

## **“Comparing Lab, virtual, and field environments in sensory product acceptance testing.”**

Sensory marketing research has recently attracted massive attention in theory and practice. Every year, companies spend billions of dollars on the sensory evaluation of food products, particularly in the context of new product launches. Recent research has started to investigate whether virtual consumption environments allow mimicking field acceptance tests in lab experiments. While these studies offer important insights for sensory marketing research, they do not allow for any conclusion as to whether results from virtual consumption environments correspond to those generated in real settings. Addressing this gap in research, our studies are the first to compare the results of consumer acceptance tests conducted in (1) a sensory lab, (2) a virtual consumption environment, and (3) a field setting. In a first study, our analyses show that segments derived from answers in the virtual coffeehouse better correspond to the segments derived in the real coffeehouse than those derived in the sensory lab. In a second study on German beer, we replicate our findings with respect to the advantages of virtual consumption environments in segmentation studies. These findings are robust with regard to varying segmentation algorithms and segment numbers. Moreover, we find that the advantage of virtual test environments over a sensory lab in extracting more generalizable consumer segments is further enhanced when testing sensory dissimilar products. Considering that researchers and practitioners routinely rely on clustering of acceptance scores in an effort to disclose consumer groups that significantly differ in their preferences, our findings are compelling for improving sensory marketing research.