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Vision document 'Purchase behaviour data and information to be used by the RICHFIELDS data cloud'

Facilities to collect purchase behaviour data

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Authors:

Jos van den Puttelaar, Tamara Bucher, Bent Egberg
Mikkelsen, Muriel Verain, Sophie Hieke

Deliverable lead beneficiaries:

Wageningen Economic Research-WUR

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Karin Zimmermann
Project Coordinator



Prof Pieter van't Veer
Scientific Coordinator

Summary

Understanding the how and why of food purchase is of utmost importance to be able to help, or possibly design a healthy food choice environment. Experiments that investigate food choice and purchase behaviour often rely on laboratory experiments, surveys or other self-reported and/or hypothetical methods. Measuring food purchase behaviour using regular facilities such as real-life restaurants has limitations such as the difficulty of automating data collection, altering product choice, location or any other contextual settings. Furthermore, the cooperation of the restaurant owner, ethical concerns and informed consent of the participants can be barrier for executing research in everyday life locations.

The Restaurant of the Future (RoF) was established to overcome the aforementioned barriers. The RoF is a real-life canteen with food lab facilities, situated on the Campus of Wageningen University and Research. It consists of a buffet area with counters and a lunch area, where Wageningen UR employees and students, as well as visitors, can buy and consume their lunch. For part of the participants, the Restaurant of the Future is their habitual lunch location; others are one-time visitors or go there for lunch occasionally. The research population that enters the premises by themselves are first attended towards the possibilities of participating in a study. Visitors that come more regularly are registered with a registration card, which makes it possible to track their food purchases over a longer period of time. A possible drawback of this real-life university canteen is the representativeness of the sample. The sample is naturally skewed due to for example the large(r) number of highly educated people at a university campus.

Apart from a (semi-)natural context for the customers, the advantage of the Restaurant of the Future is that it provides a combination of opportunities for observational research and changeable surroundings. The order of the buffet, the positioning of the food, price labels, food information, the colour of the lightning, scent and dining tables are changeable. The combination of control over the surrounding, observation methods, and a population that comes in naturally makes this a distinctive research facility.

The unique set-up offers multiple tools for observation such as tracking cameras, zoom cameras, an integrated weighing scale and cash registers that register food purchase for research purposes. Unfortunately, the collection and analysis of non-automated data such as camera imagery can be time consuming. The data produced by the different tools are partly automated (e.g. tracking and cash register), partly observational (e.g. visual observation) and sometimes linked to other databases (e.g. food composition databases). Ownership of the data is determined on project base. When external partners are involved like in a public private partnership this can be set in an consortium agreement.

This unique facility, with a lot of flexibility in the choice context, and the presence of (tracking) cameras, makes the restaurant a useful location for pre-testing of branding and communication, and product or concept acceptance (out of home). The restaurant of the future could benefit from the objectives of Richfields in several ways. The most prominent examples being protocol sharing, shared use of labs (in terms of synergies and more efficient use of existing labs), comparing of results to real life, standardization of data storage and governance of data sharing and storage.

Understanding of the benefits of Richfields for a facility like the RoF and vice versa and applying those benefits could greatly influence the way researchers use such facilities.