

An Empirical Analysis of Consumer Preferences For Salty Snacks

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Abstract: The consumption of salty snacks has a long tradition in Hungary; however, salty wafers represent a traditional product category whose marketing visibility and innovation dynamics appear weaker than those of several competing pre-packaged salty snack categories. The aim of this study is to examine consumer preferences for salty snacks, with particular emphasis on cheese wafers and the mini cheese wafer variant, and to identify factors that may influence awareness, purchase intention, packaging preference, and openness to innovation.

The research was conducted through a questionnaire survey involving 1,010 respondents in Heves County. The analysis examined purchase intention, consumption habits, media-related information sources, price/value sensitivity, and attitudes toward newly introduced salty wafer products across three analytical age groups. Respondents under 18 years of age were included only with parental or guardian consent, and the responses were processed anonymously and in aggregated form.

The findings show that most respondents are familiar with and have a positive attitude toward salty wafers, while awareness of the mini cheese wafer remains considerably lower. Among respondents previously unfamiliar with the mini variant, 91% indicated willingness to try the product after it was shown to them. The results suggest that technological modernisation, product innovation, aroma-protective packaging, broader retail availability, and more conscious marketing communication may strengthen the market position of salty wafers. Because the sample is geographically limited and non-probabilistic, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than nationally representative.

Keywords: purchase intention, food consumption, sociodemographic factors.

1 Introduction

The baking and pasta industry is one of the most important sectors of the food industry; the first factory unit in Hungary was established in 1859 under the name First Hungarian Steam Pasta Factory [1]. Enormous technological development has taken place, as a result of which high-quality pre-packaged food products are available in today's world. It is of considerable importance for the environment, sustainability, and society that innovation and development reach production lines as quickly as possible so that consumers receive the highest possible quality at the lowest possible prices. Salty biscuits, potato crisps, and salty wafers are highly popular, easily accessible, and ready for immediate consumption.

In Hungary, snacks with cheese, onion-and-sour-cream, and paprika flavours are the most popular. Sales are highest in the second, third, and fourth quarters [2], and many snack producers also market larger packages during major world sporting events, thereby maximising profit. During the past two decades, the popularity of potato crisps has increased steadily at the expense of other salty snacks; nevertheless, wafers, as traditional Hungarian savoury baked products, have managed to remain on the market. Some producers have recognised that, in order to expand further, salty wafers need to be broadened and their flavour profile updated in line with current trends and consumer needs, similarly to the direction observed in the potato crisp segment. Through cooperation among producers, processors, traders, and civil organisations, it is necessary to establish an appropriate product base, supported by well-communicated distribution that reflects local characteristics, with direct forms being preferred [3].

Starting up food production is a multifaceted task and, from the 2020s onward, requires a novel organisational approach in an economic and social environment that is changing ever more rapidly and markedly. In previous decades, the market followed a more predictable rhythm, but the arrival of COVID-19 and the sudden rise in energy prices introduced a new perspective. According to Kürthy and co-authors [4], labour efficiency in the Hungarian food industry lags behind that observed in the European Union. This can be explained by the relatively low domestic labour costs, which reduce firms' willingness to move toward technological development because of the high prices of such investments. Faster and more accurate problem solving is now required than ever before from company management, regardless of hierarchical level, and this places increasing emphasis on the competence and expertise of decision-makers.

The research problem was therefore formulated on the basis of the literature on consumer-driven food product development, digital transformation in the agri-food sector, functional foods, packaging cues, and social media food marketing [5]-[15]. These sources indicate that product development is more successful when it is aligned with consumer needs, perceived product benefits, packaging-related quality signals, and the communication channels used by the target group. The present

article consequently focuses on a narrowly defined case, the mini cheese wafer, and examines whether a traditional but less dynamically marketed product can be repositioned through innovation, packaging development, and targeted marketing communication.

2 Literature review

Hungarian food industry enterprises can keep pace with competitors only if they are able to adapt to technological and market changes [10], [16]. In the case of salty wafers, modernisation may involve not only production technology but also product policy, flavour development, packaging, and communication. Previous studies on consumer-driven product development emphasize that successful food innovation should start from consumer needs and preferences [5]. This is especially relevant for traditional products that are widely known but receive less systematic marketing support than competing snack categories.

The literature on functional foods and health-related food choices also supports the examination of innovation potential. Consumers who perceive a product as healthier or more beneficial tend to evaluate it more positively and may be willing to pay a price premium [7], [8], [11], [12]. Packaging is similarly relevant because extrinsic product attributes, such as colour, readability, and visual quality, can influence perceived healthiness and product quality at the point of purchase [9]. These findings justify the inclusion of packaging added value and price/value sensitivity among the research objectives.

Packaging, product information, and marketing communication may exert a measurable influence on consumer perception and choice even under experimental conditions. In their experimental study, Becker et al. demonstrated that the formal and visual characteristics of packaging can affect consumers' impressions of taste intensity and product evaluation [17]. This is relevant in the case of salty wafers because modern aroma- and quality-preserving packaging can be interpreted not only as a technological element but also as a marketing tool that influences perceived product quality.

Pinto et al. examined the role of packaging and health-related claims in the case of snack bars. Their results indicate that health-related information and product-benefit claims displayed on packaging can influence consumer perception and sensory acceptability [18]. This supports the view that, when developing salty wafers, not only flavour variations but also the messages communicated through packaging should be examined as market-relevant factors. These may include preservative-free production, freshness preservation, and the communication of modern packaging technology.

Regarding the reach of younger consumers, the examination of digital and social-media-based food marketing is particularly relevant. Coates et al. investigated, in a randomised experiment, the effect of food marketing communicated by social media influencers on children's food choices and consumption [19]. The online randomised study by Bragg et al. also showed that food marketing on Instagram may influence adolescents' advertising perception and food preferences [13]. These studies directly justify the inclusion of social media as a key research dimension when examining the market development of salty wafers, particularly the mini cheese wafer.

The effects of front-of-package information and labels were analysed by Grummon et al. in a large-scale randomised clinical trial involving hypothetical beverage and snack selection tasks. Their findings showed that interpretive front-of-package labelling systems reduced the energy content of selected snacks and beverages compared with the control condition [20]. In the case of snack products, packaging therefore fulfils not only an aesthetic or logistical function but may also play a significant role in guiding purchase decisions and shaping perceptions of product healthiness.

The importance of visual elements in snack packaging was also confirmed by Wang et al., who examined the impact of snack food packaging design characteristics on consumer purchase decisions. According to their research, colour, shape, imagery, line design, and typography are key elements of snack packaging that may influence purchasing decisions [21]. This is important for the present research because, when evaluating the market potential of the mini cheese wafer, the development of visual appearance and packaging communication represents an indispensable practical direction alongside product development.

Marketing communication is another important dimension. Prior research shows that food and beverage brands can reach young consumers effectively through social media, and that platform-specific marketing may influence advertisement perception and food preferences [13], [14]. In addition, interactive and informative social media marketing can affect purchase decisions through brand-related mechanisms [15]. For this reason, the study examines not only product awareness and purchase intention but also the media channels through which respondents encounter cheese wafer-related communication.

Secondary data are also used to frame the market context. KSH demographic data support the interpretation of the 18-60 age group as an economically important consumer segment [2], while FMCG retail-chain turnover data provide background for evaluating retail availability and distribution-related recommendations [22]. The research objectives were derived from this combined literature and secondary-data background rather than from personal impressions.

3 Materials and methods

A quantitative questionnaire survey was conducted in the first half of 2023 with the assistance of 14 interviewers and the involvement of 1,010 respondents. The study focused primarily on the two-centimetre-diameter mini cheese wafer and secondarily on the regular-sized cheese wafer with a diameter of eight to ten centimetres. A self-designed questionnaire was used, and the responses were analysed with descriptive statistics and selected inferential statistical procedures. In terms of information acquisition, the study relied on primary market research [23].

The fieldwork was carried out at eight retail units selling basic food products within food retail shopping centres in Heves County. The sampling procedure was a non-probability, face-to-face intercept survey; therefore, the findings describe the surveyed respondents and should not be treated as representative of the entire Hungarian population.

The research objectives were defined on the basis of the literature review and the secondary-data background presented above. The study examined the market position and perception of the mini cheese wafer because salty wafers are a traditional, well-known product category, while their innovation, packaging development, retail presence, and communication appear less intensive than in several competing salty snack segments. The questionnaire was intentionally kept short and easy to understand in order to support accurate data collection in a retail environment.

Participants were grouped into three analytical age categories: respondents under 18 years, respondents aged 18-60 years, and respondents aged 61 years and above. Respondents under 18 years of age participated only with parental or guardian consent; participation was voluntary, the questionnaire was anonymous, and results were processed only in aggregated form. Age and gender were recorded as control variables for sample description and subgroup interpretation, but the composition of the sample was not treated as an independent research objective. The results were analysed using The R Project for Statistical Computing software.

3.1 Research objectives and questionnaire structure

- 1 Comparison of awareness of the regular-sized cheese wafer and the mini wafer
- 2 Identification of purchase willingness and purchase frequency related to the mini cheese wafer
- 3 Assessment of the role of different marketing and media channels in cheese wafer-related communication
- 4 Examination of openness to flavour and product innovation across age groups
- 5 Examination of price/value sensitivity by age group

6 Examination of consumer preference for the added value of aroma-protective packaging

Age and gender were retained only as control variables for describing the sample and interpreting subgroup differences; they are not independent research objectives.

Research objective / control variable	Questionnaire item
Comparison of awareness of the regular-sized cheese wafer and the mini cheese wafer	1. Do you know the cheese wafer product? (Yes/No); 2. Do you know the mini cheese wafer product? (Yes/No)
Identification of purchase willingness and purchase frequency related to the mini cheese wafer	3. Compared with the regular-sized wafer, would you purchase the mini wafer? (for those who answered no to Q2) (Yes/No); 4. How often do you purchase mini cheese wafers? (for those who answered yes to Q2) (Weekly/Monthly)
Assessment of the role of different marketing and media channels in cheese wafer-related communication	5. Have you ever encountered an advertisement for cheese wafers in the media? (TV; Radio; Print media; Social media; Do not know/No)
Examination of openness to flavour and product innovation across age groups	6. Would you buy a mini wafer with flavours different from the traditional Hungarian flavour profile? (Yes/No)
Examination of price/value sensitivity by age group	7. Instead of the 100-gram package, would you choose a 500-gram package if the consumer price were more favourable? (Yes/No)
Examination of consumer preference for the added value of aroma-protective packaging	8. Do you prefer transparent packaging or aroma-protective packaging? (Transparent packaging; aroma-protective packaging)
Control variables used only for sample description and subgroup interpretation (not a research objective)	9. What is your gender? (Female/Male); 10. What is your age group? (Under 18 years; 18-60 years; 61 years and above)

Table 1
Research objectives, questionnaire items and control variables
Source: author's own compilation

4 Analysis of the research results

This section presents the results of the primary research using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, selected statistical tests, and The R Project for Statistical Computing software.

The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented first only as sample-description variables; the subsequent subsections analyse the substantive research questions and formulate market-oriented interpretations.

4.1 Demographic characteristics

The demographic structure of the sample is presented only to describe the database and to support the interpretation of age- and gender-specific results. It is not an independent objective of the study. Of the 1,010 respondents, 71% were women. The proportion of female respondents was 65% among respondents under 18 years of age, 73% in the 18-60 age group, and 72% in the 61 years and above age group. The weighted mean of female participation was 0.7031 and the weighted standard deviation was 0.034, indicating relatively stable gender proportions across the age groups.

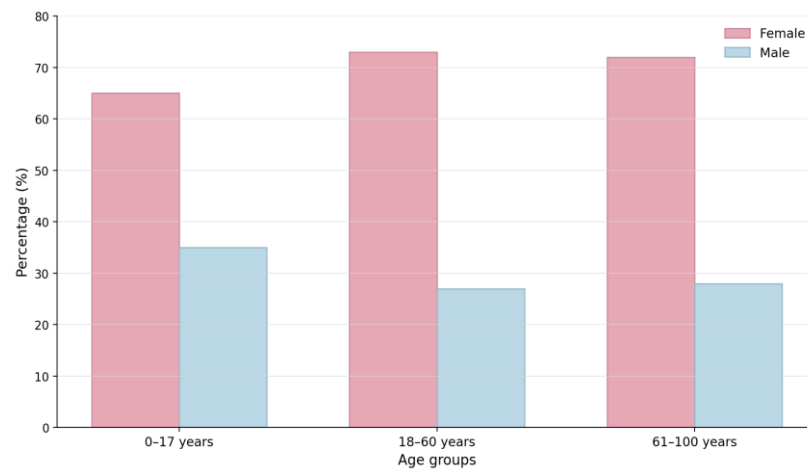


Figure 1
Demographic characteristics of the research participants by gender.
Source: author's own compilation (2024), N = 1,010

4.2 Assessment of the ratio between awareness of the cheese wafer and the mini cheese wafer

Responses to the question on awareness of the regular-sized cheese wafer showed that 96.5% of respondents answered yes. This indicates that the product has a very high level of consumer familiarity in the surveyed market. In marketing terms, high awareness represents a favourable starting point, but it does not automatically ensure purchase frequency or market growth; market growth also depends on availability, perceived value, packaging, and communication [5], [24].

Awareness of the mini product variant was considerably lower: 43% of respondents indicated that they were familiar with mini cheese wafers. The gap between the 96.5% awareness of the regular-sized product and the 43% awareness of the mini variant suggests that the mini wafer has substantial market-development potential, especially if supported by improved retail availability and more targeted communication. The difference in awareness between the two product sizes is shown in Figure 2.

When awareness is treated as a binary variable, where 1 represents awareness and 0 represents lack of awareness, the estimated standard deviation for the regular-sized wafer is $\sigma \approx 0.184$, while the estimated standard deviation for the mini wafer is $\sigma \approx 0.495$. This indicates that awareness of the mini variant is much more heterogeneous in the sample, which supports the need for further marketing communication and distribution development.

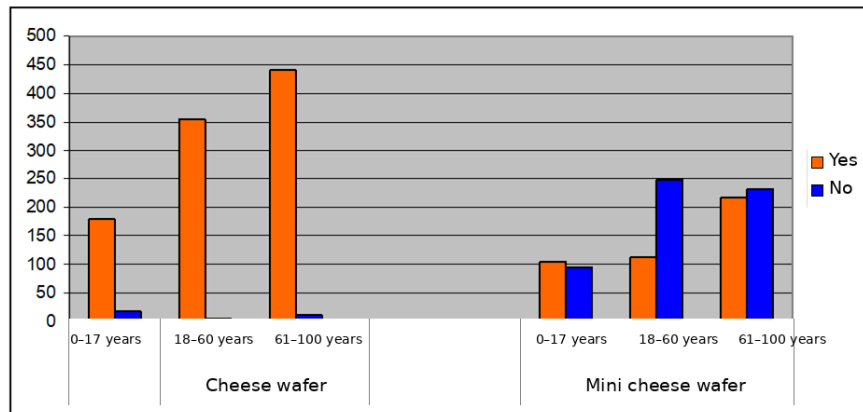


Figure 2
Difference in awareness between the regular-sized and the mini cheese wafer.
Source: author's own compilation (2024), N = 1,010

4.3 Examination of purchase frequency and purchase willingness regarding the mini cheese wafer

The proportion of respondents purchasing the mini cheese wafer weekly was 29%. This result indicates that awareness alone is not sufficient to create routine purchasing behaviour. Although the mini wafer was known by 43% of respondents, its purchase frequency remained relatively low, suggesting that communication, availability, and repeated consumer contact may be necessary to convert awareness into regular purchasing.

Respondents who were not familiar with the mini cheese wafer (N = 575; 57% of the full sample) were asked whether they would try the mini wafer instead of the regular-sized product in the future. During this question, the interviewers physically showed the respondents the mini cheese wafer package. Willingness to purchase the previously unfamiliar product reached 91%, indicating strong potential for trial. This result should nevertheless be interpreted with caution because direct product presentation and face-to-face interaction may increase positive responses.

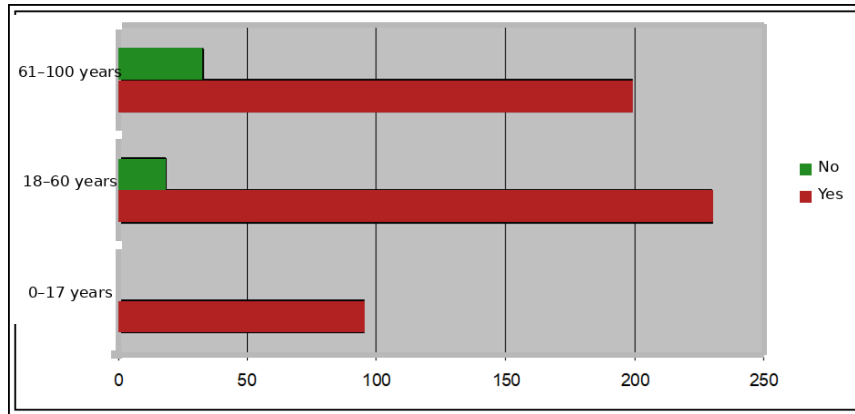


Figure 3
Distribution of purchase willingness regarding the mini cheese wafer.
Source: author's own compilation (2024), N = 575

4.4 Share of different marketing activities in the media

Television and radio advertisements were mainly reported by adult and older respondents, while the low value measured among younger respondents indicates that these channels have limited relevance for reaching the youngest consumer segment. Print media responses were interpreted cautiously, because respondents often associated this category with retail promotional leaflets rather than with traditional newspaper or magazine advertising. The low social-media value in the responses is important because younger consumers are generally more reachable through digital platforms than through traditional media.

For the first time in the 18-year history of Facebook, the number of users did not increase in the first quarter of 2023; instead, it declined. Instagram also showed a decline during this period, with 500,000 fewer users than in 2022. In 2023, the number of TikTok users exceeded one billion, and this platform appears to offer the greatest potential for younger age groups, who open the application on a daily basis at a rate of 82% [25]. According to Eurostat (2017), Hungarian internet users, with a usage rate of 83%, are the most intensive users of social media platforms in Europe [26].

International literature also confirms that food and beverage brands reach underage target groups particularly effectively through social media platforms, and that platform-specific presence can positively influence perceptions of advertisements as well as product preferences [13], [14]. In addition, the interactivity, relevance, and informativeness of social media marketing can also positively affect purchase decisions; therefore, the role of social media is of outstanding importance in reaching young target groups [15].

The proportion of 61.7% in the 'do not know/no' category indicates limited perceived visibility of cheese wafer promotion. Industry consultations suggested that some producers advertise through television, radio, print media, or Facebook, while Instagram and TikTok presence is more limited. This finding is consistent with the literature indicating that social media has a strong role in reaching young consumers [13]-[15]. The frequency of advertisement appearances across media platforms is shown in Figure 4.

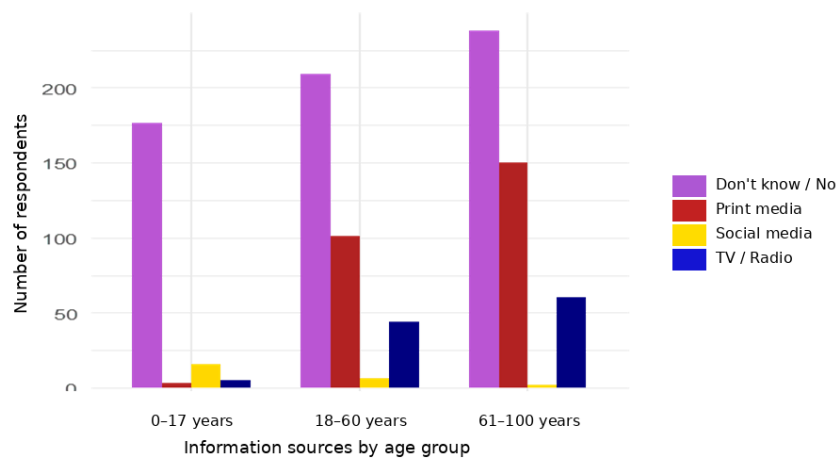


Figure 4
Frequency of advertisement appearances across media platforms.
Source: author's own compilation (2024), N = 1,010

4.5 Importance of innovation in different age groups

Openness to new flavours was strongest among younger respondents; the 91.5% value measured in this group provides a favourable basis for product innovation. The rise of potato crisps and the diversification of their flavour profiles suggest that flavour innovation may also support the renewal of traditional salty wafers. At the time of the study, the domestic salty wafer market was dominated by traditional salted, cheese, and caraway versions; therefore, the introduction of Asian, Mexican, Indian, or other contemporary flavour profiles could be tested first among younger consumers through targeted social media communication. The proportion of respondents open to novelty is shown in the revised Figure 5.

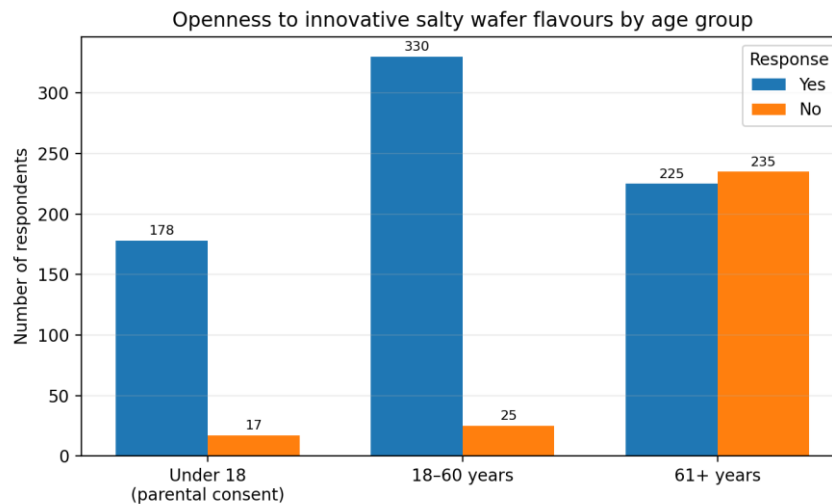


Figure 5.

Openness to innovative salty wafer flavours by age group.

Source: author's own compilation (2024), N = 1,010

4.6 Examination of the importance of the price/value ratio by age group

Price/value sensitivity increased with age in the sample. A more favourable consumer price for the 500-gram package was important to 45.0% of respondents under 18 years of age (Yes = 81; No = 99), 88.6% of respondents aged 18-60 years (Yes = 310; No = 40), and 95.5% of respondents aged 61 years and above (Yes = 420; No = 20). The chi-square test indicated a statistically significant association between age group and response distribution ($p < 0.001$). These results suggest that smaller packages may be more appropriate for launching innovative flavours among younger consumers, while larger value packs may be more attractive for older, price-sensitive consumers. The price/value ratio by age group is presented in the revised Figure 6.

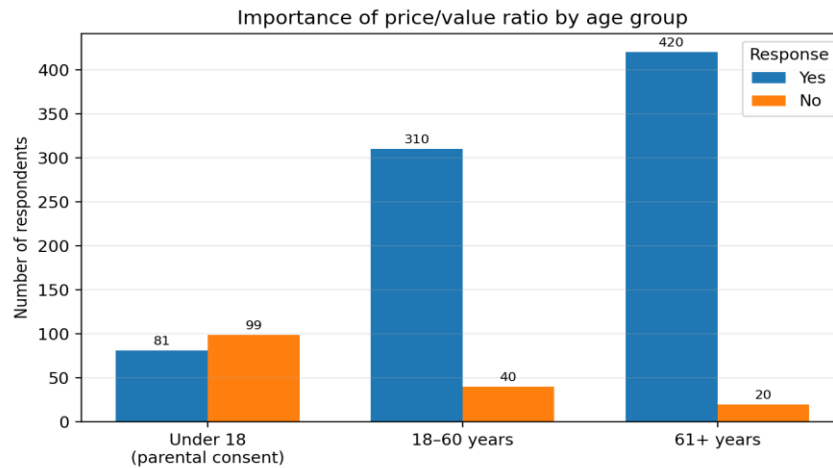


Figure 6.

Importance of price/value ratio by age group.

Source: author's own compilation (2024), N = 1,010

4.7 Examination of the importance of the added value of packaging

The interviewers had products with both packaging types available so that respondents could form their opinions on the basis of direct product presentation. Among respondents under 18 years of age, 98% chose aroma-protective packaging, mainly because of its modern visual appearance and stronger graphic effect. In the 18-60 age group, 75% considered it important that aroma-protective technology and the use of food gases may support preservative-free production. In the 61 years and above group, transparent packaging remained more acceptable: 69% preferred or accepted the older transparent solution, which may be linked to price expectations and familiarity with traditional packaging. The results suggest that aroma-protective packaging is particularly suitable for new flavours and for younger or middle-aged target groups, while price-sensitive older consumers may require clear communication of the added value of the more modern packaging.

Packaging preferences are shown in Figure 7.

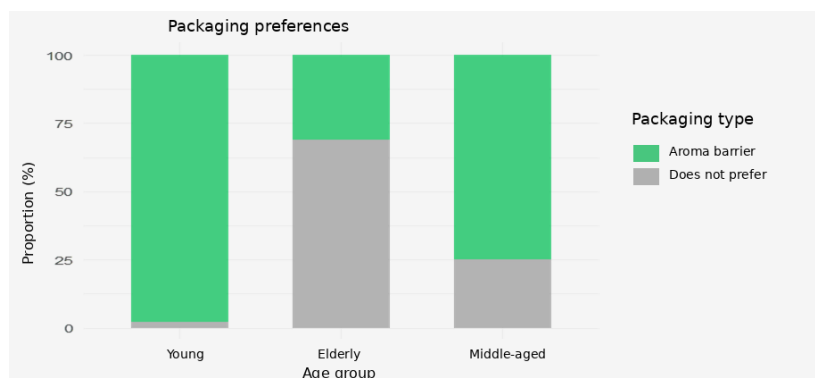


Figure 7

Proportion of packaging preferences.

Source: author's own compilation (2024), N = 1,010

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the high awareness of the regular-sized cheese wafer, salty wafers provide a market base on which product and marketing development can be built. At the same time, the much lower awareness of the mini cheese wafer shows that the category has not yet fully exploited its market potential. The findings support the need for modernisation in product policy, packaging, distribution, and communication, which is consistent with the literature on food-industry innovation, consumer-driven product development, and packaging-related quality perception [5], [7]-[12], [16].

The results suggest that product innovation may help reduce the competitive disadvantage of salty wafers compared with potato crisps and savoury biscuits. New flavour profiles, smaller innovation-oriented packages, and social media communication may be especially relevant for younger consumers, while larger value packs and clear price/value communication may be more effective for older consumers.

The study also highlights the practical importance of aroma-protective packaging. This packaging type can strengthen perceived product quality, support longer shelf life, and make preservative-free production easier to communicate. The preference patterns observed in the sample indicate that packaging development should be linked to age-specific positioning rather than treated as a purely technological decision.

From a marketing-management perspective, the four most important development areas are product policy, pricing policy, distribution policy, and communication policy. The 18-60 age group is especially important because KSH data indicate that this age category represents a large, economically active consumer base in Hungary

[2]. Retail-chain turnover data [22] also underline the need to increase availability beyond the currently limited retail presence. Broader distribution in FMCG chains could support repeat purchase, while smaller shops and markets may remain important among older consumers who value personal contact and habit-based purchasing.

Standard deviation analysis makes it possible to determine how strongly company turnover figures are dispersed around the mean: if the standard deviation is smaller, the firms are of a similar order of magnitude; if the standard deviation is larger, the differences are greater. Average turnover was HUF 896 billion and the standard deviation was HUF 307.9 billion. Lidl is significantly above the average, lying more than +1 standard deviation above it; Aldi and CBA are below the average, COOP and Tesco are around the average, while SPAR performs slightly above the average to a negligible extent.



Figure 8
Business ranking of FMCG retail chains in 2024.
Source: author's own compilation, 2024

Figure 8 provides background information on the relative turnover of selected FMCG retail chains and supports the interpretation of potential distribution channels. In the surveyed retail context, mini wafer products were found to be available only in Coop Zrt. stores; therefore, broader retail presence should be considered a primary market-development task. The older age group constitutes a stable consumer base: awareness of the cheese wafer is 97.5% among them, while awareness of the mini cheese wafer is 48%. This group is also characterized by a preference for markets and smaller shops, where personal contact and familiarity may support repeat purchasing.

Limitations of the study

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample was collected in Heves County through a non-probability, face-to-face intercept survey at retail units; consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Hungarian population without further research. Second, the sample contains a higher proportion of women, which may influence the interpretation of purchase-related results. Third, respondents under 18 years of age were included only with parental or guardian consent, and their answers should be interpreted with additional caution because minors may differ from adult consumers in purchasing autonomy and decision-making responsibility.

Further limitations arise from the use of a self-designed questionnaire and from the fact that the study measured stated purchase intention rather than actual sales behaviour. In addition, the physical presentation of the mini cheese wafer package during the interview may have increased trial willingness through the effect of direct product contact and interviewer interaction. Finally, the study focuses on one specific traditional salty snack product and only partially covers the wider salty snack category; therefore, future research should examine additional product types, regions, sales data, and longitudinal changes in consumer behaviour.

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