

Shopkeepers' Perspective of Parents' Motives Underlying Food Choice for Children in Northern Benin

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Introduction

Malnutrition is a widespread problem in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it hinders those affected to develop their individual potential, thereby reducing the development opportunities of entire countries (GIZ 2014).

The nutritional situation in Benin is particularly precarious (Global Nutrition Report 2021): Only 20 % of children under the age of two eat a balanced diet and 32,2 % of children are affected by lifelong physical and mental impairments caused by malnutrition. Climate change, poor local governance and strong population growth lead to agricultural expansion and conflicts over natural resources, particularly between mobile pastoralists and sedentary arable farmers (Djohy 2017; GIZ 2011). The resulting poverty is a threat to food security, especially in the northern part of the country, where a lack of access to nutritious food and parent's limited nutritional knowledge result in unhealthy and unbalanced diets (GIZ 2017). A prerequisite of improving the situation is the understanding of current dynamics, including parental purchase criteria related to child food.

Even though some research exists on child feeding related decision making of caretakers in the drylands of Northern Benin (Alaofè et al. 2017; Chadare et al. 2018), we are not aware of any study that investigates parents' or caretakers' child food purchase criteria. The aim of the study was to investigate these criteria by interviewing shopkeepers to see if they are similar to those of parents from other contexts.

Data and methods

Various ethnic groups live in northern Benin and the towns of Nikki, Banikoara and Parakou represent this ethnic diversity and were therefore chosen for this study. Shops, offering child feeding products, were visited and shopkeepers interviewed by computer-assisted personal interviews. They were asked to identify the different categories of child food products offered in their shops, the best-selling and unpopular products in each category and to share their assessment about the reasons why customers like or dislike the mentioned products.

An online form was used to collect the data, namely the brand and product name, the category as well as the selling price and size of the packaging unit. Predefined answering options were given for the following questions: Bestseller (yes or no), reasons (taste, nutritional value, price, packaging, brand, presentation, origin, visibility / placement). Multiple reasons could be selected and an additional blank space allowed the interviewer to add additional reasons as well as comments. The collected data was automatically sent to a google sheets file and photos were taken of both the bestsellers and unpopular products. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data.

Results

Products identified

The best-selling as well as unpopular products used to feed children below the age of 60 months were named in each category. A total number of 47 child food items was identified by the shopkeepers, of which 34 (72 %) were bestsellers and 13 (28 %) unpopular. The products recorded belonged to the following categories: Porridge (15 products), dairy (including baby formula) (15 products), custard (9 products) and cereals (8 products).

Frequency of reasons given to explain why a product belongs either to the group of the best-sellers or unpopular products

In the case of unpopular products, shopkeepers explained that in 85 % of the cases consumers find that the product was not visible enough, followed by a dislike of the product's presentation (46 %), customers do not like the product's brand and its country of origin (both 31 %) or its price (23 %). Shopkeepers stated that customers like the best-selling child food products because of their taste (100 %), nutritional value (88 %), price (62 %), packaging (15 %) as well as brand, visibility and presentation (each 3 %).

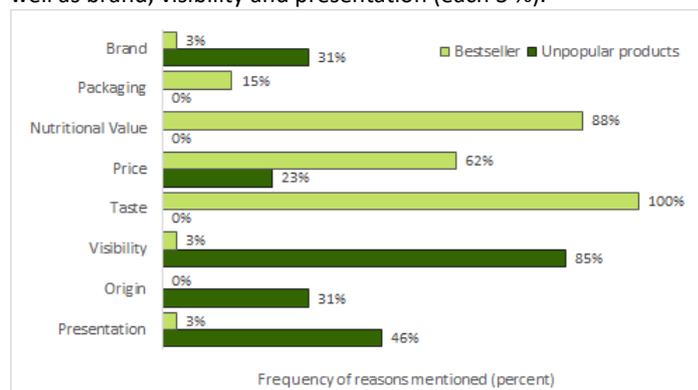


Fig 1: Frequency of reasons (percent) given to explain why a product is either a bestseller or unpopular

The frequency of reasons mentioned differed significantly within both, the bestseller category and the category of unpopular product (Cochran-Q-test; $p < 0.01$ in each case).

Product photos

Many of the products mentioned have prominent declarations of nutritional benefit labeled on the front of their packages (e.g. 'enriched with iron', '11 minerals' 'rich in vitamins and minerals'). All baby milk formula packages have these declarations, 89 % of the cereals and 69 % of the porridge packages.

Discussion

Taste is the most important purchase criterion mentioned by shopkeepers. They stated that all best-sellers are bought not only, but also because of their taste. This is in line with findings from Kenya, Latin America and high income countries, where taste is one of the most important reasons for purchase decisions, too (Cramer et al. 2021; Machín et al. 2016; Russell et al. 2015).

The second most important reason ascribed to parents choosing child food products is nutritional value. However, Røed et al. (2020) describe that there is a discrepancy between the high importance most parents put on healthy eating and the fact that this does not necessarily translate into actual behaviour. In the case of Benin, reasons might be that the high illiteracy rate of 58 % (World Bank 2020) lets customers experience difficulties trying to evaluate the nutritional value of products (Choudhury et al. 2019). Consumers might also be triggered to perceive a product as healthy by prominent health declarations on the packaging (Hughner and Maher 2006) as well as by other packaging related informational cues (Fenko 2019; Plasek et al. 2020).

Shopkeepers ascribe the product price a strong influence on parental decisions, but a less important role than taste and nutritional value.



This result is in line with findings from Kenya and other countries (Cramer et al. 2021; Machín et al. 2016; Russell et al. 2015).

Purchase decisions are strongly influenced by the visibility and presentation of products in retail outlets (Ali et al. 2012) and shopkeepers of the present study give 'visibility' and 'presentation' as the two most frequent named rejection criteria for unpopular products. Both reasons were neither mentioned in past studies which solely focused on interviewing parents to discover their reasons for choosing child food products (Russell et al. 2015; Machín et al. 2016), nor in the Kenyan study, where shopkeepers were interviewed (Cramer et al. 2021).

According to Beninese shopkeepers, customers use 'brand' both as a rejection and selection criterion. This is in line with findings from Zimbabwe and India and can be explained by consumers' lack of purchasing power, resulting in the inability of replacing dissatisfactory products and a reliance on choosing products manufactured by brands they know and trust (Viswanathan et al. 2009; Chikweche and Fletcher 2010).

Shopkeepers in Benin mentioned 'origin' and 'packaging' as the two least important reasons influencing customers.

The unpopular products to which the reason 'origin' was allocated were produced in Benin and in neighbouring countries. According to Houessou et al. (2020), shopkeepers might refer to a mistrust in local products due to insufficient marketing initiatives.

Some best-sellers in which case 'packaging' was given as a reason were packaged in reusable tins with plastic lids, others in unspecific plastic bags. While it remains unclear what shopkeepers had in mind, Houessou et al. (2020) found that packaging was not considered an important attribute in their study but that various other studies conducted in Benin reveal the influence of packaging and product presentation on Beninese customers.

Conclusion

The discussion shows that the mentioned reasons or motives for purchase decisions in Northern Benin are largely the same compared to other developing and high income countries, namely nutritional values, economic factors and the taste of the product. The specific situation in Sub-Saharan Africa let customers heavily rely on the performance of a specific product and 'brand' is therefore an important purchase criterion.

Non-visibility, presentation of products and origin were mentioned as disqualifying reasons in the case of unpopular products and packaging in the case of best sellers. These results suggest that the purchase decisions are influenced by underlying, subconscious reasons such as the packaging design of child feeding products, even when 'packaging' was rarely mentioned as a motive.

The limitations of the study must be taken into consideration: It was conducted by interviewing shopkeepers instead of customers and it is therefore possible that not the underlying motives of parents were named, but rather the shopkeeper's interpretation of the purchase behaviour of parents and caretakers.

Further research directly involving customers of child food is therefore necessary to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of packaging elements on purchase decisions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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