

Linking Product Sensory Properties and Consumer Purchase Intentions of Uht Milk Alternatives: It's All in the Taste

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: Milk alternative producers are challenged to produce products with satisfactory sensory properties to meet consumer acceptance. Sensory properties of milk alternatives have been known to enhance product purchases, whereas consumer avoidance results from unfavourable sensory properties. To develop the milk alternative market in South Africa, the impact of sensory properties on product selection and purchases needs to be understood. The link between South African consumers' evaluation of the sensory properties of UHT milk alternatives and their purchase intentions is largely unknown, necessitating this research.

METHODOLOGY: Utilising a postpositivist, qualitative approach, an exploratory-descriptive phenomenological approach supported the study. Research participants included South African consumers over 18 years, who were familiar with milk alternatives and could be reached through purposeful and convenience sampling. Two in-person focus groups, eight online focus groups and eleven online in-depth interviews, were used to collect data from 35 participants whereby data saturation was achieved. Principles of trustworthiness were addressed in the design of the research. An inductive-deductive thematical data analysis approach was applied. Ethics approval was obtained prior to data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: Consumers held strong beliefs regarding the sensory characteristics, including the taste, texture, smell, and appearance of UHT milk alternatives. They distinguished between plant- and dairy-based milk alternatives, based on their different sensory properties. Consumers often compared the sensory properties of milk alternatives to cow milk as the benchmark. Typical unfavourable sensory properties included a brownish appearance, a clay-like smell, tastelessness, a grass-like, beany or artificial taste, or a watery or grainy mouthfeel. Unfavourable sensory properties of milk alternative products resulted in discontinued use. Contrary to this, favorable evaluation of sensory properties led to a favourable intention to purchase the product.

CONCLUSION: Product sensory properties serve as driving or deterring factors in consumers' intention to purchase milk alternatives. The research contributes to the understanding of the sensory properties of UHT milk alternatives for South African consumers and how it impacts their purchase intentions. It is recommended that producers improve product sensory properties and focus marketing attention on the improved product attributes. Should this be overlooked market growth may be jeopardised.

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Prof Elizabeth Louise Kempen, obtained her PhD in Philosophy from The University of Liverpool in the UK. Further qualifications obtained from the North West University include a Masters in Home Economics, Honours in Home Economics and BSc in Home Economics. She is currently a full professor in the Department of Life and Consumer Sciences at the University of South Africa. Prof Kempen was the Head of Research and Postgraduate Studies in the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences from 2012-2020 and received the SARIMA award for a Distinguished Contribution in Research Management in 2020. Her research interest is in Consumer Decision Making and Purchasing Behaviour within the fields of clothing and foods. She is currently pursuing further research interests in consumer behaviour towards South African indigenous products and sustainable purchasing decisions.