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Descriptive Differences:

A Comparative Evaluation of Descriptive Methodologies to Determine Attributes Driving Consumer Liking for Meat Sticks

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Background & Objectives

In a competitive and evolving marketplace, understanding how a flagship product performs relative to others in the category is essential for guiding innovation, messaging, and product development strategies. To address this, Curion partnered with an industry leader in the meat snack category on a research initiative focused on category benchmarking and product positioning. While the primary goal was to map out their product's sensory space against key competitors, the study also provided an opportunity to explore and evaluate different descriptive analysis methods.

Objective:

To compare two descriptive analysis methods - Curion QDA® and Universal Scale - **assessing their relative strengths, limitations, and suitability for guiding product and brand strategy.**

Comparing Descriptive Methods

Curion QDA®

A **consumer-led** descriptive analysis method where **users and likers of the category are trained to articulate sensory attributes** using their own language. The **panel collaboratively builds a lexicon** and rating scale facilitated by a moderator, capturing **consumer-relevant terms.** Data is collected quantitatively usually in **triplicate,** allowing for **robust statistical analysis of product** differences.

For this research, 12 Curion QDA® panelists evaluated 13 products in triplicate.

Universal Scale Method

A **standardized, expert-developed lexicon** and **intensity scale** used to evaluate sensory attributes across products. Panelists are trained extensively from several months to years in **anchoring their ratings against fixed reference points**, rather than create a lexicon from scratch, enabling consistent comparisons across categories and studies. This approach emphasizes **precision, reproducibility,** and **cross-project comparability.**

For this research, 11 panelists evaluated 23 products in duplicate.

Actionable Takeaways From Both Descriptive Methods Were Largely Similar.

- Key findings from both methods indicated a **lack of distinct segmentation** for this category and that a **total population solution** was appropriate.
- **Textural attributes were found to be the biggest drivers.**
- Multiple-factor analysis (MFA) revealed **four groups of highly aligned attributes** between the methods:
  - **Texture (Interior and Exterior)**
  - **Off-Notes**
  - **Size and Shape**
  - **Basic Taste and Characteristic Flavor**
- Both methods leveraged **replicated data** collection and ensured **optimal panel performance.**

Curion QDA®'s Consumer-driven Method Revealed A Unique Modality Specific To The Category.

- Training of Curion QDA® panelists involves generating terms and definitions specific to the category, as well as how to define and measure modalities.
- During the training process the **Curion QDA® panel confirmed a unique modality** was an **important part of the consumption process** for this category from a **consumer experience** standpoint.
- Attributes in this modality were found to be **key drivers of liking**. This modality was not part of the Universal Scale Method.

The Methods Differed In Framework And Yielded Some Unique Perspectives On Attribute Drivers.

- Curion QDA® generated 68 terms across six modalities: appearance, aroma, flavor, texture/mouthfeel, aftertaste/aftereffects, plus one unique modality.
- Universal Scale Method: used a proven ballot with 44 terms across four modalities: appearance, flavor, texture/mouthfeel and aftertaste.
- While commonalities were identified, the correlation of the key drivers varied by method:

Curion QDA®

- Appearance 1 (-)
- **Unique Modality 1 (-)**
- **Unique Modality 2 (-)**
- **Unique Modality 3 (-)**
- **Unique Modality 4 (+)**
- Mouthfeel/Texture 1 (-)
- Mouthfeel/Texture 2 (-)
- Mouthfeel/Texture 3 (-)
- Mouthfeel/Texture 4 (-)

Highest Priority

Lowest Priority

Universal Scale:

- Mouthfeel/Texture 1 (+)
- Mouthfeel/Texture 2 (+)
- Mouthfeel/Texture 3 (+)
- Mouthfeel/Texture 4 (-)
- Mouthfeel/Texture 5 (-)
- Flavor 1 (+)
- Flavor 2 (+)
- Flavor 3 (+)

Diverging Methods, Converging Insights

While there are methodological differences between the two, both Curion QDA® and Universal Scale Method are established sensory tools that have been used and validated for decades. Using either of them for this research would have yielded similar overall insights and recommendations.

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