

Market research: group-related consumer preferences and purchasing criteria of (agricultural) products

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Abstract

Agricultural value chains are important elements within the context of international cooperation. Therefore, and in order to adjust production and marketing strategies according to consumer needs, this method brief provides a step by step guideline for identifying consumer group-related purchasing criteria and preferences for agricultural products without demanding in-depth knowledge of quantitative data analysis. As part of a market research, results enable policy makers and private actors to take specific demand driven actions. Combining quantitative and qualitative instruments, this method includes phases of survey design, piloting, data collection and data analysis. Particular attention is paid to the sampling and design of the questionnaire, which asks for data on revealed preferences, socio-demographic characteristics, stated preferences and purchasing criteria. The manual cluster analysis finally allows meaningful findings on group-related consumption behaviour but lacks definitive conclusions on market segmentations. This can be countered by the complementary implementation of choice experiments, for which the paper recommends further readings.



Why consumer preferences matter

Development cooperation strategies focus more and more on promoting sustainable agricultural value chains in the Global South, an approach that seeks to increase value creation at regional levels and to integrate smallholder farmers into markets (FAO, 2014). By strengthening national agricultural sectors, this approach aims to promote several cross-sectional Sustainable Development Goals, such as poverty alleviation, gender equality, economic growth and employment, as well as sustainable consumption and production (ebd.). In order to do so, market analyses are required to examine and comprehend dynamics of the supply side (i.e. value chain analysis), political institutional framework conditions (i.e. trade policy), and the demand side (i.e. consumers' preferences) within a sector. These three areas cannot be considered independently of each other, but rather interact as a whole. In this way, understanding consumer preferences is crucial in order to adjust production and marketing strate-

SLE method briefs are created from the practical experiences of our alumni in their interdisciplinary research projects. Lessons learned and good practices are compiled. In each brief, we present the method that is explained clearly, step by step, and with the help of practical examples. With its method briefs, the SLE aims to support researchers and practitioners who are active in solution-oriented and transformative international development work by providing insights into hands-on methods in a structured manner, so that the wheel does not always have to be reinvented.

The Centre for Rural Development (SLE) is affiliated with the Albrecht Daniel Thaer-Institute for Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences in the Faculty of Life Sciences at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Its work concentrates on four branches: international cooperation for sustainable development as a post-master degree course, training courses for international leaders and experts in the field of international cooperation, research on sustainability issues, and advisory services for universities and organisations.

The views and opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the SLE.

gies according to consumer needs and thus increase demand for national products in order to transform local industries. This is particularly important when imports compete with national products.

Aim of the method

When making a purchase decision, customers usually compare a variety of product characteristics and evaluate them according to their different strengths and weaknesses. Literature provides various theoretical frameworks on consumer decision analysis (Hansen, 2005), while the cue utilisation theory (Richardson et al., 1994) suggests that consumers assess the overall performance or the quality of a product against a variety of indicators. Amongst these, indicators that the customer regards as most important are referred to as customers' key purchasing criteria. They are subject to consumers' subjective perceptions and can be divided into interrelated subcategories, such as economic factors (e.g. price), emotional and cognitive parameters (e.g. product quality perception) or attitudes and values (e.g. environment-friendly production). The objective of the consumer preference method is to identify the underlying key purchasing criteria for preferences of agricultural products and allocate them to homogeneous socio-demographic groups of consumers. These findings enable producers and policy-makers to respond to specific consumer needs with demand driven actions. Group-related consumer behaviour provides information about market segmentation, which distinguishes homogeneous groups of consumers that can be targeted similarly by policy and marketing strategies because of their common needs and preferences. Wendell R. Smith's (1956) definition of market segmentation is most commonly used and still relevant. According to him, it "involves viewing a heterogeneous market as a number of smaller homogeneous markets, in response to differing preferences, attributable to the desires of customers for more precise satisfactions of their varying wants" (Smith, 1956). Based on this, it is necessary to collect socio-demographic characteristics of the surveyed consumers to analyse their impact on both purchasing criteria and consumer behaviour in order to identify said consumer groups, which are clearly distinct on the outside and homogeneous on the inside.

Many market analyses apply choice experiments (CEs) to determine consumers' preferences, opportunity costs and willingness to pay (WTP) - the maximum price at which a consumer is willing to buy a

unit of a good - for products (Bateman et al., 2004). However, the implementation of CEs, in particular the development of their experimental design, data collection and data analysis, is time intense, requires stochastic knowledge and pronounced expertise in statistical analysis tools like SPSS, STATA, or R. The implementation of CEs and WTP approaches in Overseas Projects (OP) within the scope of the postgraduate studies of the Centre for Rural Development (SLE) is accordingly challenging and needs either experienced team members in this area or requires external advice. Against this background, this method brief outlines a more feasible and hands-on approach for analysing group-related consumer preferences and underlying purchasing criteria based on experiences of the 2020 OP in Benin, which conducted market research on national and imported chicken meat products. This method, the manual analysis of group-related consumer preferences, offers a special asset -- research teams can apply it by using common sense regardless of their previous in-depth knowledge of the subject, although basic understanding and willingness to learn are a prerequisite. For this purpose and to gain a better understanding, the paper at hand also refers to background literature on CE and WTP.

Methodological approach

The analysis of group-specific consumer preferences combines quantitative and qualitative research and follows the four classic phases of mobile surveys, consisting of survey design, piloting, data collection process and data analysis. On this, the SLE method brief "Implementing a mobile survey using KoboToolbox" presents a general guideline with step by step instructions. This method brief, however, primarily addresses the specifics of consumer preferences within these four phases. Table 1 provides an overview of each phase, consisting of their respective methodological steps, objectives and comments derived from the experiences of the OP Benin.

First, the methodological steps of the survey design are illustrated. The content of this design has some special features and requires further explanation, which is dealt with in the following chapter (see chapter IV). Methodologically, the survey design phase starts out with a literature review in order to identify deductive categories from existing literature to structure the surveys (Brace, 2004). Based on studies of poultry meat consumption in Ghana and northern Benin, the OP Benin was able to identify, for example, important purchasing criteria such as the consistency and cooking time of the meat or

Table 1: Consumer preferences: phases and methodological steps

Phase	Step	Objective(s)	Comments and specifics
Survey design	Literature Review	Identifying research gaps and research questions; Identifying deductive categories (purchasing criteria) for the questionnaire; development of a first draft questionnaire.	A literature review assesses all relevant literature on the topic in order to collect in-depth information on the research question and the quantitative/qualitative questionnaires. When beginning with the first draft of the questionnaire, consider that the interview should not exceed 15 minutes and bear the five modules of the structure in mind.
	Expert interviews	Identifying deductive categories (purchasing criteria) for the questionnaire; Refining the first draft questionnaire.	Special attention to questions on socio-demographic characteristics and purchasing criteria; Including regional knowledge is crucial for the quality of the questionnaire.
	Initial qualitative interviews with consumers	Development of inductive categories (purchasing criteria) for the questionnaire; Review of the deductive categories of the first draft questionnaire.	Preparing and conducting qualitative interviews to obtain inductive categories is time-consuming, but increases the quality of the quantitative questionnaire in terms of triangulation.
Piloting and launch	Piloting	Testing the implementation of the questionnaire with a small sample size in order to revise and adapt it according to upcoming challenges.	Including data analysis of the pilot sample helps to ensure a meaningful and valid data set; Despite being time intense, piloting allows important adjustments that would be very hard to apply later during data collection phase.
Data collection	Quantitative survey implementation	Collecting quantitative data on consumers' revealed and stated preferences, socio-demographic characteristics, and the relevance of purchasing criteria.	Interviewers should be familiar with the socio-cultural and linguistic context of the region; The larger the sample size, the more meaningful the data set; Consider pros and cons of market or household surveys; Monitoring the incoming data is an integral part of the phase.
	Qualitative interviews with consumers	Understanding the underlying drivers of preferences and purchasing criteria; Increasing the validation of the research.	All identified consumer groups must be covered in the sample; Focus groups are a valid alternative;
Data analysis		Identifying homogeneous consumer groups along socio-demographic characteristics regarding their particular purchasing criteria and preferences.	Follow the steps of a manual cluster analysis; The sample size of consumer groups has to be statistically relevant; Excel radar charts provide vivid illustrations for the research report or scientific papers.

Source: Own illustration.

the convenience of the purchase. These deductive categories contribute to the development of a first draft of the quantitative questionnaire which should then be refined in a second step by involving expert interviews and considering regional expertise (Sue and Ritter, 2012). Special attention should be paid in these interviews to include regional specificities regarding socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. sensitive questions about income) and details on the revealed purchasing behaviour (e.g. measuring the purchase in grams or kilos, matching product definitions, etc.). In addition, initial qualitative interviews with consumers should be considered to increase the validity of research in terms of triangulation (Brace, 2004). These interviews can help to complete the standardised questionnaire, as they

potentially bring further (inductive) purchasing criteria to light which would otherwise have been ignored in the survey.

Following these steps during the first phase, the draft design moves on to piloting. In close communication between interviewers and those responsible for the design, this is necessary to revise and adapt the questionnaire, to check the functionality of the data transmission and hence to ensure a straightforward implementation (Sue and Ritter, 2012). At best, the piloting has such a sample size that data analysis can also be tried out to assess the meaningfulness of the data and the sampling of markets or households. The larger the sample size, the better. However, at least 50 quantitative surveys should be analysed for logical conclusions in order to be able to exclude systematic errors in the questionnaire. In addition, interviewers should be familiar with the socio-cultural and linguistic context of the region in order to avoid misunderstandings during the survey and in this way guarantee data quality. In the case of the Benin OP, many consumers

did not speak French and were interviewed in Fon. Moreover, training of the interviewers or enumerators before or during the piloting is crucial to ensure high quality data (Brace, 2004; Sue and Ritter, 2012). During the data collection process, monitoring the incoming data on a daily basis is recommended in order to react to possible inconsistencies (Sue and Ritter, 2012). After the first quantitative results are available, qualitative interviews with consumers are an integral part of the method. This is relevant to understand the motivations behind consumption preferences. For example, the standardised questionnaire might (surprisingly) show that for low-income consumer groups, the shape (sliced meat parts or live chicken) of the product is the most important

purchase criterion. Only qualitative interviews, however, reveal that this criterion is closely tied to the price, because only sliced meat parts make it possible to purchase a few grams instead of having to buy a whole chicken, which is a burden on the wallet. Focus group interviews as well as individual qualitative interviews are a suitable format for this purpose.

Next, the final phase is the data analysis. This paper does not go into detail about the analysis of the qualitative interviews because there are no method-specific features, rather researchers are advised to apply a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The quantitative data analysis of this method, in contrast, has some special features that require researchers' attention and will be highlighted in section V.

Special features of the data and data collection: The tricky questionnaire

To begin with, the researchers should address the question of sampling and decide if market or household surveys are most suitable to answer the research question. Both options offer up- and downsides. A strong argument for implementing the survey on spot at a market is that all respondents are consumers of the product being investigated, which is not necessarily the case with household surveys. Moreover, it is advantageous to discover the revealed preferences - what the customer actually bought - through simple observation. However, the market surveys also come with challenges. First, depending on the socio-cultural context, and as in the case of Benin, it is often not the end consumers but household helpers who carry out the shopping and hence follow the preferences of their employers.

Moreover, the supposed consumer could be an employee of a gastronomy business and act on its behalf. Results of the market research in Benin showed that in 22% of the cases the buyer of the chicken product was not the actual end customer and did not decide on the purchasing criteria by himself. It is therefore crucial to ask the consumer if s/he takes the purchasing decision according to his or her own preferences to avoid a bias in the sociodemographic characteristics related to the preferences. Second, market sampling must be well thought out (and often requires permission from local authorities). It carries the risk of bias because many markets are visited only by certain sociodemographic groups or only offer specific products (like traditional chicken), which is why consumers choose the very market cor-

responding to their product preferences. Thus, an unbalanced choice of the market sampling can result in misleading findings. The selection of markets should therefore evenly cover all product groups and demographic profiles. Third, consumers are often under time pressure during their shopping and not available for a survey. OP Benin's experience shows that researchers would frequently be unable to implement more than three surveys in a working day, making the process of 304 surveys extremely time-consuming. Depending on the research question and the claim to representativeness, a smaller number of surveys is also an option. Choosing household surveys can avoid some of these challenges, yet it comes with different sampling problems to solve. The fact that many households do not consume the product under investigation makes household surveys even more time-consuming and suggests consumer surveys on the market. Pros and cons of different sampling methods can be found in the Action- and Decision-oriented Research Handbook by Fiege (2019).

The design of the standardised questionnaire is key for meaningful results. Experience has shown that the interview should not last longer than 15 minutes because random answers from respondents increase with the length of the interview. For the purpose of subsequent data analysis, it is essential that the response options are given in numerical form or can be coded (numerical, yes/no, single-choice or multiple-choice answers). OP Benin provides an example of a consumer preference questionnaire on national and imported poultry meat products. It was designed with KoBo Toolbox and followed a structure of at least five thematically separated sections (see Table 2), which is the minimum requirement for the analysis of group-related consumer preferences.

The introductory part contains formalities (who is the interviewer, place/market of the interview, etc.). The second section contains the revealed references. This is where the consumer's purchase is recorded: Which product did the customer buy, for what purpose, and in what quantities? Here, all previously defined relevant product characteristics (literature review, qualitative interviews) must be listed, whereby a follow-up and skipping question structure is necessary. In practice, if the customer has bought a national live chicken, as in the case of OP Benin, questions about the characteristics of the chicken (number, plumage colour, sex, age, weight, price) follow. If imported meat was purchased, questions follow about the origin of the meat, the shape, the weight, and the price. This digital flexibility of the

questionnaire is a great advantage and allows conclusions to be drawn about the market shares of the different products.

The third section asks about socio-demographic characteristics. Right at the beginning, it should be clarified whether the respondent is buying for his/her own consumption or on behalf of someone else. If the respondent does not make the purchase decision, the digital questionnaire should jump directly to the final section to end the interview. Otherwise, the respondent's following statements on stated preferences, which are not their own, would be associated with false socio-demographic characteristics and non-corresponding revealed preferences. Which characteristics are queried are specific to the research question and the region and are developed on the basis of the literature review and expert interviews. Here, the central question is which characteristics might have an influence on preferences and purchasing behaviour. Age, gender, marital status, education and income level, and household size are classically queried characteristics and should not be missing.

The fourth section contains stated preferences - what consumers state they prefer to buy - and the underlying purchasing criteria that justify these preferences, as shown in Figure 1. The scale of the relevance of the criteria from zero to five can be adjusted, yet, must be explained to the respondent at the outset.

There are two methods by which this questioning can be carried out. Either each criterion is asked in order: "How important is the price [convenience, ...] to you in your purchase decision on a scale of zero to five, where zero is not important at all and five represents maximum importance"? Due to the predefined definition, this method offers the advantage that comparable data is collected on all criteria, even if the consumer is only subconsciously influ-

Section	Content	Observations and specifics
Introductory part	Name of the interviewer Date, time and place of the interview	While filling out this section, the interviewer introduces the interview (greeting, explanation of the project, etc.).
Revealed references	Which product did the customer buy, for what purpose, and in what quantities (present purchase and in the past)?	Product characteristics queried by follow-up and skipping question structure.
Socio-demographic characteristics	All characteristics that might have an influence on consumers' preferences (Age, gender, marital status, education, income level, household size are basic characteristics).	Develop characteristics based on literature review and expert interviews. If respondent does not take the purchase decision, the questionnaire jumps to the final section.
Stated preferences and purchasing criteria	What does the consumer state to prefer to buy? Which factors influence this preference to what extent?	The scale of relevance of the criteria can be adjusted, but must be explained to the respondent. Consider pros and cons of open or closed questions. In case closed questioning is applied, definition of each criteria must be given for a common understanding. In case open questioning is applied, make sure the consumers' understanding of the criteria matches your definition in the survey.
Final section	Free comment of the consumer Contact details for qualitative interviews	While the interviewer is filling in this section, the interviewer concludes the interview (thanking, saying goodbye, etc.).

E] Les préférences déclarées et les paramètres de qualité

PARMI LES TYPES DE POULETS SUIVANTS, LEQUEL PRÉFÉREZ-VOUS GÉNÉRALEMENT ACHETER ?

Poulet béninois d'élevage traditionnel
 Poulet béninois d'élevage moderne (semi-intensif ou intensif)
 Poulet importé congelé

QUELS SONT LES FACTEURS QUI INFLUENCENT VOTRE PRÉFÉRENCE (A QUELLE DEGRÉ)?

	0 pas de tout	1 à peine	2 un peu	3 moyen	4 fort	5 en grande partie
PRIX <i>Le prix influence ma décision d'achat.</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
COMMODITÉ <i>Je suis plus enclin à acheter la viande de volaille lorsqu'elle est déjà plumée, coupée en morceaux et prête à cuire.</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ASPECTS RELATIFS À LA SANTÉ <i>Ma décision d'achat est influencée par le fait que je pense ou non que la viande est bonne pour ma santé.</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
DISPONIBILITÉ <i>Il est important pour moi que le produit soit toujours disponible sur les marchés.</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1: Extract from the section on stated preferences and purchasing criteria, Benin OP 2020. Source: Own illustration.

enced by them and would not have actively named them. However, the order of the criteria can lead to a bias, causing criteria asked at the beginning to be rated more relevant. Alternatively, the respondent is asked in open manner about the purchasing criteria: "Which factors influence your preference how strongly on a scale from zero to five?" The criteria mentioned by the consumer are then ticked according to their stated relevance. Criteria not mentioned are indicated as "zero". Although the bias is lower this way, the comparability of the answers suffers because consumers may have a different understanding of the criteria (e.g. health aspects). Respondents may also simply forget important criteria or not mention them because they feel uncomfortable (e.g. price). OP Benin decided to use the first, closed question method, which proved to end up in valid data results during piloting. In either way, it is of utmost importance that the same questioning method is used in all interviews conducted.

Step by step: Specific requirements for data analysis

The objective of quantitative data analysis is to identify homogeneous consumer groups along socio-demographic characteristics with regard to their particular purchasing criteria and preferences. Although KoboToolbox offers integrated data analysis tools, the use of statistical analysis tools such as SPSS, STATA or R to work out the preference analysis is recommended, requiring only basic proficiency. This includes t-tests and anova one-way, kendall's w tests, chi-square tests, logistic regressions, correlations, cluster analysis and further descriptive analysis like frequencies and crosstabs – methods that might require and can be taught through learning by doing.

The composition of the consumer groups follows a manual cluster analysis. To this end, first, the purchasing criteria (e.g. the price, convenience, ...) rated most relevant by consumers on average are determined at the outset. Second, the relevance of these purchasing criteria is related to the revealed preferences (e.g. imported chicken meat) in order to explain consumer behaviour - with the support of qualitative interviews. To illustrate this in practice, an example comes to mind: consumers who buy imported chicken in Beninese markets place significantly more value on the purchasing criteria convenience and price, while buyers of Beninese chicken products rate taste and freshness more relevant. Third, the researchers determine the statistically significant influence of socio-demographic characteristics on the relevance of these respective purchasing criteria. These results can be illustrated by radar charts in Excel (see figure 2). In Benin, for example, consumers with a household income of less than 100,000 FCFA (approx. 180 USD) rate the product

price on average one rating point more relevant (3.4 out of 5) than those with an income of more than 100,000 FCFA (2.4 out of 5).

Now the researchers determine all those socio-demographic characteristics which statistically have a particularly strong effect on the relevance (on a scale between 0 and 5) of the purchasing criteria stated by the respondent. In the case of Benin, the analysis revealed that young consumers with low earnings and small households attach particularly high value to criteria that are associated with imported meat products (commodity, price, cooking time) in light of revealed preferences. If these characteristics are then manually clustered into a demographically homogeneous consumer group, its rated relevance for these purchasing criteria is particularly pronounced (see figure 3) and the group consequently shows a significantly larger market share (that can be as-

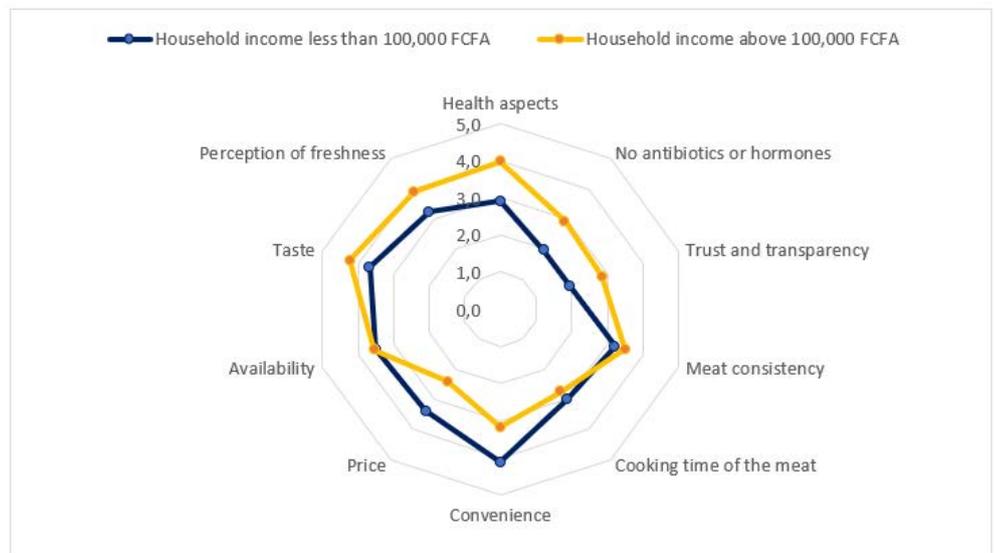


Figure 2: The influence of household income on purchasing criteria. Source: Own illustration.

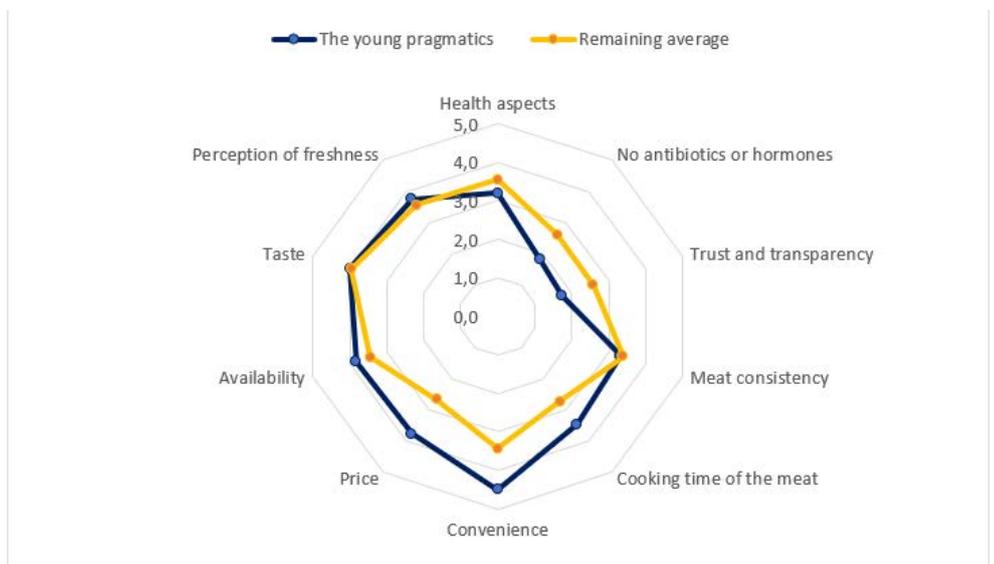


Figure 3: Average relevance of purchasing criteria - Consumer group "Young Pragmatics". Source: Own illustration.

sessed using the revealed preferences) for imported products than the average consumer.

Through this method, several homogeneous consumer segments along socio-demographic characteristics, each of which exhibited specific group-related purchasing criteria and preferences, can be identified. Here, not more than four main segments can be identified, which can be then divided into more detailed sub-segments depending on the research question and the goal of the research. The effect of stimuli from politics and the private sector (price, brand, packaging, shape, product features, sales promotions, etc.) on all individuals within these group segments is hence similar and provokes a comparable reaction (purchase decision) from them, resulting in group-related purchasing behaviour (revealed preferences). Care should be taken, however, to ensure that the sample size of the identified consumer groups is not smaller than 30 to allow statistically relevant conclusions to be drawn. Final focus group interviews with representatives of each identified consumer group contribute to an even better understanding of this segment-related behaviour.

Strengths

This method offers researchers the opportunity to make meaningful inferences about group-based consumer preferences and purchasing criteria as part of a market analysis in order to subsequently develop demand-oriented policy and production recommendations. As has been demonstrated, the implementation does not require in-depth stochastic knowledge or experience in analysing quantitative data, and can be applied by researchers who have previously focused on qualitative research but are willing to get acquainted with basic quantitative techniques. In addition, the freeware Kobo Toolbox can be used for the design and implementation of the questionnaire, which can be applied in an auto didactical way and easily applied under challenging conditions in teams, online and offline. Particularly noteworthy is the flexibility of the method, which allows adaptation to varying research questions and the addition of suitable elements.

Boundaries and challenges

The main challenges during the different phases lie in the sensitive sampling of markets or households, in the appropriate drafting of the questionnaire as well as in the sample size in order to draw representative conclusions. To master these challenges,

conscientious piloting is indispensable.

However, there are boundaries of the method that cannot be ignored. Firstly, while the technique offers valuable and reliable information on group purchasing behaviour and preferences, this alone does not allow researchers to draw definitive conclusions on market segmentations. For this, the data would have to show that the purchasing behaviour of the respective consumer groups does not only tend towards a certain product at the moment of the survey, but over a longer period of time. While these stated past preferences can and should be queried, they are, however, often inaccurate because the consumer may not recall his or her purchases in previous weeks or even months. Secondly, recommendations can be made on the basis of the results, but without providing information on whether and how much customers are willing to pay for product improvements that meet their needs. Incorporating a choice experiment into the approach allows to address both limitations but is extremely time-consuming and challenging to implement.

Lessons learned

The experience of the Benin 2020 Overseas' Project has shown that the drafting of the questionnaire design is the pivot for powerful findings. Researchers should be aware that the survey design is a time-consuming process that must first and foremost demonstrate adaptability and patience. This is because a design that works excellently in theory always presents unforeseen difficulties in practice. The design phase should therefore not be taken lightly, but rather developed in ongoing dialogue with the entire research team, through constant feedback loops with the interviewers during piloting and in cooperation with regional experts. Even under time pressure, the first implementation and analysis trials during the pilot phase are wisely invested working days and must not be short-changed under any circumstances.

Further readings

This paper outlines a method for analysing consumer preferences as part of a market analysis but cannot address all crosscutting technical and methodological issues that have been touched upon. For a deeper understanding of these topics, a recommended reading list follows at this point.

The Handbook of Survey Research (Rossi etl. al., 2013) introduces the theory and practice of sample survey research in general terms. More specifically,

Ian Brace (2004) discusses in his book *Questionnaire Design* the multifaceted role of questionnaires in marketing research and looks at different types of questionnaires, explaining when and how they should be used. As mentioned before, CEs and WTP are techniques which hold enormous potential, but are challenging to implement. Breidert et al. (2015) have published *A Review of Methods for Measuring Willingness-to-Pay* on these topics. In addition, Swanson, J. (2004) with his manual *Economic Valuation with Stated Preference Techniques* and Alpízar et al. (2011) in their article *Using Choice Experiments for Non-Market Valuation* provide introductions to working with CEs.

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