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INNOVATIVE FOOD QUALITY MODELS – DEVELOPED AS AN INTERFACE FOR MODERN CONSUMERS AND SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

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Abstract

The intensive development of global markets correlated with the modern consumer's demands led to a new complex approach concerning the food sector and its' main determinants. Old market theories that describe the food market mechanisms as a simple three point process: "to produce – to sell – to buy" are now growing into elaborated models based on more determinants that have one common challenge: quality.

Thus, the present study aims to highlight the importance of producers' accountability in ensuring the quality of food products, by implementing standardize methods of production and by informing the consumers in a correctly and completely manner.

In other words, the research focuses on quality management systems as defining instruments that can assure high-quality food products are being delivered at competitive prices to domestic and international markets.

In this sense, food quality management principles are analyzed from the point of view of one of the biggest actors in the food industry, Mondelez International. Having as a starting point the interview results with the Procurement Innovation Manager in Quality, this paper manages to outline a consumer preference based model in developing new food products. The present conceptual model takes into consideration both quality specialist and consumer's demands, in order to maintain the requirements of food management and safety systems and, simultaneously, to be flexible and optimize new food products according to modern consumer's quality requirements: design.

Keywords: quality management, food safety, consumer inspired design, sustainable business, innovative model, modern consumers' needs

JEL Classification: L15, L660, Q550, M11

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Introduction

The importance of quality as a main product or service determinant, has significantly grown in the last decades, transforming the notion from a cultural perspective to a performance evaluation tool for modern companies. Today, quality and its' constantly improvement in accordance with modern customer's needs must represent key priorities for sustainable businesses. As a response to the increasing global food safety issues, a legal framework, based on regulations and international standards regarding food safety and quality management has been adopted by many countries, for the food industry (Bobe, 2005).

In this context, the main objectives of the paper are to identify the current position of quality management and food safety standards, reported to both business environment and consumers' demands, in one of one of the biggest multinational companies that acts on the food market. Therefore, the research is divided into three main parts that provide a better understanding of the subject. The starting point is represented by identifying the current position of food quality management in modern economy, based on different contemporary literature perspectives.

The study uses the information and expectations provided by Solenne Alech, Procurement Innovation Manager in Quality of Mondelez International UK, in order to analyze the factors that influence a food quality and safety management model and the impact that consumer's demands have in designing new food products. Based on the interview results, the research methodology consists of a scenario planning model regarding the food product's design as an interface between consumer's expectations and quality and as a trigger that drives the liking of a food product to quality parameters. The main variable of the model is the design of the product, subjective and sensory characteristic that can have a major contribution to consumer's perception of the food product and its quality parameters.

1. Food Quality Management – the interface between innovation, technology and global markets

For the modern consumer, food products, more than other any products, must fit in a certain level of expected quality. Globalization and expending the food trade distances brought to public attention more and more safety issues along the food supply chain. During the last couple of decades, the credibility of the food industry was heavily challenged after a number of food crises, such as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) or mad cow disease, Dioxin in chicken feed, Food-and-Mouth Disease (FMD) and issues such as the use of Genetically Modified (GM) crops in foods (Aung and Chang, 2014).

The main results of these issues represented the starting point for a new approach regarding the management of food products, in terms of objectives that companies want to achieve: safety, legality, consistency and consumer acceptability (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011).

In this context, the innovative factor within the food sector, as a linking point between technology and the food market, determined food companies to develop new principles based on quality perspectives and safety managements systems that can provide the consumer with real quality guarantees (Kafetzopoulos and Psomas, 2013). Thus innovation for a sustainable business is now seen as developing a new product or a significantly improved one, that can generate business value based on its high quality characteristics that meet the modern consumers emerging needs, using as main instruments quality management systems and safety management systems (Dima et al., 2006).

Recently, another approach, closely related to quality and safety issues, has been developing fast through traceability systems. According to the European Union legislation, the notion of traceability involves “the ability to track any food, feed, food-producing animal or substance that will be used for consumption, through all stages of production, processing and distribution, applied both upstream (where does this product come from?) as well as downstream (where did this product go to?)” (Regulation (CE) no 178/2002). Food traceability systems are not relevant only to the industry, but also to the consumer, aspects which can determine the implementation of certification systems that provide guarantee on quality claims.

But, literature indicates that the implementation of such systems depends on organizational factors such as the size of the organization, the type of suppliers and customers, the degree of automation, the type of products, quality assurance requirements and most importantly the top management’s commitment (Dora and Van Goubergen, 2013).

Taking into consideration the sustainable attribute of a modern business model, food companies can choose today from a wide range of management tools in order to be able to better understand, develop, improve and control quality and safety matters. According to Overbosch and Blanchard (2014) the biggest impact in the food industry is brought by the following food safety initiatives:

- *GFSI* - The Global Food Safety Initiative;
- *HACCP* - Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points;
- *ISO 22000* - Food safety management;
- *ISO 9001* - Quality Management Systems;
- *6 Sigma* - quality focused methodology.

Besides the methodology and the tools, a sustainable business model must take into consideration modern consumers’ perspectives and emerging demands. These modern approaches developed new directions regarding innovation and developing new types of products on the food market. In the context of a well - regulated market, where basic quality determinants (ingredients, biological and chemical characteristics, safety potential) represent already a culture, competitiveness is driven by consumer’s needs based on subjective perceptions including design or promotion methods.

Thus, the perception of quality may be different from one consumer to another, from a country to other, being determine by economic and social aspects and beliefs. Older studies highlight that consumers can be classified 4 main groups depending on their attitude toward food quality guarantees ((Paraschivescu, 2006):

- Consumers that consider price as a quality parameter (12%);
- Consumers that count the product’s design as a quality parameter (41%);
- Consumers that trust quality marks – label details, designations of origin (14%);
- Consumers that appreciate the notoriety of the retailer and brand mark (33%).

The above percentage structure was identified as defining the perception of French consumers, perception that is highly important in considering the buying decision for food products, especially new ones. Recent studies highlight that European consumers value more the ecological aspects (German consumers) or trademarks with history in quality aspects (British consumers) (Theuvsen, 2010).

Given these trends, consumer behavior, in many cases, does not represent an adequate basis for decision making in quality planning (Paraschivescu, 2006). Therefore, a sustainable business approach must consider mandatory analyzing the reasons that produce that certain behavior. These aspects conclude to the fact that the modern consumer's quality perceptions involve new quality characteristics, which are based on sensory cognitions that cannot be easily quantified and standardized.

In this sense, design principles are now being implemented in most food product developing models and industry specialist are trying to highlight the impact of design in the consumer's food quality perception. Moreover, at this level, the aim is to link the technological possibilities with the art elements, to obtain products with increased utility, distinguishable through their originality/elegance, which can succeed to impress and provoke emotions for consumer through their artistic value (Pamfilie and Procopie, 2013).

Under these conditions, food product's design represents a component of modern commodity science research processes that tends to enlarge the modern perspective of food usage value. On this line, establishing a competitive global food market, consisting of demanding and sustainable business must take into consideration the aspects raised by consumers, which highlight the necessity of a more modern approach in terms of design, regarding the two main aspects: food product and package.

Throughout the years, different groups of relationships, which define the aesthetics and design of food products and packaging systems have been identified (Diaconescu, 2007):

- shape of the food product and its main reports: shape – structure, shape – composition, shape – color, shape – ornaments;
- appearance and finishing details: exterior appearance, interior aspect, section view, color, package, finishing details of exterior surface, finishing details of interior texture, graphics, product expressivity, trademark logo expressivity, proportion reports.

Nowadays design, as a quality characteristic, represents the interface of the main determinants of food products, in terms of value, functionality, and extrinsic characteristics (figure no. 1).

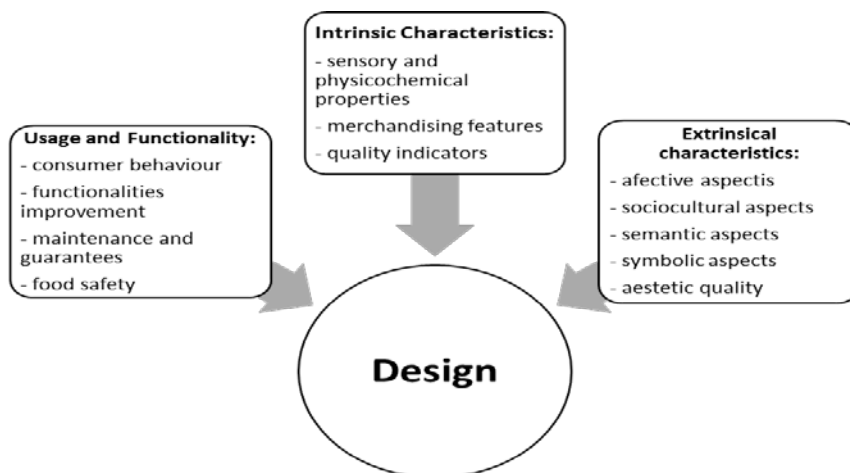


Figure no. 1: Food product's Design – main determinants in developing a new product
Source: Adapted after Pamfilie and Procopie, 2013, p.13

The sustainable development of global food markets involves a well-built long-term relationship between industrial production and consumption needs, involving safety and preventive measures but also economic, ethical and social aspects that can be easily highlighted through design.

2. Procurement Innovation Manager in Quality Interview - Mondelez International

For the present study, an interview was conducted in order to analyze food quality management principles in the vision of one of the biggest actors in the food industry: Mondelez International UK. The structured interview was used as a qualitative research instrument, taking into consideration the method's potential of depth to studying and identifying specific elements for the company and common ones for the entire food market.

Qualitative market research techniques primarily take into consideration solving issues related to the proper diagnosis of the motivations that underlie certain decisions. Their analysis must be made not only on the surface, but also in depth, by determining their type (nature) and their intensity. This is possible by using diversified methods and techniques such as: diagnostic methods (motivational), prospective methods, creativity methods where the interview is a diagnostic method (Anghel, 2004).

In connection with the purpose and objectives of the present research, an interview guide was developed, consisting of 7 questions using the following structure: introduction, opening questions, key questions and closing questions. The interview, as a data collection procedure can be conducted in four different types such as: structured interview, semi-structured interview, unstructured interview, informal interviews and focus groups.

The below interview is a structured interview, characterized by a clear topical focus and well-developed understanding of the matter in scope - food quality management. The questions were prior created whilst the interviewer played a friendly, neutral role and did not state personal opinions during the interview which was conducted face to face.

In summary, the interview results with Solenne Alech, Procurement Innovation Manager in Quality, conceive to outline a consumer preference based model that can be applied by food companies for optimizing food product design as a quality requirement.

When asked which is the strategy used by Mondelez International to implement innovative management models for food quality and safety, Miss Alech responded that *it is important to secure the foundation of a consumer preference based model, define the quality program globally and follow the Lean Six Sigma Pillars based on the five steps included in the DMAIC quality method (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve) and also implement the strategy into the way of working of the company. The five stages of DMAIC refer to a data-driven improvement cycle used for optimizing and stabilizing business processes and designs.*

A different question is related to the key factors that differentiate the company's strategy from the competition. In this case, Mondelez International *is delivering superior consumer value by introducing innovative products to market, at a better price that the competition offers using product quality and trust, packaging quality, sustainability, ingredient sourcing and brand image within 15 global Power Brands and more in biscuits (®Oreo; ®Chips Ahoy!; ®TUC; ®belVita; ®Club Social and ®Barni), chocolate (®Milka, ®Lacta, ®Toblerone, and ®Cadbury Dairy Milk) and gum & candy (®Trident, ®Chiclets, ®Halls, ®Stride and ®Cadbury Dairy Milk Eclairs).*

Being a multinational company is a challenging aspect, therefore a consumer preference based model and strategy has to be implemented across different product categories and regions. The company's perspective on this matter is that *designated teams must conduct studies on consumers to see which are their preferences regarding different product categories and regions where the products are sold. Afterwards the data has to be analyzed and the strategy should be centered on the consumer's preference. Of course, the strategy has to be aligned through all product categories and regions.*

Moving forward, when asked how to define an effective quality management model for a sustainable business in the food industry, the manager responded that *the quality system that is in place in the company has to be effective and the technical working part should be mixed with people management. For this to happen there are a few important aspects that need to be in place: compliance with audit, quality incident elimination, product quality defect elimination.*

The next question answered by the manager is related to how Mondelez International is maximizing value from consumer feedback and minimizing dissatisfaction. *If the consumer quality is met then this consumer will repeat purchase of the product. Therefore the consumer's sensory experience when consuming one of the company's products can be monitored through tests and the best product assortment can be created to minimize dissatisfaction. For example, product texture can have an impact on overall product liking. If the company knows from the consumers, which are their preferences then it can create a consumer driven quality product.*

The next question is about the way that Mondelez International finds the right balance between food safety, compliance and consumer inspired quality. In this case the Procurement Manager in Quality response is that *the company puts effort in finding the right balance between food safety, compliance and consumer inspired quality. All three processes are in place and they all need to deliver with maximum efficiency. But these processes can be subject of consumer preference changes or regulatory changes. Therefore the company has to continuously adapt to the market specifications and it has to overcome the competition.*

Last but not least, when it comes to determine which are the consumer's preference drivers when buying the company's products, the manager's response is *that the company's main purpose is to minimize consumer dissatisfaction by creating high quality food products of renowned brands such as @Cadbury, @Milka, @Oreo, @Lu where the consumers have a good experience with the packaging of the product, they like certain key attributes of the product. Other important aspects are good product availability and quality-price relation.*

3. Case study - Quality inspired by consumer's needs

One major focus of multinational companies involved in the Food Quality and Safety industry is to implement a product design from both the consumer's and the factory perspective. In this sense, companies are permanently trying to develop and improve product and process strategies in order to better understand the modern vision of the food consumption sector, from a global point of view (Escanciano and Santos-Vijande, 2014, 2014). As a result, the most encountered barriers are represented by the fact that companies and consumers have different ranking criteria regarding food quality characteristics. Thus, companies focus more on productivity in line with food safety issues and in terms of product and production processes, while consumers are more concerned about the aesthetic elements of the product (package, form) (Kafetzopoulos and Gotzamani, 2014). The final

determinant in this chain is the market vision that represents the communication channel between company and consumer: it delivers the company's perspective to the consumer and, on the other sense, the company gets the consumer's feedback regarding new product (Luninga, 2006). This aspect and the main components are outlined in figure no. 2 regarding the food product interface issue from the perspective of the three main determinants (company, consumer, market).

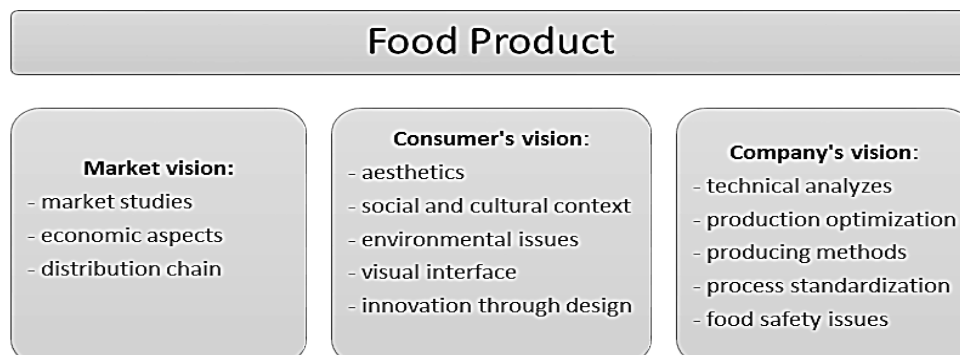


Figure no. 2: Ideal food product interface – Main Perspectives

Source: Adapted after Pamfilie and Procopie, 2014, p.87

In consequence, food companies must adapt and expand their quality perceptions from basic quality determinants (ingredients, producing processes, safety standards etc.) to more complex aspects like product design, packaging system or marketing programs, aspects that have become very important to the consumers.

Therefore the consumer's needs and satisfaction transposed to the industrial and safety requirements have to be in the center of a company's strategy, in order to build a sustainable business in the food industry. Having as a starting point the information provided by the Mondelez International Procurement Innovation Manager in Quality, the present study tries to outline an innovative food quality management model that can be applied to multiple companies from the food sector, taking into consideration one of the most important quality characteristic in terms of modern food markets: design.

a. Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to optimize food product design, as a modern quality determinant, in order to meet consumer expectations and transform the drivers of liking into quality parameters, closely connected with the specialist's (company) vision regarding quality and safety issues. The expected outcome of this study is that developing new food products based on the current model will determine an increase in the purchase level of such food products and therefore it will also position it into the consumer's top preferences, thus appreciated as superior products.

The starting point in conducting the present study is that a food company must focused on the following key drivers, used for several food groups:

- The consumer will try a new product as a result of good marketing, good product placement, good shelf impact and good product availability;

- The reason why consumers repeat purchase of a product is that:
 - They had a good experience with the packaging;
 - They like certain key attributes of the product;
- The producer needs to understand the key drivers mentioned above, ensure they are measurable and understand the range attributes that determine preference;
- The drivers that determine preferences must be translated into specifications and compliance with quality standards, therefore the consumer's dissatisfaction and its main causes must be also taken into consideration and must be kept at minimal level through the continuously improvement process;
- These attributes must be carefully respected during manufacturing process;
- Food Companies are prioritizing to find the right balance between food safety, compliance and quality inspired by consumer needs.

b. Benefits of the study

The benefits of delivering quality inspired by consumer's needs are the following:

Driving new behaviors that involve high levels of repeat purchase, which can lead to a maintaining/growing business,

- Better pricing, allowing investment back into the company's brands,
- A food quality management model based on quality inspired by consumer needs is cross-functional and takes a consumer-defined characteristic of a product and transforms it into a superior product,
- A key deliverable of this model is that consumer drivers of liking and disliking are identified, and optimal levels and ranges of these drivers are defined and validated,
- The present study is feasible, the conceptual model being successfully tested in a company, focusing on sweet products.

Based on the study's findings, a SWOT analysis (figure no. 3) could be determined to point out the (S)trengths, (W)eaknesses, (O)pportunities and (T)hreats that companies are facing when implementing a process focused on quality inspired by consumer's needs.

Thus the main challenge that food companies are facing is to translate the modern subjective consumer's needs in terms of food quality and safety requirement. Modern food companies that already produce according to standardize quality and safety systems have a major competitive advantage, but, this advantage will not materialize on a long-term basis if the innovation factor is limited within quantifiable characteristics (Green and Kane 2014).



Figure no. 3: SWOT analysis focused on quality inspired by consumer's needs

Source: study results

c. Samples analyzed

The present study was successfully tested in a food company, specialized on sweet products. Reporting the consumer's requirement to the chocolate production process, allowed the Critical to Quality (CTQ) attributes to be identified. For identifying the consumer's requirements, a questionnaire was applied, during the period December'14 – March'15, among 380 consumers, aged above 18 years, targeted in supermarkets.

The questionnaire highlighted that chocolate texture is the quality characteristic that raises most problems among consumer's satisfaction. The Consumer requirement is in this case to increase cocoa flavor intensity whilst keeping medium soft texture of the chocolate. The Analytical departments of the Food Company and the R&D Chocolate and Cocoa experts identify the CTQ attributes as: Cocoa butter (type), Cocoa powder (type and level) and Cocoa liquor (level and beans composition).

Samples were taken over an 8 week period according to statistical sampling plan. The samples are then validated by the above mentioned experts through sensory assessment and analytical results and conclude that CTQs have an impact on the cocoa flavor intensity.

Another aspect identified based on the results of the questioner is related to the product's visual design. Taking into consideration contextual determinants (the questioner was conducted in the same period with theme events like Christmas or Easter) consumers manifested a concern regarding the products visual design. In other words, consumers expect products in different shapes and packages that are related to important events.

d. Study Results

As shown in the figure below (figure no. 4), both analytical and sensory data confirm that texture impacts the product liking. The lower specification limit (LSL), is a value designating a lower limit below which the characteristic performance of the product is

unacceptable to the customer. While the upper specification limit (USL) represents an upper limit above which the performance of the product is unacceptable by the customer.

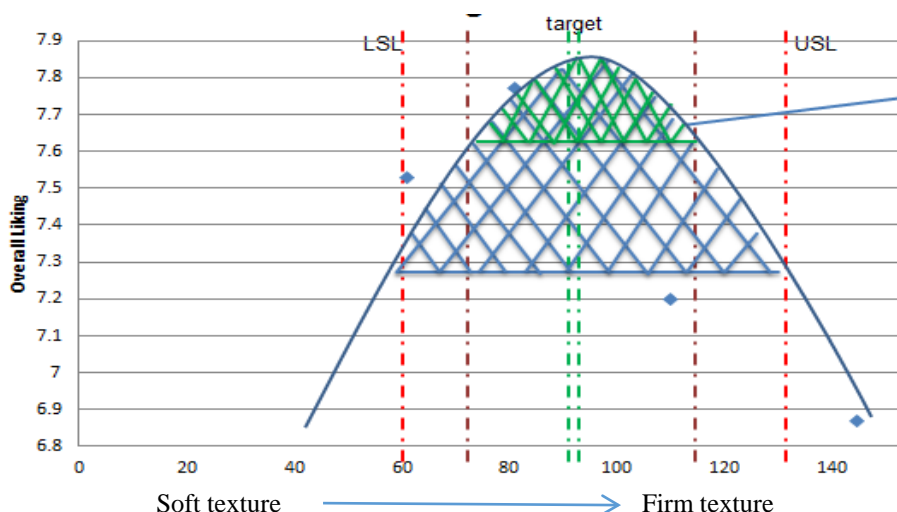


Figure no. 4: The impact of product texture on overall product liking

Source: Own research

Therefore, narrowing the texture range to reach the target – a single designated value for which the producer wants the product characteristic to perform at – will improve consistency of the consumer experience when consuming the chocolate.

In this sense, chocolate texture can be controlled in most of the cases through raw material quality, especially cocoa butter content. Being ranked as an expensive vegetable fat, the adding of high quality cocoa butter (from a certified place of origin) in order to maintain an unctuous and smooth texture will determine additional costs and a higher price.

In addition to the sensory characteristics, the study results highlighted the need of a perfect relationship between a food product and its package. In this regard, the quality of the package must be in a direct relationship with the quality of the food product. The package and the product's design represents also a very important determinant in maintaining chocolate texture through the post-production chain (transport, storage).

On the other hand, package quality is very important on a market where counterfeited products can be identified. In this situation, the elements that help consumers identify a food product (like batch number, designations of origin) can represent real guaranteed for consumer and can only be accessible through a well-designed package.

In summary, outlining a consumer preference based model can provide highly valuable information for the food company, in order to optimize food product design as a quality requirement.

Conclusions

Due to the growing importance that quality and safety registered in the last decades in relation to the food sector, food quality management represents today a strong guarantee of trust for the modern consumer that eliminates important barriers with direct impact on the level of consumption.

Taking into consideration the fact that the food sector is a very dynamic one, in the last period, these barriers have been more difficult to overcome, as the notional sphere of quality has expanded with new emerging characteristics which can be individualized from one modern consumer to another.

In this context, the following food safety initiatives determine the greatest influence in the food industry:

- *GFSI* – The Global Food Safety Initiative;
- *HACCP* – Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points;
- *ISO 22000* – Food safety management;
- *ISO 9001* – Quality Management Systems;
- *6 Sigma*.

Thus, in order to maintain competitiveness, companies that act in the food producing sector must develop innovative food quality models in order to optimize the design of new food products, taking into consideration modern quality determinants and consumer's demands. For a better understanding of these perspectives, a multinational food company was chosen for the case study – “Mondelez International UK” – which represents one of the biggest actors on the global food market. According to the Sector Manager in Consumer Quality the most important aspect that can constantly model the food design process is the consumer and his preferences. Also, it can be highlighted that a consumer based model applied by food companies represents today a food quality and safety requirement in order to optimize food product design.

The research focused on shaping an innovative food quality model, based on the main direction provided by Mondelez International's Procurement Innovation Manager in Quality.

In general terms, the main directions identified were cumulated under a SWAT analysis and adapted on a certain food product example. In this context, a food producing company was able to apply the model and provide a positive feedback for chocolate products assortments.

Improving quality can generate added value in both directions:

- For the company – economic benefits (manifested by an increase of productions and sales);
- For the consumers – social benefits (manifested by the outlining of quality patterns, environmental concerns).

Nevertheless, the psychosensorial quality characteristics are very important to the consumer. Taking into consideration the results of the current study, regarding the improvement of chocolate texture, we can say that consumers are willing to pay a higher price (determined by the increase in cocoa butter usage – a highly priced fat- for obtaining the requested texture) for higher levels of quality.

Thus we can confirm that both analytical and sensory data have a very important influence regarding the overall product impact on the market. In this sense, the food safety initiatives can represent important instruments in developing modern and innovative food quality management models in the context of a sustainable business.

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