

NEW TECHNOLOGIES APPLIED TO INTERNAL MARKET FROM THE CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The paper outlines a complex analysis of the contingent factors of consumer behaviour in the period of overlapping crises that the Romanian economy is going through and highlights the changing power relations in the changing domestic consumer market under the influence of new technologies. We include in the category of new technologies mainly the discoveries and practical applications of information technology, considered a “disruptive technology” for over two decades, but which has generated certain changes, considered today, not without certain fears, as a new beginning of revolutionary changes in economy and society.

While, before the start of the pandemic crisis, which was “responsible” for triggering the other types of crises, the effects of which we are currently feeling, we could speak of a certain dominance of the forces of end-consumer demand, with the pandemic crisis and the contraction of supply (production cutbacks, breakdown of supply chains, etc.), consumer isolation has increased and, as a result, the distance between producers and end-consumers has grown considerably. This gap had to be filled quickly in order to ensure the “survival” of the two poles of economic exchange: Producer-Consumer.

Research conducted until recently within the area of deciphering of the “Market in the mind of the consumer” (which is the topic of a PhD programme), focusing mainly on the dynamics of the effects of applying new technologies, has revealed several categories of hypotheses. One category relates to new developments, supported by massive investment from the producers, in the areas of consumer behaviour research, the development of new communication technologies, the improvement of storage systems,

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order processing and the promotion of new transport systems to the point of consumption, in quantity, quality, at the right price and at the right time. From the consumer's perspective, there has also been an increased interest in endowing consumers with the means to formalise their requests for offers (mobile phones, laptops, tablets, etc.), to purchase internet services, as well as to "professionalise" them in the use of social networks and the analysis and comparison of offers on the market.

We also note the contribution of research to Big Data analysis, which is useful for both manufacturers and end consumers.

Attention should also be all the more focused both on the new stage of information processing and analysis, as well as on the usefulness of what is now included in the field of Artificial Intelligence, i.e., the benefits and possible limitations in terms of production orientation, organisation of logistical processes and influence on consumer behaviour.

Keywords: *the market in the mind of the consumer, image, brand image, consumer, in-depth interview, conversation guide, semantic differential*

Introduction

The research of the market in the mind of the consumer is based on the knowledge of the purchase and consumption behaviour conceptualized in the literature as "*representing the totality of decision-making acts performed at individual or group level, directly linked to the acquisition and use of goods and services for the satisfaction of current and future needs, including the decision-making processes that precede and determine these acts*"¹⁵.

In order to decipher how the consumer behaves in the processes of information on products, brands and, in general, on the ways of satisfying needs and making purchase decisions, we will start from the model developed by Howard and Sheth, based on four blocks of variables:

¹⁵ V. Balaure coordinator, V. Adăscăliței. C. Bălan, Șt. Boboc, I. Cătoi. V. Olteanu, N. Al. Pop, N. Teodorescu, 2003, *Marketing*, 2nd revised and added edition, p. 180, Uranus Publishing House.

- “«inputs» block variables;
- endogenous (perceptual and learning) variables;
- exogenous variables;
- «outputs» block”¹⁶.

Among the formative factors of the market in the mind of the consumer, an important role is played by the variables in the “inputs” block, represented by “marketing and social stimuli specific to the consumer”¹⁷.

Noting the importance of communication in the “age” of information technology, attention is drawn to “symbolic stimuli, i.e., linguistic or graphical representations of products and services, their characteristics, resulting from the promotional activities carried out”¹⁸.

To the extent that communication becomes a “communion of thoughts”, “*reality is nothing but an interpretation*”¹⁹, as Deepak Chopra says in his work "The Seven Laws of Success", just as Richard Wagner says: “*imagination creates reality*”²⁰.

There are two realities: one in the mind of the consumer and the other in the existence of physical forms and the characteristics perceived by the consumer in direct contact with them. The imagined reality is in fact what we want to see, in which perception “*a highly complex process*”²¹ plays an important role, consisting “*in the mental activity of ascertaining, understanding, judging, etc. of stimuli, which can be achieved with the help of the system of sensory receptors*”²².

Figuratively, one can talk about reality beyond the perceived reality.

¹⁶ Idem, p.213

¹⁷ Ibidem, p.213

¹⁸ Ibidem, p.213

¹⁹ <http://subiecte.citatepedia.ro/despre.php?s=realitate>

²⁰ <https://webcultura.ro/imaginatia-creeaza-realitatea/>

²¹ V. Balaure coordinator, V. Adăscăliței. C. Bălan, Șt. Boboc, I. Cătoi. V. Olteanu, N. Al. Pop, N. Teodorescu, 2003, *Marketing*, 2nd revised and added edition, p. 183, Uranus Publishing House.

²² Idem, p.183

*“We communicate by means of forms, which relate to each other in a way that is inaccessible to the conscious mind, but we intuitively recognize that they have meaning”*¹, said Albert Einstein and, coming back to the role of communication in achieving a communion of thoughts, one can state that, in the processes of search, selection and purchase of goods and services desired by consumers to satisfy their needs, the overlapping of the two images - that in the mind of the consumer and that of the goods in material reality - becomes the first condition for the materialisation of the acts of consumption.

Research Methodology

Both qualitative methods, such as projective tests and direct research, and methods of analysis of information from secondary sources, i.e., statistical information from the fields of modern media communication and online commerce, are used in the development of the paper. The ones in the first category of research focus on the image in the mind of the consumer *“meaning the synthesis of cognitive, affective, social and personal mental representations of the product among buyers. Being a motivational component of a subjective nature, it is the result of the way users or consumers perceive a product or brand”*.²

The objectives of image research are to define its components and to measure the influence of each of them, for a concrete example in the formation of a *“clear, positive and differentiated image that makes the product stand out by giving it a position of its own in the global offer”*.³

¹ https://archive.org/stream/AlbertEinsteinCuvinteMemorableCuleseDeAliceDeAliceCalaprice/Albert%20Einstein%20-%20Cuvinte%20Memorable%20Culese%20Alice%20Calaprice_djvu.txt

² Idem, p. 339

³ Ibidem, p.339

Online, image is formed by communication based on new technologies, while the distance between product and consumption is achieved through the activities and processes surrounding e-commerce.

Thus, a public image is obtained through *“the representation that has been formed as a sum of beliefs, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, experiences or assumptions among groups of people within public opinion about a natural or legal person, organizations, phenomena, objects”*.¹ As a result, image represents the internal culture of an individual, social group or organisation, formed in the processes of information from various external sources, and in the case of goods and services intended to satisfy needs, from the communication of their issuers, producers and providers.

Communication represents *“a process through which a sender transmits information to the receiver by means of a channel with the purpose of causing certain effects on the receiver”*². The sender can be the producer/ service provider, but also the consumer, who communicates his consumption experiences to the family, the community, the social group he belongs to, or, in certain cases, the entire society when he is at one end of a communication channel, thus becoming, what we call today, with a neologism, an influencer.

*“In conclusion, **image is the pivot of the new world**. We live in a society in which the role of the image becomes increasingly important. Whether we are talking about a country, a person or company, or the print media, internet and television, image is the first thing that comes to mind”*³.

The research of the internal culture (image) involves collecting, processing and analysing certain information “stored” in the subconscious of the individuals. According to researchers, the subconscious stores over 80% of the information an individual “calls upon” when making decisions.

¹ <https://tasentetashy.wordpress.com/2009/02/04/rolul-imaginii-in-comunicarea-publica-de-tasente-tanase/>

² Idem

³ Ibidem

This lifetime legacy differentiates people and, to some extent, guides their perceptions regarding the offer of products and services, and ultimately determines how needs are expressed in the form of demand for products and services.

Neuroscience today offers a wide range of tools for measuring individuals' reactions to external stimuli, and measuring their intensity is the basis for the conclusions regarding the use of these means of communication meant to stimulate and direct consumers towards a particular product or brand.

In selecting the research methods for the development of the paper the starting point was the hypothesis that the research of the product image had to be carried out without its physical presence.

Also, we believe that researching brand image can lead us to obtain a synthesis of information on the characteristics of the product, such as the brand image.

“The brand image characterises in particular organisations with an economic purpose and it is a synthetic embodiment of the company's image. It individualizes a company, a product or a service, allowing the buyer to distinguish them from others like them, to individualize them by memorizing their characteristic attributes, to give them psychological significance and to establish emotional relationships with them in their own horizons of expectation.”

In countless cases, a word, a simple graphic sign, a colour, the spelling of a letter, etc. acquires great representational power thanks to the “stock” of information in the mind of the consumer.

“For example, if the buyer sees the «comma», he will be aware that this symbol is the brand image of the company «Nike». The next thoughts that will come to the buyer's mind will be the other aspects, such as «product quality», «product benefits», «personality» and so on.”¹

¹ Ibidem

“The current age prefers the sign over the signified thing, the copy over the original, imagination over reality, appearance over essence, as now illusion alone is sacred while the truth is secular. (Ludwig Feuerbach)”¹

The problem to be solved in the case of our research is how we collect this information, what tools and methods we use, how we process and analyse this information and how we use it in practice in decision-making in order to ensure a certain degree of satisfaction in consumption, respectively a convenient relationship between the values offered by the product and the expectations created over time during the image formation process.

As *“Imagination creates reality (Richard Wagner)”²* and *“Imagination is the first step in the creative process (Herbert Harris)”³*, one can consider that *“Imagination too is a source of information (Grigore Moisil).”⁴*

We sought to validate these hypotheses through media research in order to discover commonalities between internal image and media variables.

For example, experimenting with eye tracking, we found that when viewing an advertisement, the following attract particular attention: the colour red, the message at the top right, then, in order, other elements and lastly the price marked at the bottom of the advertisement. As the price has a major impact on the purchase decision, given the risk involved in buying the product, the above information has to prepare the consumer to accept the price. Intermediate elements of communication need to emphasise the product's features in relation to the consumer's expectations, in order of their importance and immediately before the display of the price, specified in visible fonts and colours, the “certificate” of product warranty, the term for which the manufacturer certifies that the product will perform the functions based on the features presented.

¹ <https://pildele-cartilor-sfinte.com/imaginatia.html>

² Idem

³ ibidem

⁴ ibidem

“Behaviour is the mirror in which everyone reflects their image.” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe).¹

The research of the behaviour of the consumer, respectively of how his or her endogenous variables (especially the ones that make up the internal image) are revealed without restrictions – restrictions determined by the physical presence of the offer –, which allow their measuring and expression in the form of numeric symbols, helps obtaining a reflection of the internal image in graphs and statistical tables easy to analyse. Recent studies “have reached the conclusion that, in fact, consumers eat, drink and dress in images. This conclusion can be considered pertinent if we keep in mind that the choice is based on a certain attitude that turns into a preference.”²

Actually, correcting the above quote, preferences are the ones that determine a certain attitude, as we can see from the research conducted. Accordingly, we turned to consumer opinion* research using the “in-depth interview method” and, based on a pilot survey, using the scaling, semantic differential method to research the variables that define the image in the consumer's mind of a brand.

In-depth interview

It is a qualitative research method, and, according to the objectives set, it is part of the exploratory research category. They have as an aim to identify the general coordinates of the researched phenomena and are the basis for the formulation of the research variables, used, as a rule, in

¹ <https://pildele-cartilor-sfinte.com/imaginatia.html>

² <https://tasentetashy.wordpress.com/2009/02/04/rolul-imaginii-in-comuni-carea-publica-de-tasente-tanase/>

”Opinions are how people perceive something, what they believe about it and what those beliefs signify. The most potent form of opinions tends to be attitudes, which are mental sets or predispositions to act in some manner (e.g., to decide in advance not to accept the trade-in offered by the first dealer visited). Another form is images of what something is like” Luck/Ronald S. Rubin, *Marketing Research*, Seven Edition, 1987, Prentice-Hall Inc., p. 98

the case of the quantitative research methods (for example, opinion surveys).

Also, it falls into descriptive research category and it is used when the level of knowledge of the phenomenon (brand image in this case) is minimum, and the choice of the research method and of the information scaling methods is more difficult.

It is an unstructured research method whereby the interviewees can freely express their opinions, without any restriction from the information collection tool (conversation guide) and the interview operator.

The conversation guide was applied to a sample of twenty people from various social categories, instruction levels, professions, ages, incomes, in the following format:

Conversation Guide

Good afternoon,

My name is Boboc Mihaela-Carmen and I am a Ph.D. student at the School of Advanced Studies of the Romanian Academy, the Department of Economic, Social and Legal Sciences. I am conducting a study on the use of various communication means for information and decision-making regarding the purchase of goods and services.

I undertake to respect the law on the confidentiality of personal data and not to use this data publicly.

- (1) What devices (phone, laptop, computer, tablet, TV) with internet access do you possess and which ones do you frequently use?
- (2) In what order do you particularly use them?
- (3) What do you currently use these means for?
- (4) When you watch an advertisement or a video what particularly catches your attention?
- (5) What do you believe persuades you to buy a certain product?
- (6) What do you understand by product presentation?
- (7) Do you frequently order products online?

- (8) What is your favourite colour?
- (9) What is the colour in trend now?
- (10) What products did you order in the last three months?
- (11) What kind of food did you order?
- (12) What desert or sweets did you order?
- (13) What do you particularly appreciate about a chocolate?
- (14) What chocolate brands do you prefer?
- (15) When you ordered chocolate, what made you ultimately decide?
- (16) How do you rate the delivery?
- (17) Do you prefer a particular deliverer?
- (18) Were you satisfied with the quality of the received product?
- (19) Will you continue to shop online?
- (20) When you go to the store, where do you decide what to buy?
- (21) Does it matter what you found out about the desired product after collecting information about it through media devices?
- (22) When you go shopping, do you make a list?
- (23) Do you write the list down?

Thank you for your time.

Results after processing opinions:

- (1) Frequencies: 20 mobile phone, 16 laptop, 11 TV, 8 tablet, 6 computer;
- (2) Frequencies: 20 phone, 12 laptop, 11 TV, 5 tablet, 4 computer;
- (3) Frequencies: 15 Facebook, 16 Instagram, 17 TikTok, 5 Twitter, 18 online orders, 20 products/goods searches, 16 bills payments;
- (4) Frequencies: 18 colour, 16 musical background, 5 form, 12 presentation, 14 brand, 19 price;
- (5) Frequencies: 14 brand, 18 price, 12 trend, 18 warranty/ expiration date, 10 way of presentation;
- (6) Frequencies: 20 information; 12 product comparison, 7 influencer image (trust);
- (7) Frequencies: 12 quite often, 6 sometimes, 2 never;
- (8) Frequencies: 9 black, 2 white, 3 red, 5 blue, 1 what is in trend;

- (9) Frequencies: 1 viva magenta (purplish red), 3 green, I think, 2 red, I think, 14 I don't know;
- (10) Frequencies: 16 food, 5 clothing, 5 mobile phone, 2 tablet, 1 fridge, 1 microwave, 2 I didn't order;
- (11) Frequencies: 12 pizza, 15 fast food, 10 desert, 12 sweets, 1 cannelloni;
- (12) Frequencies: 15 chocolate, 5 savarina, 5 amandine, 8 éclair, 2 cake
- (13) Frequencies: 12 colour, 14 smell, 20 taste, 16 flavour, 10 appearance, 5 consistency (without and with filling), 8 ingredients, 18 freshness (shelf life), 15 size (grammage), 2 portioning (compact tablet, cubes), 16 packaging, 10 additives;
- (14) Frequencies: 8 X1, 9 X2, 2 X3, 1 X4 (these symbols replace the researched brands);
- (15) Frequencies: 9 brand, 10 price, delivery time
- (16) Frequencies: 10 good, 5 satisfactory, 2 I was unsatisfied, 2 I couldn't pay by card, 1 the delivery person was arrogant;
- (17) Frequencies: 6 yes, 11 no, 3 I am not interested;
- (18) Frequencies: 9 I was very satisfied, 5 satisfied, 1 I had problems, 2 I wasn't satisfied, 3 I returned the product;
- (19) Frequencies: 17 yes, 2 no, 1 prefers the store;
- (20) Frequencies: 13 home, 11 at the store, 7 at the seller's recommendation;
- (21) Frequencies: 6 very much, 10 a lot, 3 not so much, 1 not at all;
- (22) Frequencies: 12 yes, 6 most of the times, 2 nu;
- (23) Frequencies: 18 I write it on my phone, 2 rarely I write it on paper.
13 at home, 11 at the store, 7 at the seller's recommendation;
18 write it on the phone, 2 rarely write it on paper.
(23) Frequency: 18 write it on the phone, 2 rarely write it on paper.

The results of this research show frequent use of media in the image formation of products and brands, as well as significant interest in online ordering.

By processing the information, collected with the help of the Conversation Guide, the main variables of the brand image of product

X2, the ways of forming this image, the importance of the formed image in making online orders, as well as a number of characteristics of the distribution activity of products at the place of consumption were defined.

The brand image assessment was done using the information collected by means of a questionnaire, subsequently applied to each interviewee, in which semantic differential was used as a scaling method.

“In evaluating the usefulness in marketing research of the semantic differential as a scaling device, William A. Mindak (William A. Mindak, "Fitting the Semantic Differential to the Marketing Problem”, Journal of Marketing, April 1961, vol. 25, pp. 28-29) has enumerated the following advantages:

- «1. It provides a basis for isolating intensity of predetermined feelings.*
- 2. Since the feelings are predetermined, it is possible to compare them over time.*
- 3. Problems of question phrasing and structure are practically eliminated.»*

However, as Mindak admitted, the selection of the polar adjectives may present problems in terms of which adjectives should be used. Any particular pair of adjectives may not be precisely polar opposites in some persons minds, and one can often conceive of several alternative adjectives from which to choose.”¹

Consumers' perceptions of a brand of chocolate (X2) were measured regarding the following characteristics: colour, smell, taste, aroma, appearance, consistency, ingredients, freshness, size, portioning, packaging, additives and price, variables defined in the previous research for question number 13: What do you particularly like about a chocolate?

The variables are presented in the first column in Figure 3.

¹ Luck/Ronald S. Rubin, *Marketing Research*, Seven Edition, 1987, Prentice-Hall Inc., p. 160

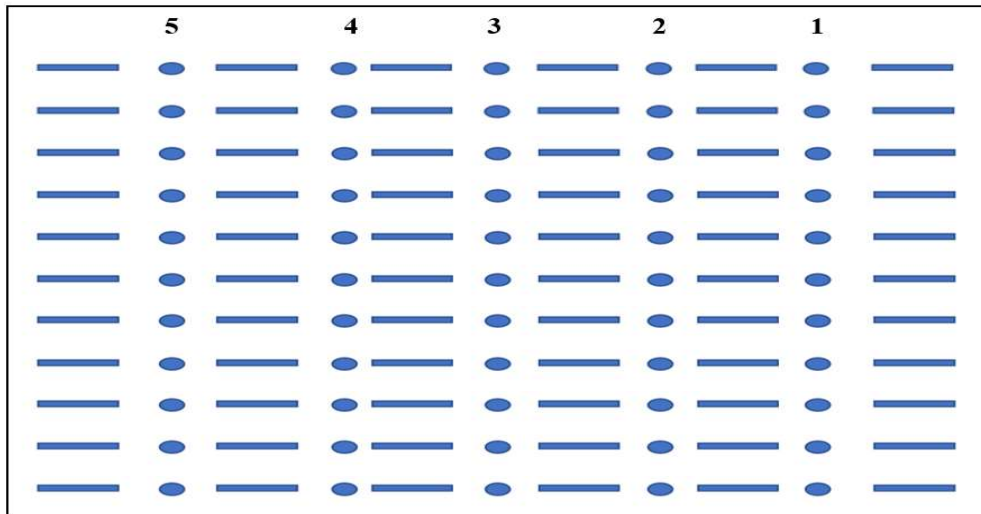


Figure 1. The graphic image of the semantic differential

Each interviewee was asked to express their opinions about one of the characteristics listed above through a series of pairs, of bipolar attributes with an odd number of steps, on a scale of 5 to 1, i.e. very adequate (5) - very inadequate (1).

It is understood to test the consumer's expectations for each characteristic of the image in their mind and how this is perceived from direct contact with the product.

Respondents mark the opinion on the segment of each characteristic between the two bipolar attributes, which opinion corresponds to their image of this product.

The information collected using the weighted arithmetic average is processed with the model of the form

$$M_p = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^k n_i \cdot p_i}{\sum_{i=1}^k p_i}, \quad k \in \mathbb{N}$$

where:

M_p - is the average of all respondents' opinions for one characteristic;

n_i - the level of opinion marked by a given number of respondents;
 p_i - the total number of those who marked opinions on the scale segment;
 k - sample size.

The averages thus obtained are presented graphically and interpreted according to the scale average, and in the case of our research it is 3, i.e. $(1+5):2$.

Averages above 3 indicate a higher level of coincidence between the image in the mind of the consumer and the way the characteristics measured with the presence of the product are perceived.

Ideally, the communication of the product's characteristics should result in a graphic of the form:

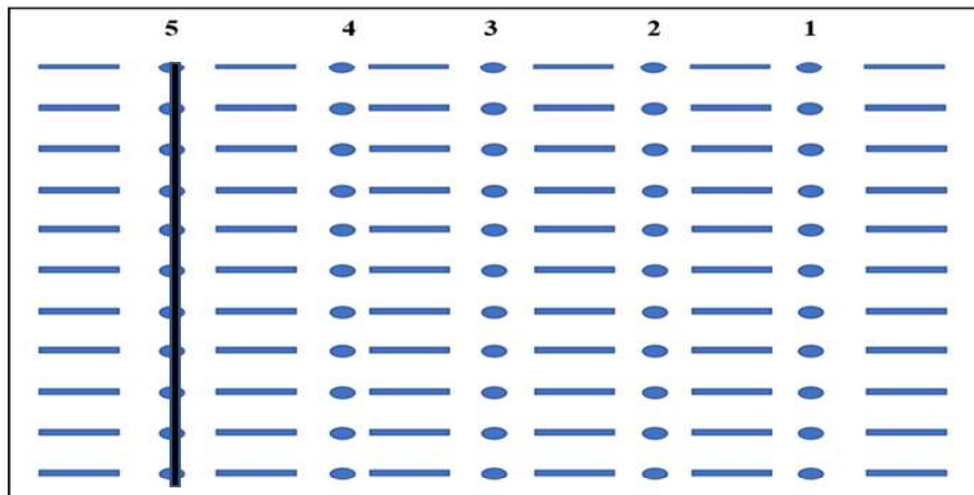


Figure 2. Graphic image of the consumers' expectations of the ideal product

The measurement in reality can result in a graph of a different shape, the differences indicating the directions to follow by the sender in order to improve the image of the product with the purpose of stimulating orders and online sales.

Analysis and interpretation of results

Applying the questionnaire on the sample of 20 persons with the aim of the research to measure the characteristics of the X2 chocolate brand and the way these are reflected in the mind of the consumer – research conducted without the presence of the product during the interview, only by naming the product, a product intensely advertised in the media, the following results were obtained:

- of the 20 respondents, 100% had heard and seen at least once an advertisement for the product, all of them remembering the brand name;
- 19 respondents recalled the following features from the advertisement: brand name, packaging colour, product logo, graphic symbols, background elements, brand spelling, product colour and suggestions about product content;
- all respondents had consumed the product prior to the survey and were able to state the characteristics measured using the semantic differential, reproduced in the following table:

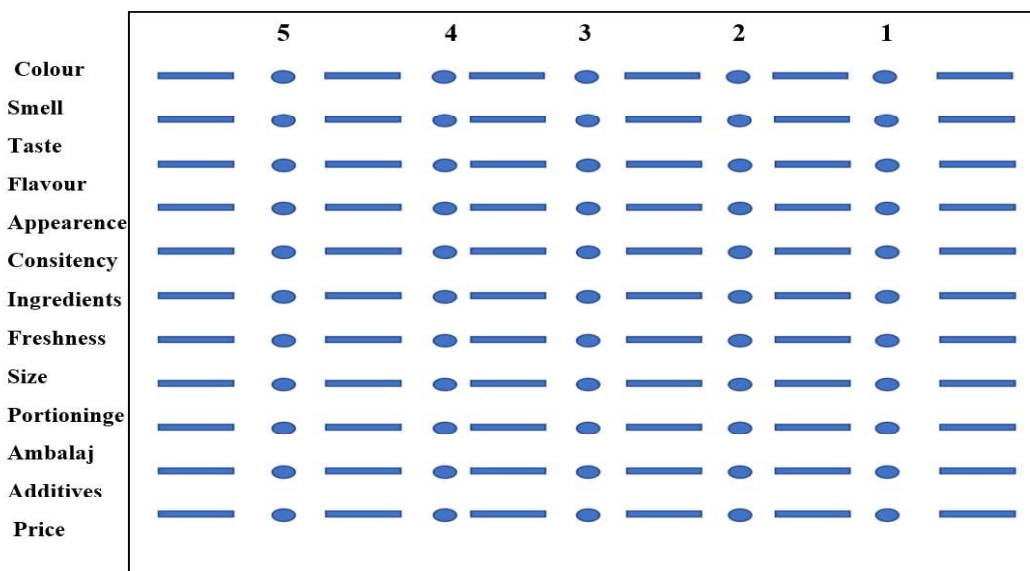


Figure 3. The characteristics of the product researched using semantic differential

➤ The 20 interviewees were asked how they rated the product characteristics and were asked to mark their opinions on the scale shown in Figure 3.

Weighted arithmetic averages were calculated for each characteristic with the denominator of fraction 14.

For example, for the colour characteristic (packaging colour), the average was calculated as follows: $(5 \times 5 + 4 \times 6 + 3 \times 4) / 14 = 4.36$; for the smell the average was 3.35; taste 4.14; flavour 3.5; appearance 4.42; consistency (without filling, with filling) 4.36; ingredients 3.68; freshness (shelf life) 3.85; grammage (size) 3.68; portioning (compact, cubes) 3.21; packaging 4.64; additives 3.14; price 4.42.

The graphic form of the survey results is shown in Figure 4.

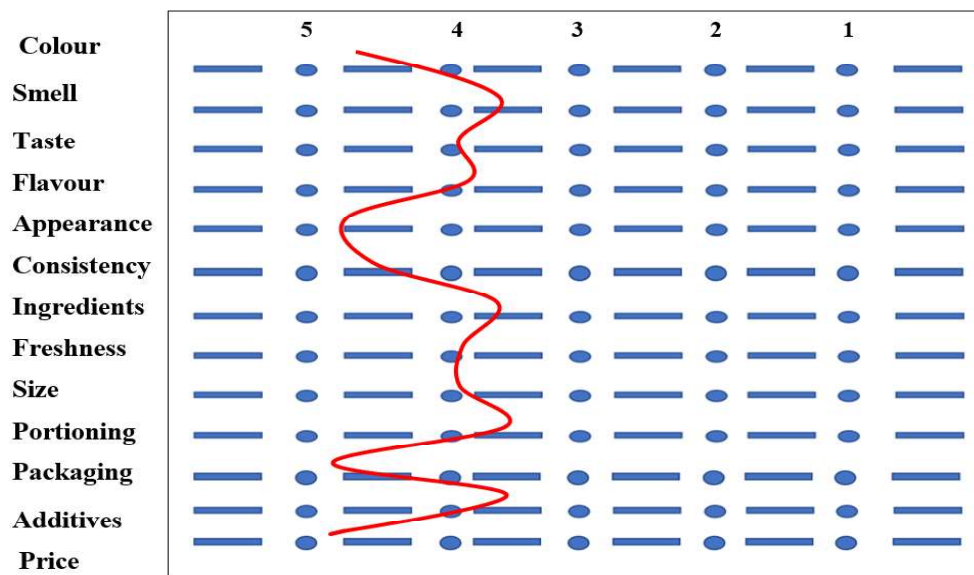


Figure 4. Graph of the characteristics measurement results

We notice in the graphical representation that the opinions of the respondents for all 13 characteristics of the brand X are over the scale average (3) which shows a high level of the opinions on the product, its characteristics, the brand, all these being perceived through the modern media.

We notice that five of the characteristics - colour, appearance, consistency, packaging and price - have averages close to the maximum level of the scale (5), which shows their importance in shaping a positive image, along with, of course, the other eight.

If the manufacturer wants to improve its brand image, they should give prime importance to the characteristic “additives”, which, of course, as the in-depth interview shows, is closely linked to freshness (shelf life time).

In-depth research should aim to determine how large the range of products should be so as not to affect either the perception of each individual characteristic or the overall image of the brand. For example, it is the ingredients characteristic that determines the diversification of the product range.

Consequently, distinct research has to be conducted on the type of ingredient that can be used to improve the image of each individual assortment. In the same vein, research on the *flavour* and *appearance* characteristics should continue.

We notice the importance of price in image formation. In the same vein, research on flavour and appearance characteristics should be continued.

In this case, the price registers a value close to 5, reflecting a good association between the quality of products under this brand and the high level of the purchase price.

In the same vein, research on flavour and appearance characteristics should be continued.

In this case, the price registers a value close to 5, reflecting a good association between the quality of products under this brand and the high level of the purchase price.

The synthetic indicator for measuring the image of the X2 product after actual consumption is

$(4,36+3,35+4,14+3,5+4,42+4,36+3,68+3,68+3,21+3,85+4,64+3,14+4,42)/13 = 3,9$, a value close to 4, which represents a good brand image.

Conclusions

As a summary of consumers' perceptions of product characteristics, it can be stated that in the formation of the market in the mind of the consumer an important role is played by product image and brand image. Image assessment is carried out through a complex of research methods, with careful choice of information scaling methods and information collection tools.

Qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews, proved useful for conceptualising research variables, as did semantic differential, for measuring consumer opinions for assessing characteristics and calculating a synthetic indicator for measuring overall image.

Brand image becomes the central pivot of online commerce in placing orders and determining the satisfaction degree of a product in the consumption process, as a relation between the expectations communicated through the media and the characteristics of the product consumed.

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