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A kind of magic – Converting a credence in an experience attribute

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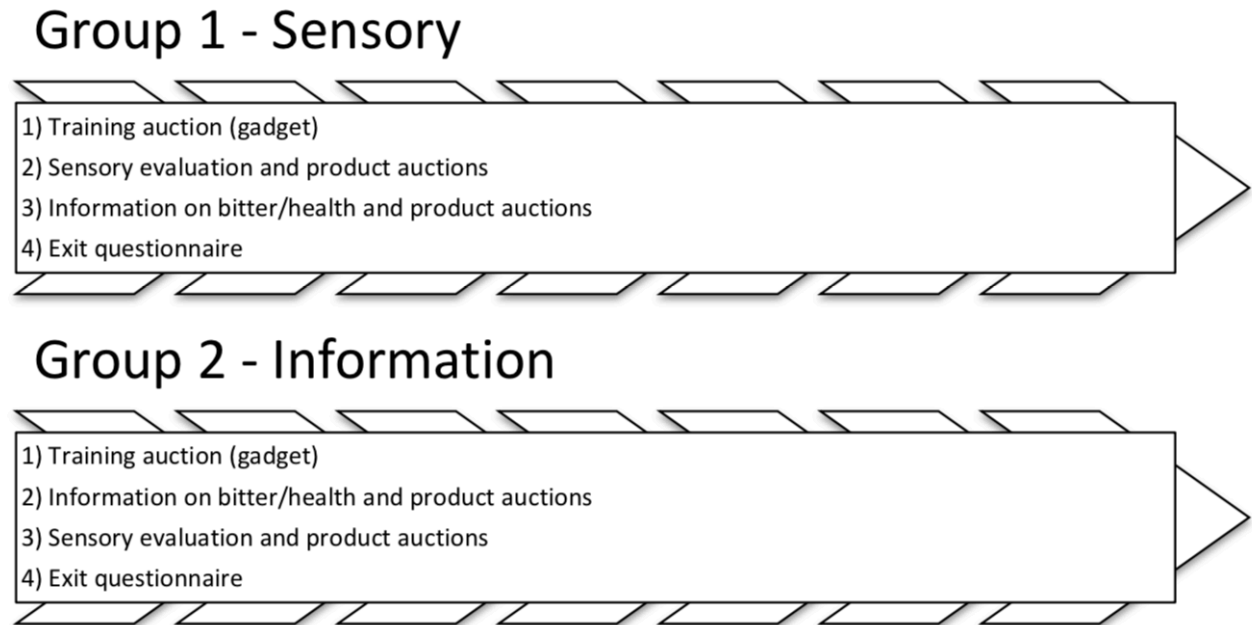
Abstract

Several studies evaluated how the information on health-related features (through labelling) can effectively influence the liking of consumers (Roosen et al., 2007; Annett et al., 2008; Bolling Johansen et al., 2010; Vidigal et al., 2011, Fernqvist & Ekelund, 2014; Thorndyke et al., 2014; Purnhagen et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2016), although this effect can be mediated by other factors, as for example the category of food (Wansink et al., 2004; Peng et al. 2006) and the health concern of the individual (West and Larue 2004, Verbeke, 2006; Ares and Gámbaro 2007). The current research tries to evaluate the effect of linking taste to health properties; helping to turn the health attribute, traditionally a credence one, to an experience attribute, and (eventually) radically modifying the framework in which the change of behaviour has been habitually thought. This should also provide public bodies with useful information to develop and design more effective communicational and promotional strategies.

Non-hypothetical experimental auctions have been applied, in a laboratory setting. Specifically, incentive aligned random n-price auctions were used to evaluate consumer preferences for extra virgin olive oils (EVOO) and cruciferous vegetables (CRUV); with different, pre-determined, amounts of bitter taste (4 EVOO and 4 CRUV with different bitter levels as measured by a professional sensory panel and ceteris paribus) in two rounds involving only taste and information. Additional data were collected in the post auction phase, on: personal tasting capabilities (via a threshold test for 6-n-propylthiouracil (PROP); food choices (via the Food Choice Questionnaire, Steptoe et al., 1995); general health interest (developed by Roininen et al., 1999); risk preferences (via Holt and Laury (2002) Multiple Price List); time preferences (as measured by Courtemanche et al., 2014); socio-demographics. A total of 20 sessions, involving 10 ± 2 participants each ($N=200$) were performed at the University experimental economics lab. In one-half of the sessions, participants submitted their bids for the products after evaluating their sensory characteristics alone and then after receiving information (see Figure 1 for an overview of the experimental flow). For the sensory portion of the experiment, participants completed tasting sheets where they were invited to write down comments about each product and rate them on their perceived level of bitterness and overall likeability (1 to 9 hedonic scale). Ordinary least squares (OLS)

regression was used in the sensory models to examine consumer preferences for the products based on their perceived levels of bitterness and overall liking. Random-effects tobit models were estimated for the WTP, to account for the panel nature of the data, i.e. each subject submitted multiple bids for different products in multiple rounds. The current study offers insights on the effect of communicating bitter as a proxy of higher healthiness for in vegetables and extra virgin olive oil.

Figure 1 – Experimental flow



Keywords: Consumer behavior, experimental auctions, health attribute, hedonic liking, cruciferous vegetables, information