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INNOVATION IN TRÁS-OS-MONTES TRADITIONAL PRODUCTS: CONSUMER PERCEPTION ABOUT NEW PRODUCTS DERIVED FROM *ALHEIRA*

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Abstract

Innovation is seen as driving economic growth. In the field of consumer products, innovation is a key factor to generate profitability and growth, ensuring that companies succeed and remain in the market even in difficult economic and financial periods (Nielsen, 2015). Companies need to be continually innovating to be competitive. In this context, many companies invest in the development of new products to gain a greater market share and, consequently, to achieve higher profits. On the opposite side, consumers have a strong appetite for innovation and are increasingly demanding in terms of quantity, quality and variety of products. On the other hand, the literature demonstrates that sociodemographic characteristics have a significant influence on consumer behavior regarding the adoption of new products, indicating that younger consumers with higher income and higher education level tend to adopt innovations faster (Gatignon and Robertson, 1985; Wang, Dou and Zhou, 2008). This work is part of a project developed under PRODER, measure 4.1 - Cooperation for innovation, dedicated to the development of new products derived from *alheira*, namely, snacks with *alheira* filling. The project results from a partnership between a research unit and an industrial company.

In December 2017, tastings were held at Intermarché located in Bragança city. The new product was presented to the consumer with two types of presentation, namely *croissant brioche* dough with *alheira* filling and small rectangular portions of *brioche* dough with *alheira* filling. Consumers were invited to participate in the tasting event on a voluntary basis. After the tasting of the product, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire with the objective to evaluate the product tasted on a scale from 1 (Very unpleasant) to 5 (Very pleasant), requesting the indication of a reason justifying the evaluation; to know the intention to buy on a scale from 1 (I would not buy it for sure) to 5 (I would buy it for sure); and to know the most appealing shape of presentation of the product from the perspective of the consumer. In addition, questions were asked about age, gender and occupation. Data were processed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software.

Data treatment involved the calculation of descriptive statistics and, in order to compare the consumers' assessment of the product taking into account socioeconomic factors, the Mann-Whitney (gender) and Kruskal-Wallis tests (age and occupation) were used at the 5% level of significance.

This study included 129 individuals, aged between 18 and 90 years old, with a mean age of 56.4 years old (SD = 16.2). The majority of the respondents were female (63.6%), 38.8% were dependent workers and 38.8% were retired. The overwhelming majority considered that the product tasted was pleasant (45.7%) or very pleasant (46.5%). The reasons justifying the assessment were, in order of importance, to be tasty (38.0%), to have a bittersweet flavor (29.5%), to be perfect, soft, smooth, good (8.5%), to have the same traditional flavor of *alheira* (5.4%), to have a great appearance and tasty dough (3.9%) and also to be a perfect and harmonious combination of dough and filling (2.3%). There were no consumers considering the product unpleasant or very unpleasant. The participants who were indifferent to the product (7.8%), that is, consumers who thought the product was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, presented the following reasons: the dough was not sufficiently light or crunchy (2,3 %); the dough was excessively sweet (2.3%); do not appreciate bittersweet taste (1.6%); do not appreciate the product when served cold (0.8%); would have detected a flavor and taste of mold and smoke (1.6%); do not like the dough and prefer another type of dough such as the puff pastry (0.8%). Regarding the intention to buy the product, 45.0% of participants consider buying it or buying it for sure (37.2%) when the product becomes available for sale. Only 3.9% consider not buying the product or do not know if they would actually buy it (14.0%). Regarding the presentation of the product, consumers prefer single small portions in a rectangular shape (68.2%) because, in their opinion, it is particularly suitable for appetizer. The *croissant* shape was more appealing to 24.8% of consumers, who found it particularly suitable for snacking. About 5% of the participants would opt for both forms (4.7%) depending on whether consumed as an appetizer, snack or at breakfast with coffee. When compared the evaluation that the consumers made of the product taking into consideration the gender, the age and the occupation, it was verified the absence of statistically significant differences ($p\text{-value} > 0.05$).

The results showed that there is a great acceptability of the product by the consumer, regardless of the shape of presentation. This product increases the diversity of the industry's offerings, resulting in the conquest of new consumers and, consequently, greater market share and higher profits. Finally, given the homogeneous behavior of consumers towards the product tested, in the effort of communication with the consumer, there will be no need to segment the market.

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