

Exploring the artisanal Black Forest distilleries: Defining and re-discovering its features.

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Summary:

This paper investigates the complex conceptual space of the Black Forest distillers (Brenner) to explore its relevance for and the understanding by its members - the group of artisanal producers. By exploring the relevant features of distillers and their products it allows us to consider the potential for creating a more distinctive outward image and concept, focused on regionality that can be more easily understood by external audiences and thereby enhance its attractiveness. Moreover, we consider how and what innovation is possible in this traditional craft without losing its distinctiveness and undermining community efforts for shaping the outward image.

Introduction

Features of organisations and their products are the fundamental building blocks that define concepts and determine category membership (Hannan et al., 2019) with a wide range of further implications for distinctiveness (Zhao and Glynn, 2022) and informativeness considerations. Recognising the importance of the shape and distinctiveness of the categories in the conceptual space as well as the position that individual organisations and their offerings occupy has important strategic implications (Pontikes, 2018). Moreover, in spaces where features may be shared between concepts, or where hierarchical category structures (Murphy, 2020; Cattani and Fliescher, 2012) exist, the importance of investigating audience perception and sensemaking increases. Therefore, this paper investigates the complex conceptual landscape of Black Forest distillers (Brenner) to explore the varying perception by members of this group themselves and the potential for creating a more distinctive space focused on regionality that can be more easily grasped by external audiences.

High-percentage, region-specific alcoholic beverages have a long tradition in many parts of Europe and beyond. Distilled from different varieties of locally grown fruit, corn or potato, different regions have their own version of such a spirit. To give an example, Palenka (Czechia), Palinka (Hungary) or Rakia (Balkan countries) denote a distilled alcoholic beverage, usually made from fruit, that comes in many different forms. A subcategory of this kind of fruit brandy and a popular staple in many Central- and Eastern European countries is a plumb schnaps that again has a range of different versions in different countries, yet largely shares the same features - Slivovitz (Serbia), Hungary (Slivovice), Czechia (Slivovica), and Poland (Sliwowica).

Similarly, in Germany, the broad term of 'Schnaps' covers a range of spirits with a wide variety of region-specific spirits. Two of them are the 'Obstbrand' and 'Obstwasser' of the Black Forest region. With approximately 1,100 distillers, both private and SME distilleries, in the relatively small Rensch-valley alone, it has one of the highest densities of distillers in the world and thus makes Oberkirch, the city at its centre, the "Schnaps capital" of the world (Wall Street Journal, 2019; FAZ, 2022). By decree of the Bishop of Strasbourg who ruled the region, local farmers growing fruit were granted the right to distil a certain amount of spirit from their own-grown fruit since 1726 (FAZ, 2022).

This right persisted until the reform of the federal law regulating the spirits production and distribution in 2017 (BMF, 2017).

Steeped in regional and artisanal tradition, these products hold much appeal to connoisseurs but have not gained the same level of popularity that other spirits have garnered, such as Gin or Scottish Whisky. This context therefore poses a range of important questions and research directions. In this paper, the regional characteristics are explored as features that determine the relevant features and its position in feature space to permit the establishment of greater regional identity in the perception of the external audience (Romanelli and Khessina, 2005). While it is important to establish a clear boundary for clear categorisation and sensemaking (Zuckerman, 1999), it is also important to consider the scope for innovation (Pontikes, 2022) in this artisanal craft. Thus, combining elements of regionality, tradition, and artisanal craft in term of feature-based categorisation allows an in-depth investigation that holds important strategic implications for members in this population.

This paper contributes to the discourse on category dynamics by explicitly considering the feature space and the possibility of features to be interlinked and thus resulting in more complex concepts. Using the insights from semi-structured interviews with a range of different distillers from the Black Forest region, the perception of the conceptual space for their own products offers insights into its distinctiveness and at the same time scope for innovation.

Literature Review

Categorisation processes play an important role in a variety of social settings and have received an increasing amount of attention in the field of organisational studies over the past decade (Hannan, 2010). Moreover, recent developments in the field of sociology, and in particular cultural consumption research, have provided additional insights about audience structures, which transpire to have important implications for categorisation processes in sociology in general, but also for organisation studies in particular.

Considering the specific audience structure, Pontikes and Hannan (2014), conceptualised what they term the 'feature space' to empirically test how labelling decisions by the audience are affected by distance in knowledge space and thus

further advanced the model of Hannan et al. (2007). They found a positive correlation between the proximity of an organisation to a label in knowledge space and the likelihood of that organisation adopting that label, emphasising the importance of feature values for audience members.

Furthermore, building on the work of Goldberg (2011) and Pontikes and Hannan (2014), Kovács and Hannan (2015) introduced a new measurement for distance in conceptual space that could be of use for research on the evolution of genres over time. Extending on the measure of typicality proposed by Hsu et al. (2009), which defined the typicality in a category based on an object's grade of membership, Kovács and Hannan (2015) proposed a measure of contrast that also considers the conceptual structure of the domain which individual audience member perceive. Also using the new developments in terms of the feature space, Le Mens et al. (2015) considered environmental drifts, which are signified by changing audience tastes, to build a unified model of age dependence that combines the notions of 'liability of newness', 'liability of adolescence', and 'liability of obsolescence'. Recognising that categories are constructs of the audience, changes in the audience's taste are used to explain environmental drifts that cause the obsolescence of old organisations in the age dependence framework.

Motivated by this line of work and the potential for further investigations, Hannan and colleagues (2019) have elaborated a formalised apparatus of the categorisation processes in terms of the conceptual feature space that defines the relevant academic conceptualisations and explicitly takes account of the conceptual structure of a domain that emerges from feature-level considerations. Like Hannan et al. (2007), this model recognises the role of the audience for the emergence of social forms. Specifically, they clearly define the relationship between concepts and the categories, stating that the latter is the set of those objects that an individual assigns a specific category label to, making it a subjective probability. Going beyond their model of category formation, Hannan et al. (2019) modelled 'the cores of concepts as feature-value combinations that occupy distinctive regions of conceptual space'. This allows the formalisation of the geometric distance between conceptual cores of objects and conceptual inventories, which audience members hold. Moreover, they also introduce the Bayesian probability, which has been an integral part of ecological studies of other subject areas, to account for the presence of priors. Using these tools, Hannan et al. (2019) discuss the implications for cases of multiple categorisations, the notion of

conditional independence, and the perceptual magnet effect that emerges when certain concepts are present. Moreover, they revisit the implications of partiality in categories and the processes by which agreement and disagreement about concepts and categories emerge and get altered.

This formal development in cultural sociology opens a wide range of topics for future research that has the potential to expand the understanding of organisational dynamics in a number of domains, such as entrepreneurship, marketing, strategy, and human resource management, to name just a few. Exploring the strategic implications for organisations Pontikes (2018, 2022) argued that firms can shape relevant market categories and their position within this category system by using the category labels they apply themselves strategically. Building on her discussion of strategic categorisation, Pontikes goes on to explore category innovation in the context of the software industry and concludes that firms use category labels to communicate to their audience which market they are in and thus pioneer new market categories (Pontikes, 2018). Closely connected to these developments, Pontikes and Rindova (2020) have developed a theoretical framework that captures this kind of organisation agency in strategic positioning and the shaping of the market categories. Also examining the dynamics of innovation, Kovács et al. (2021) have investigated the effects of attention and search processes after an innovation has been introduced and argued that this depends on the contrast of the focal technological categories. Linking to these considerations, Denrell and Kovács' (2020) study of the population of 'management concepts' explored the role of contrast and complementarity with other existing concepts, finding that the dynamics in this scholarly population vary over time.

In addition to the strategic and innovation considerations, scholars have also examined the emergence of novel populations. In this line of reasoning, Liu and van Witteloostuijn (2020) demonstrated that by conceptualising markets as multi-dimensional feature spaces, insights about the emergence of new forms can be gained. In their investigation of the German energy market, they found that changes of the multi-dimensional conceptual space by introducing new feature dimensions, in their case 'greenness', facilitated the emergence of a new population focussed on sustainability.

Using the formalisation developed by Hannan and colleagues (2019), this study considers feature-level conceptualisation in the context of the population of Black Forest distillers to complement the recent insights regarding the distance within conceptual space and the distinctiveness. We argue that the focus on and evaluation of specific features holds important implications for the category dynamics. Specifically, the position within the concept-internal, feature-level hierarchy determines the scope for innovation without penalisation for deviation from the prototypical form. Moreover, by allowing for the combination of different features and recognising the distinctive positions in conceptual space that result from this interconnectedness can be linked to the notion of distinctiveness of the concept (Piazzai, Liu and Montauti, 2024) within this space.

While extant research often make use of ‘feature lists’, researchers do recognise its limitations in representing real-world concepts (Murphy, 2004). To allow and account for the complex structures of real-world concepts, in this study we turn to the schemata approach which extends the feature lists by introducing the relationality between features (Murphy, 2004). Therefore, the product offerings by the distillers are framed as a complex category that is defined by products that combine features, both continuous and concrete¹, in a non-separable manner.

The schemata approach used herein differs from the prominent prototype theory by considering not only feature lists, which are used to determine a prototype, but the structured representations that divides the properties of an item into dimensions. The schema of a concept thus includes the relations to understand an entire object. Hannan and colleagues (2019) utilised this insight to define the centre of a concept as a set of positions in the semantic space that have the same meaning.

In general, an objects’ features are an important part in both prototypical and schemata models of concepts. Because feature relations, weights, and hierarchies can vary, this can lead to schema structures with complex or multiple prototypes (Hannan et al., 2019). This holds interesting implications for the study of the cognitive impact of such a conceptual feature space. Nevertheless, the potential complexity of features and the resulting prototypes have featured in early studies on cognition already. Although the dot pattern study by Posner and Keele (1968) was limited to ‘distortions’ in a two-

¹ The most prominent case for this is the binary feature value.

dimensional space, it provides evidence that individuals do recognise gradual changes in structures. In a similar vein, considering gradual changes in feature values leading to 'distortions' could also be argued to represent the feature space of the real-world concepts more generally, including the space of the distilleries. While, no specific prototype was predetermined by the researchers, individuals are able to recognise similar objects as category members.

Feature value considerations have been an important part in the study of the cognitive influence of categories from the beginning, including in the prototype model of categories by Rosch and Mervis (1975). In this model it is assumed that individuals evaluate and score the features that determined the typicality of the respective items. Therefore, the more common features are observed for an object, the higher the typicality. This has important implications for the family resemblance approach as discussed by Murphy (2004). First, more typical objects share more features with other category members and less typical objects share fewer features. Second, more typical objects share fewer features with other categories' members and less typical objects share more features with other categories. Based on this relationship between the object's features and the typicality, considering an object's position in feature space based on the features it displays makes it possible to estimate the typicality and connects it to the probabilistic representation that Hannan et al. (2019) put forward. However, the form of the computation function used for typicality estimations in this context has drawn some interest in past research as well. Specifically, Medin and Schaffer (1978) introduced of multiplicative rule for similarity computation to identify similar exemplars instead of the previously widely used additive function. The impact of such a multiplicative rule is that 'mismatching features' have a greater negative effect on the similarity perception (Murphy, 2004). However, in these estimations, continuous dimensions have so far not been fully integrated as part of the feature set considerations that determine an object's positions due to the complexity that requires more sophisticated approach to feature counting. When allowing more complex continuous feature dimensions one solution put forward by Murphy (2004) would be to deploy averages that are mentally stored rather than the exact feature values.

Drawing on the schemata approach and taking into account the complexity of feature combinations, this study sets out to explore two important research questions.

1. How does the interconnection of features shape the concept of Black Forest distillers and their offerings?
2. How and where can innovation take place in such a feature-determined concept?

Methodology

To investigate the space of the Schnaps distillers and their activities from the perspective of the members within this category, semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015) with different types of producers were conducted to garner insights into the perception of their own activities in this space and that of the category in general. Thus, this qualitative approach was chosen to determine the feature space for the concept of the Black Forest distillers based on the language used by the category members, rather than being determined by the researcher.

A total of 31 interviews, lasting between 25 to 55 minutes each, took place. This included interviews with local farmers, who distil based on the traditional rights and allocated quotas, but sell limited quantities to private customers, and more enterprising family-farm distilleries that emphasise innovation, submit their products in competitions, and engage in marketing activities with most sales to consumers. Moreover, interviews with representatives of family-owned SME producers were conducted to gather their perspectives. Given their large scale of operations as well as cooperative interactions with and purchases of materials from local farmer distillers, they hold a somewhat special position in the domain and could arguably have greater potential to shape the space through their activities.

In addition to the interview data, secondary data in the form of texts from the websites of the distillers and the regional association that represents the interests of the small farm distillers (Kleinbrenner) and newspaper articles on the topic were collected to provide context and complement the narratives of the interviewees (Roulston and Choi, 2018). This allowed the researchers to build up a comprehensive overview of the current state of the conceptual space, encompassing the prominent features and their links to the perception by the members within this space.

To analyse the interview data and texts, thematic analysis (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022) was conducted to identify and determine the relevancy of different features in the space. This analysis not only focused on identifying relevant features as perceived by the members of the category but also the linkages between features and feature dimensions, thus allowing insights into the complex space where features are not only assessed on their own but instead form dynamic interconnected structures (Bell et al., 2022).

Moreover, this approach allowed us to investigate systematic differences and patterns between groups within the category (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These groups emerged from their responses and did not necessarily reflect the groupings outlined above. This allows us to further explore the dynamics of category emergence (Durand and Khaire, 2017), perception and innovation (Pontikes, 2022) as the differences in perception between the groups may lead to different interpretations of the category space. Furthermore, these differences can provide insights into why a more clearly delineated concept has failed to emerge for the Black Forest schnaps as of yet, which has strategic implications not just for individual players in this domain but the population as a whole. In particular, the difference in exposure to outside audiences, which is largely shaped by the SME distillers, could also reveal some interesting intra-group dynamics in this domain.

An important element of this dynamic is the possibility to enhance the category's product evaluation by outside audiences. Therefore, in the interviews we not only consider the concept's key features but also the perceived scope for innovation and thus explore the feature-level shifts in permissible deviation from the prototypical core.

This qualitative approach forms the basis for further research that will compare and contrast the offerings of the Black Forest distillers in the broader domain, to investigate how the feature-based conceptualisation can be used to delimit this regional offering from others.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews highlights the complexity of the Black Forest spirit concept with interlinked feature dimensions, as well as the systematic differences of how the products and the scope for innovation is considered by the producers.

Notably, the small-scale farmers, which we term the 'Traditionalists', viewed their distilling activities as a very traditional and regional element of fruit farming, with very limited room for alteration or innovation at the small scale that their production takes place. Rather, great pride is taken in the level of quality of the produce, for which the geographical region has been well-known, that goes into the distillation process and the care that is taken during the procedure. However, only a limited amount of their 'Brand' is sold to consumers directly, either regular guests of their holiday lets or sold in their own physical farm shops where other produce from their farm is also sold. The majority of their distilled schnaps is sold to SME distilleries that buy the schnaps in bulk and use it in their own production and refinement process. The income from the distilling activities normally is a relatively minor source of additional income.

In contrast to the 'traditionalists', the more innovative family-farms, we term them the 'distiller entrepreneurs', engage in greater communication, largely through an up-to-date online presence and the use of local news outlets, and experiment with new flavours and techniques while also producing the 'classics'. For these distillers, the sale of their schnaps products is the main source of income for the family farm and fruit-farming is at its heart to provide the required, high-quality resources that are used in their products. Experimenting with unusual flavours and taking inspiration from other domains, while emphasising the high-quality of their schnaps, reinforced by awards from the regional association of distillers, is a core element for these enterprising farm-distillers in this traditional sector.

Finally, the SME distilleries play a significant role in shaping the perception of the regional schnaps category for the audience of consumers. They supply supermarkets and discounters with their products at a national and international level, and they engage in campaigns to reshape the image of the product that is often viewed as old-fashioned. Whether it is the introduction of new product lines that build on reimagined Black Forest imagery or developing recipe ideas for cocktails with their schnaps at the centre. These companies rely on the local fruit farmers for the resources that are used

to distil their products at a much larger scale than the other two groups. They either receive the already distilled schnaps, that farmers produce themselves, or they buy the fruit from the farmers. Besides the much larger scale of operations, a further notable difference is the tax status and requirement of the SMEs. While farm operated distilleries are allowed to distil a certain amount of alcohol from their own fruit tax-free, this is not the case for the SMEs who therefore underlie further restrictions.

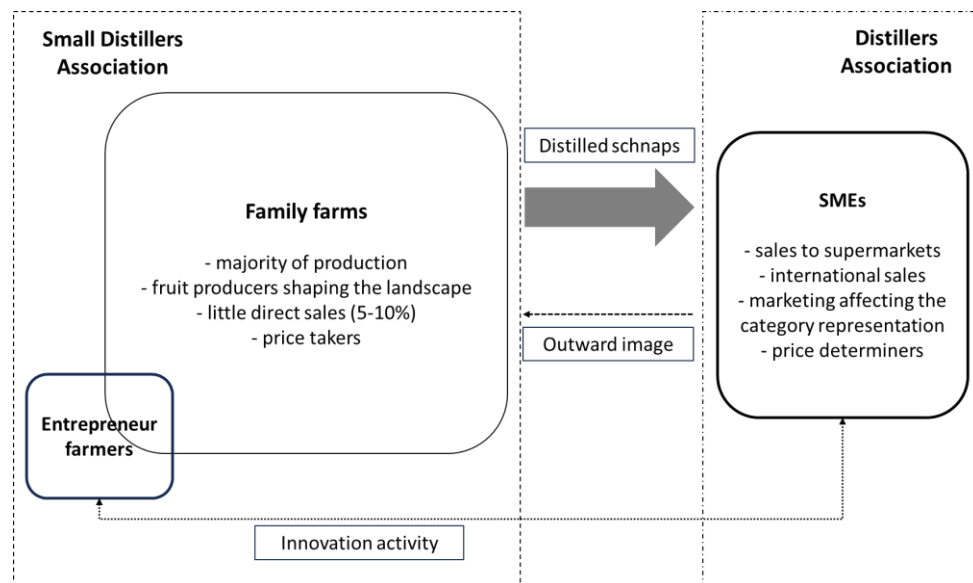


Figure 1: The producer space and relationships.

Core concept and tradition

Regardless of which group the interviewees belonged to, the thematic analysis identified a combination of 'core' features for the Black Forest Schnaps. This included the general, 'tangible' features of {high-percentage alcohol content, fruit-based, clear spirit} that are widely shared with spirits from other European countries. Going beyond this generic feature combination however, that further interlinked features could be argued to set this concept apart. Complementing, the {fruit} feature dimension, the distillers consistently emphasised the {high-quality} reputation of the fruit grown in this particular region, thereby linking {regionality} considerations firmly to this dimension. Moreover, the {regionality} feature dimension also links to the local {tradition} dating back to the 18th century, which is a source of pride and aspiration for many distillers. {Tradition} in turn is also linked strongly to the {artisanal craft} and craftsmanship that is required in producing the highest quality spirits during the old-fashioned distillation process. To some extent, the pride and connotation of {craftsmanship} is further

connected to being able to select and grown the high-quality fruit required for distilling the Obstwasser. In particular, old and region-specific types of fruit, select based on craft experience do partly set the concept apart from other country's version of fruity brandy. However, it is important to note that these features that have emerged from the thematic analysis would not be immediately evident to an outside audience without further information gathering and thus constitute what is herein termed 'intangible' features. Although these are features that arguably have a significant influence on the quality of the product, they would not be apparent to an uninformed consumer, a core group of external audiences.

Thus, the core concept of the Black Forest Schnaps consists of a combination of 'tangible' and 'intangible' product features that are interlinked and contribute to a narrative that could more clearly distinguish the concept as a whole. Whether a Black Forest Obstbrand is based on cherries, plumbs, pears, or apples, these distillates are sharing the following 'intangible' features {regionality, quality fruit, tradition, artisanal craft} that are unique in this combination for this concept.

Connected to the considerations of regionality as a feature was to some extent the discussion of changing product features. Whilst at the core of the Obstbrand or Obstwasser is the high-quality fruit and careful distillation process, quite a few of the interview participants highlighted that they offer a line of products that is furthermore aged in either stone or ceramic containers, according to old, local traditions. Thus, focusing on the feature dimensions that determine the concept, rediscovering or reintroducing regional tradition to enhance the product offering allows to introduce further features without risking increasing the distance to the prototypical core.

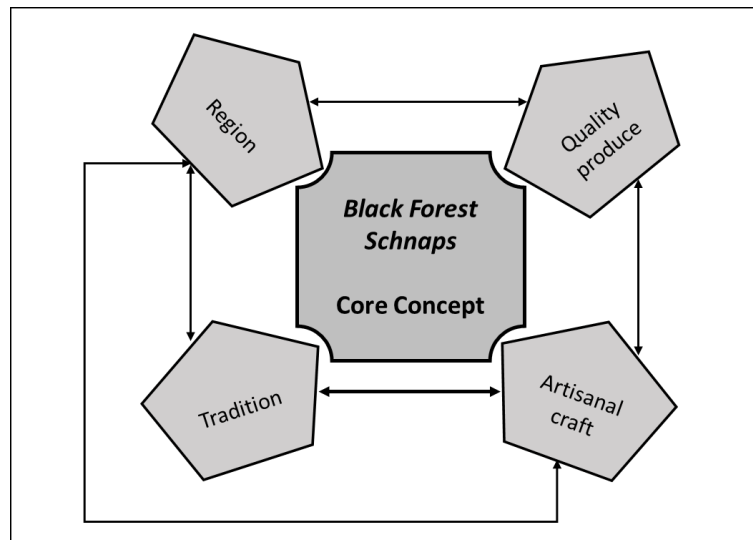


Figure 2: The core concept of the Black Forest Schnaps with the 'intangible', interconnected feature dimensions.

Innovation

Of course, innovation in the feature space of this concept also takes place and is pursued by different category members. Whereas the 'traditionalists', as well as some of the SMEs are averse to participate in innovation activities within the domain themselves, they nevertheless recognised the potential and are aware of the developments driven by the 'distiller entrepreneurs' and bigger SMEs.

Again, across the groups, participants emphasised the importance of the geographical location that makes this region unique for their own products and the category in general. However, it is important to note that this was interpreted differently by the different groups. Whereas the 'Traditionalists' only focused on the fruit grown in the region, most of the 'distiller entrepreneurs' discussed regionality as being embedded in the Black Forest region and making this part of their identity as well as an opportunity to seek active differentiation. In this vein, some of the SMEs actively try to enhance the regional connection by linking to other Black Forest connotations – whether it is the imagery of traditional costumes in a modern look or making links to traditional occupations. For example, one SME has launched a product series uses flavour variation, such as introducing smokiness, to connect to the traditional occupation of the charcoal burner. By drawing on and extending the scope of the feature dimensions {tradition, region} and to some extent also {artisanal craft}, this choice for innovation space appears to be well-suited in that it does not violate some of the core 'intangible'

dimensions. In doing so, these innovations are extending the scope of features in some areas but simultaneously re-emphasise the importance of {region}, further strengthening the connection between features. Similarly, some of the ‘distiller entrepreneurs’ have introduced schnaps varieties that are distilled from unusual, yet regionally available ingredients such as pine saps. Again, emphasising the connection to the {regionality} feature and extending the feature dimension of the ‘quality produce’ that provides the ingredients.

Nevertheless, this introduction of reinterpretations and extension of the feature dimensions could also be argued to risk diminishing the features’ clarity and may explain to some extent the lack of a clearer categorical delineation in feature space. In particular if category actors make illegitimate claims regarding ‘intangible’ features or introduce features that overextend the feature dimension, this could pose a concept-level risk.

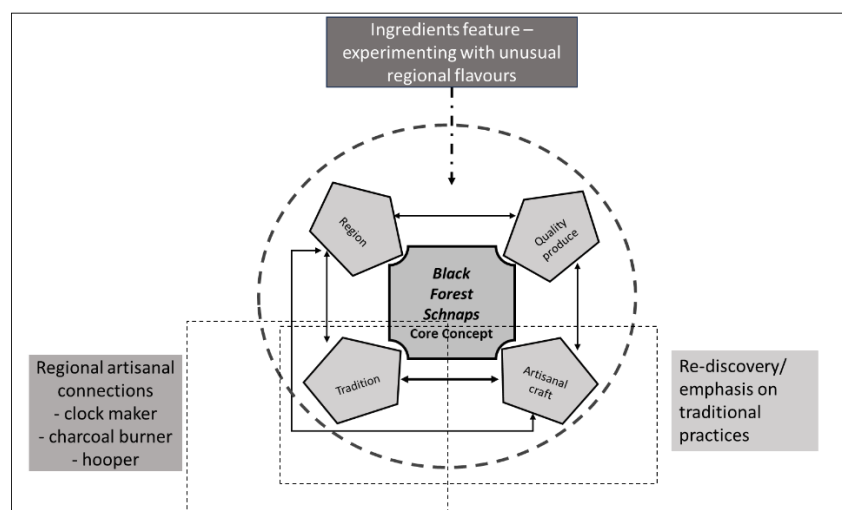


Figure 3: Areas of innovation linked to the features that determine the prototypical concept core.

Feature borrowing

In addition to the extension of some of the feature dimensions to introduce innovation, some of the ‘Distiller Entrepreneurs’ and SMEs have started to take inspiration from and ‘borrow’ features from other domains. This includes for example the ageing of the Obstbrand in wooden barrels like Scottish Whisky or developing pairing suggestions and cocktail recipes like Gin manufacturers have done. In particular the ageing in wooden casks also shows some variation at this feature level. Whereas some

producers use previously used casks and thereby introduce additional flavours from the previous content, others use specific types of wood, such as cherry, to accentuate the flavour of the fruit distillate.

Given that schnaps producers in the Black Forest have traditionally aged their products in ceramic or stone vessels and some producers now are emphasising this again, it could be argued that this introduction of the practice of ageing the schnaps in wooden barrels is not too dissimilar.

Naturally, from a feature space perspective, this use of features from other areas holds both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it allows the introduction of value-adding elements and thus a potential increase in the quality perception. On the other hand, it risks further diluting the concept by adding permissible elements and thus possibly making it harder to make sense of the category for the audience if the distinctiveness of the concept is reduced. Moreover, it raises an interesting further question on whether the origin of the borrowed feature also has an impact on the effect of spanning categories in such a manner.

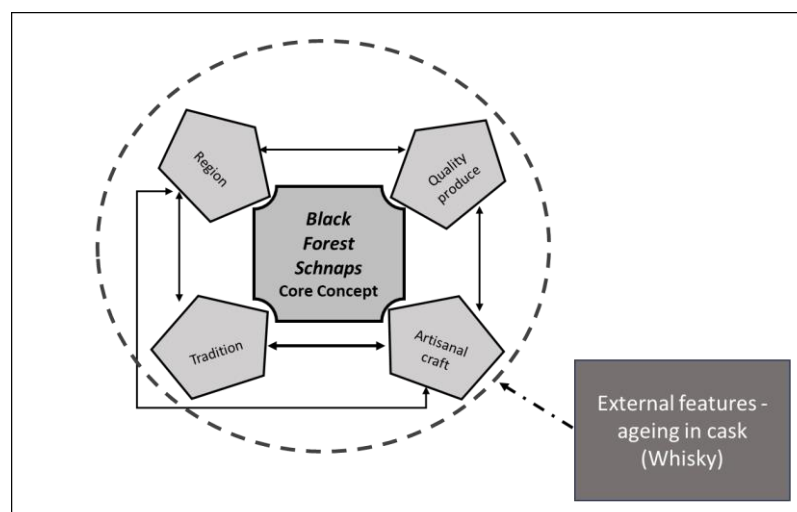


Figure 4: Feature borrowing from the outside.

Taken together, the findings from the thematic analysis provide valuable insights into the features and the interconnections between them that determine the concept of the Black Forest schnaps from the perspective of the producers. Moreover, by considering the features, this study also highlights how category members can connect to, expand, and reinterpret these feature dimensions for innovation.

Discussion

This paper contributes to the discourse on cognitive perception of categories and the features that determine the underlying feature space by investigating the interesting case of the Black Forest Brenner population. Although, the category and its population of producers is long established in the Black Forest region, it somewhat lacks a clearly delimited position in the feature space making it difficult to make sense off and thus limiting the attractiveness for external audiences. This is largely due to a lack of clear definitions within the producer groups, who do not fully share a particular set of features, however, have some level of agreement linked to the regional characteristics of the products. While regionality is important, its interpretation varies. This allows some scope innovation through the rediscovery of traditional methods. The borrowing of features from other domains however adds further complexity to the already diverse representation in feature space.

The present study offers a clear and structured evaluation of the category and its features to allow a unified representation of this regional concept to provide the basis for future research into the external audience understanding of the offering. This in turn may offer practical implications for population-level decision makers such as the association of distillers to consider a clear narrative for increasing the attractiveness of the products in general.

The findings from the thematic analysis identify the feature dimensions at the centre of the Black Forest schnaps concept, which is shaped not only by the features themselves but also the connections between them. Thus, the qualitative research goes beyond the frequently used feature lists and uncovers a more nuanced space that is integrally connected to the region.

Addressing the second research question, the study explores how category members can introduce innovation by extending and reinterpreting the feature dimensions that determine the concept.

Generally, an important role in this 'sensemaking' process through defining relevant feature dimensions and permissible attributes likely falls to the regional associations of Kleinbrenner (e.g., Badens Brenner), NGOs that represent the interest of their members (Khaire and Wadhwani, 2010). Extending the insights by Pontikes and

Rindova (2020) on the potential to strategically shape the categorical positioning, the association may take a proactive role to benefit small family distillers. Therefore, the role of the supporting network (Correidora and McDermott, 2020) in this context will be explored further. As part of this, a further area of research in this domain will be the study of awards given out by these regional associations to explore how the products submitted into the competition have changed over time and what features have emerged, increased in importance, or disappeared altogether.

Going forward, the research project on the Black Forest distillers will also investigate the audience perception, which has been at the centre of most studies that explore category effects for organisations. By connecting the internal perspective of the category members with the external evaluation, the project will further contribute to the discourse by exploring areas in feature space that deviate between the groups. As part of this, the possibility of the emergence of multiple prototypes from an audience perspective will be considered. Whereas, the complex concept with its interlinked features already extends our understanding for categories, it is also plausible that external audience members may identify different category prototypes based on the nature of the producer type that provides the schnaps.

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