Searching for emotions in the grocery bag

The University of Trento with the Department of Economics and Management participates in a European research project that aims to harmonize research on food consumption choices, which have multiple implications for health and sustainability. UniTrento, in particular, will investigate the role of emotions in food purchases.

Trento, 18 October 2021 – Imagine a messy kitchen where you can't find what you need to prepare a good meal. This is a description of the current state of the food consumer science community: many research teams are at work in different parts of the world but they are not always talking to each other, so the full results achieved by one team may not be available to the others and cannot provide the basis for further studies.

The Comfocus (Communities on Food Consumer Science) research project, funded with 5 million euro over a 4-year period (from 2021 to 2025) within the Horizon 2020 programme of the European Commission, set out to put things in order in that messy kitchen.

The project, coordinated by Wageningen University (the Netherlands), is developed by a consortium of 14 members, including the University of Trento with the Department of Economics and Management (Dem), as the only Italian participant together with the University of Bologna.

The Department of Economics and Management, which has received about 220,000 euro funding, will investigate the role of emotions in the purchase and consumption of food products. The research team is led by Roberta Raffaelli with Simone Cerroni and Luigi Mittone. Simone Cerroni is also affiliated to the Agriculture Food Environment Center (C3A) of the University.

The researchers explain: "Emotions influence many aspects of our lives and affect our choices. This is particularly true for the food products that we buy and consume. For example, think of food we are not used to in western cultures and we consider disgusting, like insects. Insects however represent an important protein source that can be an alternative to meat, given also that the meat industry has an important environmental impact and is responsible for climate change because of carbon dioxide and methane emissions".

They provided some information on how the study will be conducted: "European researchers in the area of cognitive and behavioural sciences will visit our Laboratory of Cognitive and Experimental Economics (Ceel) at UniTrento to conduct experiments that aim to study how different types of stimuli can trigger emotional reactions that lead consumers to make healthier and more sustainable choices".

The various stimuli may include images or videos of dishes (insect-based dishes, for example), or information on food-related risks (on the presence of bacteria that are harmful for human health). By measuring variations in sweating and skin conductivity, through small sensors on
the fingers of individuals participating in the study, the researchers will establish if they experienced disgust or fear, and how these emotions impacted on their purchasing choices.

The final goal of the Comfocus project is to reduce the fragmentation of studies in the area of consumer and nutrition science and to develop a knowledge platform, a data base containing information and digital services available to all European research groups in the field. "We take inspiration from the principles of Fair (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) and responsible research and innovation data use", they said.

"Our mission is to advance the food consumer science community to contribute to sustainability in all its dimensions – environmental, social and economic – which can benefit from the adoption of healthy food choices", they concluded.

The research project includes networking activities, joint research and transnational and virtual access to major research infrastructures. The results will be promoted and disseminated through a virtual forum.

The projects and all the participating partners are involved in an even larger Europe-wide research network (FNH-RI, Research Infrastructure for Food, Nutrition and Health) comprising over 150 institutes from 24 countries which is focused on the study on healthy and sustainable dietary habits. Its ultimate goal is to provide standards and procedures for the sharing of data and the use of the new technologies and infrastructures that are essential in this research field.

For further information:
Press Office and External Relations
Directorate of Communication and External Relations
University of Trento
tel. +39 0461 281131 – 281136
ufficio.stampa@unitn.it
Past press releases: https://pressroom.unitn.it/tag/english