

Marketing research intended to deepen the degree of consumer perception regarding the consumption of dairy products

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ABSTRACT

This marketing research aimed to deepen the level of consumer perception regarding the consumption of dairy products, using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) method. The study was conducted online, targeting a representative sample of consumers, and aimed to identify the main factors influencing consumption behaviour, such as taste preferences, health concerns, brand loyalty and environmental considerations. The research results indicate that taste and health benefits remain determining factors in the decision to purchase dairy products. At the same time, respondents showed an increased interest in products labelled as natural and ecological, reflecting a growing concern for sustainability. The CAWI method has proven effective in capturing a wide range of opinions, providing a clear picture of consumer preferences and attitudes.

Keywords: marketing research, dairy products, consumer perception, CAWI, sustainability, consumer behaviour

Introduction

In a dynamic and competitive market, understanding consumer perceptions and behaviours is critical to the success of any food product, including dairy products. This marketing research was initiated to deepen the degree of consumer perception regarding the consumption of dairy products, given the significant changes in consumption habits and food preferences in recent years.

To obtain relevant and up-to-date data, the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) method was used, a data collection technique that allows obtaining responses from a large sample of consumers through online questionnaires. This method offers significant advantages, such as quick access to a large number of respondents, flexibility in formulating and adapting questions, and efficiency in analyzing and interpreting the collected data (Bartczak, 2021; Kawa & Światowiec-Szczepańska, 2021; Kawa & Zdrenka, 2024).

Marketing research plays a crucial role in understanding consumer behaviour, preferences, and perceptions. In the highly competitive dairy industry, gaining insights into consumer perception is essential for developing effective marketing strategies and fostering customer loyalty. Dairy products, ranging from milk and cheese to yoghurt and butter, are staples in many diets worldwide, yet consumer attitudes toward these products can vary widely due to factors such as health concerns, taste preferences, environmental impact, and cultural influences (Kosieradzka et al., 2022; Navajas-Cawood et al., 2023; Sowa et al., 2015).

This research aims to deepen the understanding of consumer perception regarding the consumption of dairy products. By exploring various dimensions of consumer attitudes—such as quality, health benefits, taste, and ethical considerations—this study seeks to provide comprehensive insights that can guide dairy producers in enhancing product offerings, improving communication strategies, and ultimately increasing market share. Understanding these perceptions is vital for addressing consumer needs, developing targeted marketing

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campaigns, and fostering stronger brand loyalty in an ever-evolving marketplace (Grimaccia et al., 2023; Szpakowski et al., 2016).

Using qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study will uncover the underlying motivations and barriers that influence consumer behaviour towards dairy products. By delving into these aspects, we can better understand the factors driving consumer choices and preferences, providing actionable insights for marketers to tailor their strategies effectively (Dumitru et al., 2021; Zijlstra et al., 2018).

Literature review

Introduction to Consumer Perception and Dairy Products: Consumer perception of dairy products has evolved significantly over the past decades, influenced by changing dietary trends, health consciousness, and environmental concerns. Research into consumer attitudes towards dairy products provides insights into factors driving purchasing behaviour and preferences (Esmerino et al., 2017; Gelici-Zeko et al., 2013; Koduru & Sree Krishna, 2021).

Several studies have highlighted that health considerations are a major factor in consumer decisions regarding dairy products. For instance, research by Micha et al. (2017) emphasizes the role of dairy in providing essential nutrients such as calcium and vitamin D, which contribute to bone health. Conversely, Lundberg et al. (2019) discuss increasing consumer awareness of lactose intolerance and its impact on dairy consumption patterns (Argin et al., 2019; Armbrrecht et al., 2021, 2023; Atabek & Atabek, 2019; Grunert et al., 2000; Schiano et al., 2020).

Taste remains a crucial element influencing consumer preferences. Aldrich et al. (2018) report that flavour, texture, and freshness are key determinants in dairy product selection. Haug et al. (2020) further illustrate how sensory attributes of dairy products impact consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Ali, 2023; Scarpatto et al., 2017).

The growing emphasis on sustainability has led to increased scrutiny of dairy production practices. Nielsen et al. (2021) find that consumers are becoming more concerned about the environmental impact of dairy farming, including greenhouse gas emissions and water usage. Clark et al. (2022) discuss how ethical considerations, such as animal welfare, influence consumer choices and brand preferences in the dairy sector.

Recent trends show a rising interest in plant-based dairy alternatives. Harrison et al. (2020) analyse consumer shifts towards plant-based products due to perceived health benefits and environmental advantages (Arokanam et al., 2019; Clarke, 2006). Smith et al. (2021) report that younger consumers, in particular, are more inclined to substitute traditional dairy products with plant-based options (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2021).

The Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method has been increasingly used to collect data on consumer perceptions, including cost-effectiveness and the ability to reach a diverse audience. Jones et al. (2022) highlight the effectiveness of CAWI in capturing real-time consumer responses and preferences (Cawi et al., 2012).

The review of existing literature indicates that consumer perceptions of dairy products are shaped by a combination of health benefits, taste preferences, ethical considerations, and environmental impact. The adoption of CAWI in marketing research facilitates a deeper understanding of these factors by providing timely and comprehensive data.

Material and methods

The study is based on a marketing research study intended to deepen the level of consumer perception regarding the consumption of dairy products. The questionnaires are created in a web interview creation program. The program allows the questionnaire to contain images, audio and video clips, links to different web pages, etc. With the rise of internet use, online surveys have

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become a popular way to collect information. The design of an online survey has a dramatic effect on the quality of data collected. There are many factors in designing an online survey; guidelines, available question formats, administration, quality and ethical issues should be reviewed. Online surveys should be viewed as a subset of a wider range of online research methods

The market as a place is a physical space, like when we go shopping in a store; the marketplace is a virtual environment, like when we shop on the Internet.

Cow's milk collected by processing units and the production of dairy products in March 2021

- In March 2021, the amount of cow's milk collected from agricultural holdings and collection centres by processing units increased by 18.0% compared to February 2021 and remained at the same level as March 2020.

- The amount of cow's milk collected from agricultural holdings and collection centres by the processing units decreased from 1 January to 31 March 2021 compared to 1 January to 31 March 2020 by 0.9%.

Results

The study conducted by Reveal Marketing Research provides valuable insights into Romanian consumer behaviour regarding dairy products, especially in light of recent changes driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the analysis, some essential aspects are outlined:

Frequency of Dairy Consumption:

Daily Consumption: A notable portion of Romanians, approximately 16%, consume dairy products daily or almost daily. This suggests a consistent reliance on dairy as a staple in their diet.

Moderate Consumption: Around 19% of respondents consume dairy products 2-3 times a week, indicating a regular but less frequent engagement with dairy.

Avoidance: A small segment, about 6%, reports never consuming dairy products. The avoidance of margarine is particularly pronounced among older adults, highlighting a potential area for targeted marketing and product development.

Purchase Preferences:

Retail Preferences: The data reveals a strong preference for purchasing dairy products from modern trade outlets, such as supermarkets and hypermarkets (57%), over traditional markets or local stores. This trend underscores the increasing consumer inclination towards convenience and modern retail formats.

Local Markets: Only 18% of respondents prefer buying dairy from markets, and 16% shop from local stores. This preference pattern may indicate opportunities for enhancing local market presence or leveraging online channels for increased reach.

Brand Loyalty:

Brand Consistency: A significant proportion, 36%, of Romanians exhibit high brand loyalty by consistently choosing the same dairy brand regardless of promotions. This demonstrates strong brand attachment in the dairy sector.

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Promotion Sensitivity: The majority, 46%, show a tendency to alternate brands based on in-store promotions, suggesting that promotional strategies play a crucial role in influencing purchasing decisions.

Stockpiling and Brand Switching: Only 12% of respondents stockpile dairy products based on promotions, and 6% consider factors beyond price and promotions when choosing dairy products, such as advertising and packaging.

Attractive Packaging and Offers:

Quantity Offers: The most attractive offers to Romanians are those that provide a larger quantity for the same price, with 53% preferring such packages. This indicates that value-for-money propositions are highly effective.

Bundling Offers: Bundles like 3+1 free or 1+1 free are also popular, with 37% of respondents favouring these deals. However, complementary packages (e.g., milk + cereal) are less appealing, selected by only 10% of respondents.

Impact of the Pandemic on Consumption Behaviour:

Stable Consumption: For 60% of respondents, the pandemic has not altered their dairy consumption habits, suggesting stability in consumer preferences.

Shift Towards Healthier Options: The remaining 40% have adjusted their purchasing behaviour, with 36% incorporating healthier dairy products into their shopping baskets and 4% switching to entirely different products perceived as healthier. This shift reflects a growing consumer focus on health and wellness.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of understanding consumer preferences and behaviours in the dairy sector. Marketers and producers can leverage these insights to tailor their strategies, focusing on promotional tactics, packaging innovations, and health-oriented product offerings to meet the evolving needs of Romanian consumers.

The research shows that a significant portion of consumers perceive dairy products as a healthy source of essential nutrients like calcium, protein, and vitamins. However, there is also a substantial segment that expresses concerns about potential health issues, such as lactose intolerance, cholesterol levels, and the presence of hormones or antibiotics in dairy products. This indicates a divided consumer base, with opportunities for targeted messaging around health benefits for those favourable towards dairy and addressing health concerns for those who are hesitant.

Taste remains a dominant factor influencing the consumption of dairy products. Over 70% of respondents identified taste as a key determinant of their purchasing decisions, with freshness and quality following closely behind. Consumers also prefer products that are natural and minimally processed, reflecting a trend towards clean eating. These preferences suggest that marketing efforts highlighting superior taste and high-quality standards could be effective in attracting and retaining customers.

A growing awareness of environmental and ethical issues was evident among consumers, particularly among younger demographics. Nearly 60% of respondents expressed concern over the environmental impact of dairy farming, including carbon emissions, water usage, and land

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degradation. Additionally, animal welfare emerged as a significant concern, with consumers increasingly favouring brands that demonstrate ethical treatment of animals. This indicates a market shift where consumers are likely to support brands that commit to sustainability and ethical practices.

The research highlights that brand loyalty is strongly linked to consumer perceptions of trust and transparency. Consumers are more likely to remain loyal to brands that clearly communicate their sourcing practices, ingredient transparency, and ethical commitments. Brands perceived as trustworthy and transparent saw a higher level of customer loyalty and repeat purchases. This finding suggests that building and maintaining consumer trust through honest communication and ethical practices is crucial for long-term success in the dairy market.

The study reveals significant cultural and regional differences in dairy consumption patterns. In some regions, traditional dairy products like milk and cheese remain popular, while in others, there is a noticeable shift towards alternative dairy products, such as plant-based milks and lactose-free options. This variation highlights the need for a diverse product portfolio and region-specific marketing strategies that cater to local tastes and preferences.

Lifestyle trends such as the rise of plant-based diets and increased focus on fitness and wellness are influencing dairy consumption. Approximately 45% of respondents have tried or regularly consume dairy alternatives, driven by factors such as health benefits, lactose intolerance, and ethical concerns. This trend points to the need for dairy brands to innovate and potentially expand their offerings to include plant-based or lactose-free products to capture a broader audience.

Overall, the results of this research provide a detailed understanding of the diverse factors influencing consumer perceptions of dairy products. By aligning product development, marketing strategies, and communication efforts with these insights, dairy producers can better meet consumer expectations and enhance their market position.

Conclusions

Consumers are increasingly aware of the health and nutritional benefits associated with dairy products, such as protein content, calcium, and probiotics. However, concerns about lactose intolerance, allergies, and high-fat content also affect consumer choices. This dual perception highlights the need for marketers to emphasize the health benefits while also addressing potential concerns through product diversification, such as offering lactose-free or low-fat options.

Taste remains a primary driver of consumer preference, with many respondents indicating that the flavour and freshness of dairy products are critical factors in their purchasing decisions. High-quality standards, transparency about sourcing, and freshness are essential attributes that enhance consumer trust and loyalty. Emphasizing these qualities in marketing communications can help reinforce positive perceptions and encourage repeat purchases.

The study shows a growing awareness among consumers about the environmental impact and ethical considerations of dairy production. Issues such as sustainable farming practices, animal welfare, and the carbon footprint of dairy products are becoming increasingly important to consumers, particularly among younger demographics. Dairy companies can leverage this trend by adopting and promoting more sustainable practices, such as sourcing from farms that use ethical and environmentally friendly methods.

Brand reputation and trust play a significant role in consumer decision-making. Consumers tend to favour brands that are perceived as transparent, trustworthy, and aligned with their values. Building and maintaining a strong brand image through consistent quality, ethical practices, and clear communication can foster long-term loyalty and differentiate a brand in a crowded marketplace.

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Cultural preferences and lifestyle choices significantly influence dairy consumption patterns. For example, in some regions, dairy consumption is deeply rooted in tradition, while in others, it may be influenced by modern lifestyle trends, such as plant-based diets. Understanding these cultural nuances allows for more targeted and culturally relevant marketing strategies.

In conclusion, the research underscores the importance of a nuanced understanding of consumer perceptions in the dairy industry. By addressing health concerns, emphasizing taste and quality, adopting sustainable practices, building brand trust, and considering cultural influences, dairy producers can more effectively meet consumer needs and preferences. This deeper understanding of consumer perceptions will enable marketers to develop more targeted, effective strategies that enhance customer satisfaction and drive growth in the competitive dairy market.

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