and their ability to realize the taste attributes of the biscuits. On the basis of the first stage, they were sorted out and eliminated. In the second stage, taste sequence patterns being assessed to bring out the tastes of food products as identified by the respondents. In the last stage, the composition levels of different tastes in the food products being determined based on the uniqueness of the two identical food products.

NATURE OF EMPIRICAL TEST

The study composed of two segments, viz. Level of realization and taste sequence patterns of two identical food products. These two are intended to testify consumer's preference of their choice of products. In our study, we attempted several stages to reach out the composition levels of different tastes

for assessing its uniqueness for discriminating their position. Under realization level, two tests were performed, viz. Realization and Blind tests and are discussed.

(A) REALIZATION TEST

Realization test is being performed to understand the respondents taste realization about the food products. At the outset, the respondents were instructed to eat the biscuits slowly, bit by bit, so that they could realize the taste of the biscuits. After an interval of 5-10 minutes, the respondents were asked about the taste realization. In the process, firstly, the

respondents had to taste two biscuits in crushed form one by one. Later, they were supplied full biscuits of two different brands (BIL and ITC) to ascertain their familiarity with the brands based on taste attributes. Both processes were repeated until elimination of some respondents who did not have sufficient evidence to identify the taste of two different brands. The confused state of mind of respondents was removed from experiments at the end.

(B) BLIND TEST

The prior knowledge and experience about food products of BIL and ITC brands (biscuits) by the respondents can be helpful to judge the texture, size and smell of the products. This may lead to some sort of bias. It can be avoided by conducting a blind test. In this test, the respondents were given full, half or one fourth of the biscuit of both products (BIL and ITC brands) to taste them. This process is being repeated until the respondents confirming the correct name of brands of the biscuits through the tasting.

Both tests can provide evidence about how the taste of the product affects preference and perception of similarity and dissimilarity among the identical products. The strategic implication of taste test would simultaneous effect on brand positioning, which have not been explored much in the academic literature. In product categories where taste is one of the major reasons for brand choice, and it's become complex for marketers. The taste is an intangible attribute of the product that can be properly judged not by objective measurement but by actual tasting by consumers²³.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

(a) Taste Realization

Realization and Blind tests have been applied to the sample respondents to find out their ability to discriminate the taste of two identical food brand products (BIL and ITC). In the process, out of 200 respondents, ultimately 194 were considered by making four categories of respondents who are eligible to take up the tests. The test results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Realization of Respondents for Food Products

| Categories | Total Respondents | BIL | | | ITC | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
| | | Male | Female | Sub-Total | Male | Female | Sub-Total |
| Very Quick Realizes (VQR) | 63 (32.47) | 16 | 15 | 31 | 13 | 19 | 32 |
| Quick Realizes (QR) | 56 (28.86) | 15 | 14 | 29 | 14 | 13 | 27 |
| Moderate Realizes (MR) | 51 (26.29) | 18 | 12 | 30 | 11 | 10 | 21 |
| Slow Realizes (SR) | 24 (12.37) | 05 | 08 | 13 | 05 | 06 | 11 |
| Grand-total | 194 (100.00) | 54 (52.43) | 49 (47.57) | 103 (53.09) | 43 (47.25) | 48 (52.75) | 91 (46.91) |

Table 1 presents category-wise respondents whose taste realization on two similar food products have been assessed through realization and blind tests. It is to be noted that respondent's categorization has been framed based on their rate of response while conducting the experiments. We found that among 194 respondents, 63(32.47 %) were very quickly realized both the taste of food products and correctly named them.

On the other hand, 24 (12.37 %) respondents were found to be slow to realize of both taste and naming the brands. Interestingly, about 53.09 % of respondents could make out BIL biscuit individually after tasting the products; while 46.91 % for ITC biscuit irrespective of categories and gender groups. Among the gender groups, the highest rate of realization of BIL product was reported by a male group (52.43%); on the contrast, for ITC product, it was from a female group (52.75 %). Therefore, it may be inferred that both gender groups differed while deciding the brands of their choice.

Table 2: Group-wise Realization Level by Respondents

| Categories | Name of brand Product | Group A | | Group B | | Total |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| | | Male | Female | Male | Female | |
| VQR | BIL | 12 | 9 | 4 | 6 | 31 |
| | ITC | 6 | 7 | 7 | 12 | 32 |
| QR | BIL | 5 | 10 | 10 | 4 | 29 |
| | ITC | 9 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 27 |
| MR | BIL | 6 | 7 | 12 | 5 | 30 |
| | ITC | 5 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 21 |
| SR | BIL | 2 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 13 |
| | ITC | 3 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 11 |
| Total | | 48 | 49 | 49 | 48 | 194 |

Table 2 highlights group-wise response given by the sample respondents by the taste realization test as well as blind test. The findings showed that there is not much difference between groups A and B in terms of response level of male and female. However, at the individual response level, there was higher variation between BIL and ITC for moderate category. Looking at the VQR and QR categories, we did not find much variation in both products. This indicates those category persons (VQR and QR) might have a higher probability of preferring the choice of the product they want. The last two categories (MR and SR) persons, somewhat they lacked in decision making about their choice of products.

(B) TASTE SEQUENCE PATTERN

Partly, we got a clue through realization and blind tests about the respondents' identification of products while administering two identical taste products. As a follow up, taste sequence patterns have been used further for making a correct assessment of the respondents on choice of products. In the segment, we are particularly, interested to study the stage wise (bite, chew and swallow) response for each food product. Finally, we had subjected only 72 respondents out of 103 for BIT; and 64 out of 91 of ITC (Table 1) for assessing the taste sequence pattern.

In this test, we proposed four test parameters, viz. sweet, salty, combined taste (butter, milk, vanilla), and edible vegetable oil separately for BIL and ITC food products (Table 3). The respondents were asked to record in a sheet of paper about the taste of each pattern separately, their realization after biting, chewing and swallowing of each product. The results are presented of BIT product in Table 3.

Table 3: Realization Level Vs Taste Sequential Patterns for BIT product

| Gender | Realization category | | | | Taste Sequential Patterns | | | Total number of respondents |
|--------|----------------------|-----|-----|----|---------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| | VQ R | Q R | M R | SR | Biting | Chewing | Swallowing | |
| Male | 4 | | | | | | | 4 |
| Female | 4 | | | 2 | Salty | Salty + Sweet + Butter | Sweet | 6 |
| Male | | 6 | 5 | | | | | 11 |
| Female | | 4 | 2 | | Salty | Salty + Sweet + Butter + milk | Salty | 6 |
| Male | | 4 | | 3 | | | | 7 |
| Female | | | | 3 | Salty | Salty + Oil + Sweet | Salty | 3 |
| Male | 6 | | | | | | | 6 |
| Female | 3 | 4 | | | Sweet | Sweet + Salty + Oil | Salty | 7 |
| Male | | | | | | | | - |
| Female | | 6 | 4 | | Sweet | Sweet + Milk + Salty | Sweet | 10 |
| Male | | 5 | 7 | | | | | 12 |
| Female | | | | | Sweet | Sweet + Salty + Butter | Sweet | - |
| | | | | | | | | 72 |

Of 72 respondents, 37 were felt salty and 35 were expressed sweetness when they started biting the biscuit. While chewing the product, 10 were felt the combination of salty, sweet and butter; 17 were salty, sweet, butter and milky; 10 were salty, oil and sweet; 13 were sweet, salty, and oil; 10 were sweet, milky, and salt; and 12 were sweet, salty and butter respectively. While swallowing, 32 for salty; and 40 for sweetness taste were realized by them for BIT product.

Table 4: Realization Level Vs Taste Sequential Patterns for ITC product

| Gender | Realization category | | | | Taste Sequential Patterns | | | Total number of respondents |
|--------|----------------------|-----|-----|----|---------------------------|----------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| | VQ R | Q R | M R | SR | Biting | Chewing | Swallowing | |
| Male | | | | | | | | - |
| Female | 4 | | 4 | | Salty | Salty + Sweet + Butter + Vanilla | Sweet | 8 |
| Male | | 4 | | | Salty | Salty + Sweet + Butter | Butter | 4 |
| Female | | | | 4 | | | | 4 |
| Male | | | | | Salty | Sweet + Oil + Milk + Salty | Salty | - |
| Female | | 3 | | 2 | | | | 5 |
| Male | 6 | | | | Sweet | Sweet + Salty + Milk | Salty | 6 |
| Female | 4 | | | | | | | 4 |
| Male | | 3 | | | Sweet | Sweet + Oil + Salty | All | 3 |
| Female | 3 | | | | | | | 3 |
| Male | | 5 | 5 | | Sweet | Sweet + Oil + Milk + Salty | Sweet | 10 |
| Female | 3 | | | | | | | 3 |
| Male | 8 | | | | Sweet | Sweet + Salty + Butter | Sweet | 8 |
| Female | | 3 | | 3 | | | | 6 |
| | | | | | | | | 64 |

Table 4 presents the realization level for ITC product. Out of 64 respondents, 21 and 43 were reported the taste of salty and sweetness when they bite the biscuit. When chewing the biscuit, 8 were felt the taste combination of salty, sweet, butter and vanilla; 8 felt the taste combination of salty, sweet and butter; 5 felt the taste combination of sweet, oil, milk and salty; 10 felt sweet, salty and milk; another 6 felt sweet, oil and salty; 13 felt sweet, oil, milk and salty; and 14 felt the taste combination of sweet, salty and butter. While swallowing, 35 felt sweetness; 15 felt salty; 8 were butter; and 6 were combination of all taste.

In brief, for BIT product, there were six taste combinations felt by the respondents, whereas for ITC product, they felt seven taste combinations. Therefore, we may infer from the analysis that ITC product had some added taste feature to attract consumers than that of BIT biscuit. Perhaps, this might have some advantage (ITC biscuits) over other food products in the market. The findings disproved our hypothesis that there is no difference between two food products (BIT and ITC) in terms of taste realization. To put in a nutshell, there is a significant difference between two branded biscuits in terms of taste realization as observed by the respondents.

(c) Association between Taste Realization and Food Products

In the previous discussion, we made groups of respondents based on their realization by different taste combination. The findings complement to understand how taste combinations being considered as an important factor in the choice of the product by the consumers while making purchase decision. Subsequently, we planned to discuss the association between taste realization and level of response. As it was reported through the experimental studies, except salt and sweetness, other taste ingredients did not have any major impact while biting two identical branded biscuits by the sample respondents. Therefore, we consider to find out the association with only two taste attributes (salty and sweetness) for two brands at different response levels.

Table 5 presents association between different response levels and taste of realization (salty and sweet) by the respondents for two food products (BIT and ITC) at three different eating stages (biting, chewing and swallowing).

Table 5: Association between Level of Response and Realization of Taste

| Response level | Biting | | | | Chewing | | | | Swallowing | | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|---------------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|---------------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|
| | Salty | | Sweet | | Salty | | Sweet | | Salty | | Sweet | |
| | BIT | ITC | BIT | ITC | BIT | ITC | BIT | ITC | BIT | ITC | BIT | ITC |
| VQR | 8 | 4 | 9 | 24 | 16 | 28 | 17 | 25 | 9 | 10 | 8 | 15 |
| QR | 14 | 7 | 15 | 11 | 27 | 18 | 29 | 18 | 18 | 3 | 11 | 8 |
| MR | 7 | 4 | 11 | 5 | 19 | 9 | 18 | 13 | 7 | 0 | 11 | 9 |
| SR | 8 | 6 | 0 | 3 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 3 |
| Total | 37 | 21 | 35 | 43 | 72 | 64 | 72 | 64 | 40 | 15 | 32 | 35 |
| Chi-square value | 27.910**, DF = 9, Prob. value = 0.001 | | | | 16.758*, DF = 9, Prob. value = 0.0522 | | | | 18.988**, DF = 9, Prob. value = 0.025 | | | |

In the first stage of the eating process (biting), it is found that there was not much difference between salty (37) and sweet (35) taste realized by the number of respondents for BIT biscuit; whereas for ITC biscuit, the result is totally reversed. There were 21 respondents reported salty taste and 43 felt sweetness. It means that between BIT and ITC biscuits, there is anytaste difference felt by the respondents. In other words, there is a significant difference between the two brands of biscuits while eating, as evident from chi-square value (27.910) at the one per cent level of probability. In the second stage (chewing), also findings showed a significant difference(chi-square value 16.758) between the two brands irrespective of category of respondents. In the final stage of the eating process (swallowing), was also a significant difference (chi-square 18.988 value) between two food brands for salty and sweet taste.

The findings showed that at all three stages, between two brands, there was difference felt by the respondents in terms of salty and sweetness. This has disproved our second hypothesis that there is no difference between the tastes of food products at different stages. However, other taste attributes such as butter, milky, oil and vanilla did not have a good response when subjecting them for identification of two brands. Hence, they left out for studying their association with eating process for two branded biscuits.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The study on the taste realization of two identical food products (BIT and ITC) by the sample respondents showed that there is a significant difference between the two products as realized by the respondents at different stages of eating process. Further, BIT product found to have a unique taste of luscious and mouth-watering; whereas ITC had delicious taste. These two distinct

taste realizations were opinioned by the sample respondents at the end of the experiments. Although these two branded biscuits had identical taste, but they felt different taste composition as evident from the study. The implication of the study is that both food products should give more priority on unique taste attributes rather than common taste to sustain its products in the long-run in the increasing competitive markets.

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