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# The meanings of chocolate: A qualitative understanding of its consumption experiences

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# Study background

- Reference:  
Zarantonello, L. & Luomala, H.T. (2011). Dear Mr. Chocolate – Constructing a typology of contextualized chocolate consumption experiences through qualitative diary research. *Qualitative market Research: An International Journal* 14(1), 55-82.
- Context-specificity of consumption experiences:  
"...is an emergent property that results from a complex system of mutually overlapping interrelationships in constant reciprocal interaction with personal, environmental, and situational inputs " (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1986, p. 219)
- Contextual variation in food consumption important, yet poorly understood (Bisogni et al., 2007)
- Two key research goals
  - To explore how different contexts shape and define chocolate consumption experiences
  - To develop a novel typology of contextualized chocolate consumption experiences
- Rising economic significance of chocolate

## How was the study conducted?

- Diary-data collected in Italy
- 19 female and 4 male diarists, age range 20-63
- Instruction: writing down all of the things that related to either thinking about or consuming chocolate
- Diarists were highly involved chocolate-lovers
- Diaries were fully transcribed
- Data coded both theory-drivenly and inductively
- Analytical methods:
  - Basic content analysis (2 coders, reliability coefficient 0.924)
  - Interpretive analysis

## Findings: Context of physiological need (10.1 %)

- Existence of state of physiological deficit such as hunger and tiredness
  - “Today, my lunch consisted of a Kinder Cereali. I didn’t like it very much, but I needed to eat something nutritious and fast while on the train.” (Female 4)
  - “I skipped dinner: between work, school of dancing and cinema, I didn’t have time. But they gave me lots of chocolates – Baci Perugina and Ferrero Rocher—and I ate many of them even though I didn’t like them.” (Female 11)
- Craving for sweet foods after eating or stimulation of digestion
  - “It’s like a physiological necessity. I need chocolate after meals.” (Female 14)
  - “This morning, among other things, we went to a herbalist’s shop and bought an organic chocolate bar [. . .]. That bar turned out to be extremely useful in the evening: as I was having difficulties in digesting the dinner, I took a small piece and I felt better right away.” (Female 10)

## Findings: Context of sensorial gratification (32.6 %)

- Wallowing in taste experience; white vs. milk vs. dark; filled vs. unfilled; rough vs. soft
  - “I’m madly in love with white chocolate, because it’s totally different to any other chocolate.” (Female 9)
  - “I’m a purist. I love chocolate in its classical version, without any filling, aroma, or other alterations of the flavour.” (Female 12)
  - “I like rough chocolate. I hate smooth chocolate bars or those that are too thin, unless they are just for tasting.” (Male 4)
- Product and package esthetics (colors, forms, materials)
  - “These chocolates sparkle in the tin foil [. . .]. Simply lying like this on the table, among documents and papers, they look like flowers or butterflies.” (Female 19)
- Role of odors
  - “I was at home and decided to make a chocolate pudding for my children, because they really love it. While I was preparing it, the smell was so intense and gratifying.” (Female 5)

## Findings: Context of memories and nostalgia (7.3 %)

- Chocolate conjures up memories from the past  
“Since I was a child, the choice of the Easter egg has always been a special ritual. There couldn’t be an Easter without an egg.” (Female 9)
- Brand-specific memories  
“One year, I was on holiday with my uncles and I fought with my aunt, because she didn’t give me Nutella. Suddenly, I packed my rucksack and ran away from the camping ground. Inside, I had my pyjamas, toothbrush and Nutella.” (Female 14)
- Most memories clouded with sense of nostalgia  
“I remember when I went out for a walk in the mountains with my grandfather and my uncle. The most beautiful thing was that we took chocolate bars with us [. . .].” (Male 4)  
  
“Milk chocolate makes me think of my childhood. Those good old days!” (Female 18)

## Findings: Context of escapism (8.1 %)

- Chocolate as a break-free from everyday reality and routines
- Mental chocolate escape
  - “I tasted a couple of little chocolate eggs with yoghurt and strawberry flavours. [. . .] While tasting them, I don't know why, mountains, pastures, and shepherd's huts came into my mind. Maybe it's because of the combination of chocolate and yoghurt, that I found myself running in the middle of meadows together with goats.” (Female 9)
- Linking chocolate escape to other activities
  - “Tonight, I watched some TV from my comfy sofa, munching Pavesi Gocciolo extra dark.” (Female 16)
  - “I went to the beautician and finally tried the chocolate aromatherapy. It was relaxing and I was left feeling totally regenerated.” (Female 6)
- Preference for solitude
  - “I have just got home. The kitchen light is still on and my dad is still up. Damn! Right in the kitchen. Nothing to be done, Nutella must be tasted in solitude.” (Female 14)

## Findings: Context of materialism (5.2 %)

- Possessiveness: existence chocolate stashes
  - “Today, as soon as I got to the laboratory, I checked that my little yellow box was still there [. . .] and if its precious content was intact.” (Female 9)
  - “I can’t stand my fiancé [...] The most frustrating thing is that, if I want to keep chocolate at home and save it from his greedy, I have to hide it from him. Sometimes I hide chocolate so well that I myself can hardly find it.” (Female 12)
- Non-generosity
  - “A negative effect of chocolate – It makes me selfish.” (Female 17)
  - “I hate it when my chocolate disappears! Seven or eight people came over for dinner and I had to offer them some.” (Female 8)
- Envy for others’ chocolate
  - “At Silvia’s place, I get near the usual bowl filled with chocolates, where there are lots of different types. As usual, I envy Silvia and her chocolates.” (Female 14)



# Findings: Context of chocoholism (26.8 %)

- **Addiction, relapses, substitutes**
  - “Today I have been a real choco-slave!” (Female 8)
  - “I snort chocolate almost every day. It makes me feel good. I feel the same way as when I taste it.” (Female 14)
- **Limited or no control, attempts at abstention**
  - “I resisted chocolate for the whole day, but in the evening, I gave in. After supper, I had two slices of chocolate cake, but I couldn’t get enough. So I had a Kinder Cereali. Then I had a dozen of Pan di Stelle cookies. After that, I found an open box of Karina chocolates and finished it off.” (Female 14)
- **Guilt feelings**
  - “Eating chocolate always makes me feel guilty, because of the calories.” (Female 15)
  - “A fantastic emotion that, sadly, is gone so fast.” (Female 1)
- **Positive existential experiences yet possible!**
  - “After having eaten and tasted chocolate, I feel [. . .] more positive, in the sense that I’m better disposed towards everybody including myself. I accept myself for what I am – pros and cons.” (Female 17)

## Findings: Context of interpersonal and self-gifts (10.1 %)

- Altruistic chocolate gifts

“Some friends asked me over for dinner. I don’t like to arrive empty-handed. My first thought was to buy them a box of chocolates.” (Male 2)
- Egoistic chocolate gifts

“On Sunday, my daughter and I visited a relative and we gave him a box of chocolates. My daughter asked if we could open it, but he said he didn’t want any chocolate. I kept quiet, but was really disappointed.” (Female 1)
- Role of quality, price, package and place of purchase of chocolate gift

“When we were engaged, he [. . .] gave me Baci Perugina on St Valentine’s Day. I have always liked Baci Perugina and enjoyed reading the little cards.” (Female 15)

“I think it’s really classy to buy sweets at the confectionery. It isn’t like the supermarket!” (Female 8)
- Chocolate self-gifts as rewards

“After cleaning the house I awarded myself with two chocolate eggs.” (Female 12).

# Conclusions: A typology of contextualized chocolate consumption experiences

	Functional chocolate consumption motive	Experiential chocolate consumption motive
Personal centre of meaning for chocolate	Context of physiological need Context of sensorial gratification Context of chocoholism <b>MEDICINE</b>	Context of escapism Context of self-gifts Context of memories and nostalgia <b>MIND MANOEUVRING</b>
Socio-cultural centre of meaning for chocolate	Context of materialism <b>REGRESSION</b>	Context of interpersonal gifts <b>RITUAL ENHANCEMENT</b>

# Conclusions: Implications

- Academic implications
  - Existence of gender differences?
  - Existence of cross-cultural differences?
  - Role of product and package aesthetics on taste perception
  - Role of consumer value – brand symbolism (mis)fit in different chocolate consumption experiences
- Managerial implications
  - Use of contextualized chocolate consumption meanings in advertising
  - Harnessing chocolate enthusiasts for product development and brand management activities
  - Segmenting consumers based on typical meanings they attach to chocolate consumption



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