

A Kernel Based Method for Discovering Market Segments in Beef Meat

Jorge Díez¹, Juan José del Coz¹, Carlos Sañudo², Pere Albertí³ and Antonio Bahamonde¹

¹ Artificial Intelligence Center, University of Oviedo at Gijón,
33271 Gijón (Asturias), Spain
{jdiez, juanjo, antonio}@aic.uniovi.es
www.aic.uniovi.es

² Facultad de Veterinaria, University of Zaragoza, Zaragoza (Aragón), Spain
csanudo@unizar.es

³ Service of Agriculture and Food Science Research, Zaragoza (Aragón), Spain
palberti@aragon.es

Abstract. In this paper we propose a method for learning the reasons why groups of consumers prefer some food products instead of others of the same type. We emphasize the role of groups given that, from a practical point of view, they may represent market segments that demand different products. Our method starts representing people's preferences in a metric space; there we are able to define a kernel based similarity function that allows a clustering algorithm to discover significant groups of consumers with homogeneous tastes. Finally in each cluster, we learn, with a SVM, a function that explains the tastes of the consumers grouped in the cluster. To illustrate our method, a real case of consumers of beef meat was studied. The panel was formed by 171 people who rated 303 samples of meat from 101 animals with 3 different aging periods.

1 Introduction

Consumer preferences for food products address the strategies of industries and breeders, and should be carefully considered when export and commercial policies are designed. In this paper we present a method to deal with data collected from panels of consumers in order to discover groups with differentiated tastes; these groups may constitute significant market segments that demand different kinds of food products. Additionally, our approach studies the factors that could contribute to the success or failure of food products in each segment.

From a conceptual point of view, consumer panels are made up of untrained consumers; these are asked to rate their degree of acceptance or satisfaction about the tested products on a scale. The aim is to be able to relate product descriptions (human and mechanical) with consumer preferences. Simple statistical methods cannot cope with this task. In fact, this is not a straightforward task; the reason is that when we are aiming to induce a function that maps object descriptions into ratings, we must consider that consumers' ratings are just a way to express their relative preferences about

the products presented in the same testing session. Additionally, it is necessary to realize that numerical ratings do not mean the same for all the people, the scales used may be quite different. Discussions about ratings and preferences can be found in [1], and in the context of food preferences in [2][3][4].

From a practical point of view, the market is not interested in tastes of individual consumers, the purpose of marketing studies of sensorial data is to discover, if they exist, widespread ways to appreciate food products that can be considered as market segments. These segments can be seen as *clusters* of consumers with similar tastes. In this paper, we will show that the similarity of preference criteria of consumers can be computed in a high dimension space; for this purpose, we present here a kernel-based method.

To illustrate our method, we used a data set that collects the ratings of a panel of beef meat consumers. The panel studied was formed by 171 people rating samples of 303 different kinds of beef meat [5][6][7][8] from different breeds, live weights, and aging periods.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we discuss the general approach, and we present the details of the beef meat panel. Then we describe how it is possible to measure similarities between preference criteria of two consumers. In the fourth section we explain the clustering algorithm used. The fifth section is devoted to report the results achieved in the case of the data from the panel of beef meat consumers. We spell out the steps followed by our method in this real world case, and we review the implications both to breeders and to designers of future commercial strategies.

2 Description of the method and of the case studied

In this section, we present the method proposed to discover market segments. We proceed in two steps; first, we define a similarity measure in an appropriate space, and then we use a clustering algorithm. The second part of the section is devoted to introduce the database used to illustrate the method in a real-world environment.

2.1 The general approach

The main assumption behind the approach presented in this paper is that we are able to map people's preferences into a metric space in such a way that we can assume some kind of continuity. A first attempt to provide such a mapping would consist in associating, to each consumer, the vector of his or her ratings, taking the set of samples as indexes. However, this is not a wise option since ratings have only a relative meaning, and therefore they cannot assume an absolute role. There is a kind of *batch effect*: a product will obtain a higher/lower rating when it is assessed together with other products that are clearly worse/better. In fact, if we try to deal with sensory data as a regression problem, we will fail [3]; due to this batch effect, the ratings have no numerical meaning: they are only a relative way to express preferences between products of the same session.

To overcome this, instead of ratings, we can assign to each product its ordinal position in the ranking of preferences. Unfortunately, this is not always possible given that, in general, the size of the sample of food prevents panelist from testing all products. Hence, we cannot ask our panelist to spend long periods rating the whole set of food samples. Typically, each consumer only participates in one or a small number of testing sessions, usually in the same day. Notice that tasting a large sample of food may be physically impossible, or the number of tests performed would damage the sensory capacity of consumers.

The consequence is that consumers' rankings are not comparable because they deal with different sets of products. Thus, in this case we will codify people preferences by the weighting vector of a linear function (called *preference* or *ranking function*) in a high dimensional space: the space of features where we represent the descriptions of food products. Then, the similarity is defined by means of the kernel attached to the representation map.

Once we have people preferences represented in a metric space, and we have defined a similarity function, then we use a clustering algorithm. Although there are other possibilities, we used the nonparametric hierarchical clustering algorithm [9] that uses a proximity matrix of pairwise relations that directly captures the intention of the similarity functions. Then, we only need to explain the meaning and implications of each cluster in the context of the food products. For this purpose, we will learn a preference or ranking function from the union of preference judgments expressed by the member of the cluster; this will provide the consensus assessment function of the cluster.

2.2 Description of the beef meat experiment

To illustrate our method we used a database described in [5][6][7][8]. The data collects the sensory ratings of a panel of beef meat consumers about three aspects: flavour, tenderness, and acceptability.

For this experience, more than 100 animals of 7 Spanish breeds were slaughtered to obtain two kinds of carcasses: lights, from animals with a live weight around 300–350 kg (light); and heavies, from animals at 530–560 kg. The set of animals was uniformly distributed by breeds and weights. Additionally, to test the influence of aging in consumers' appreciation, each piece of meat was prepared with 3 aging periods, 1, 7, and 21 days.

On the other hand, the 7 breeds used constitute a wide representation of beef cattle. These breeds can be divided into four types: double muscled (DM, one breed), fast growth (FG, two breeds), dual purpose (DP, one breed), and unimproved rustic type (UR, three breeds). In Table 1 for each breed, we show the average percentages of fat, muscle and bone. Notice that it is important to distinguish three kinds of fat: intermuscular, subcutaneous, and intramuscular, that is included in the percentage of muscle. In the experimental results reported in section 5 we used the carcass composition of each animal; the breed was only used to provide an explanation of the tastes of clusters.

Each kind of meat was also described by a panel of 11 trained experts who rate 12 traits of products such as fibrosis, flavor, odor, etc.. In this paper, we considered the average rate of each trait. The characterization of meat samples was completed with 6 physical features describing its texture.

The panel was organized in a set of testing sessions, where a group of potential consumers assessed 3 or 7 instances of the available beef kinds. Frequently, each consumer only participated in a small number (sometimes only one) of testing sessions, usually in the same day.

Table 1. Carcass compositions of 7 Spanish beef breeds used in the experiment

Name	Breed		Fat %		Bone	Muscle	Intramuscular
	Type		inter-muscular	subcutaneous	%	%	fat %
Asturiana Valles	DM		5.01	0.89	15.77	78.32	1.01
Avileña	UR		13.30	3.55	19.30	63.84	2.48
Morucha	UR		13.71	3.93	18.68	63.68	2.59
Parda Alpina	DP		10.27	2.70	20.53	66.50	1.96
Pirenaica	FG		10.11	3.09	17.66	69.14	1.59
Retinta	UR		13.76	4.52	20.40	61.33	2.12
Rubia Gallega	FG		5.90	1.12	16.34	76.64	1.27

3 Vectorial representation of preference criteria

As was explained above, in order to compare the preference criteria of consumers we need to state a common language. We cannot use for this purpose the ratings assigned by consumers to food products, since they have rated, in general, different sets of samples. Then we are going to induce a reasonable extension of the preferences expressed by each consumer to obtain a function able to capture the pairwise orderings, not the rates. Then we will manage to define similarities in the space of those functions.

Although there are other approaches to learn preferences, we will follow [10][11][12]. Then we will try to induce a real *preference, ranking, or utility function* f from the input space of object descriptions, say \mathbf{R}^d , in such a way that it maximizes the probability of having $f(\mathbf{v}) > f(\mathbf{u})$ whenever \mathbf{v} is preferable to \mathbf{u} ; we call such pairs, *preference judgments*. This functional approach can start from a set of objects endowed with a (usually ordinal) rating, as in regression; but essentially, we only need a collection of preference judgments.

When we have a set of ratings given by a consumer c , we must take into account the session where the ratings have been assessed [4][2], as was explained in section 2.1. Thus, for each session we include in the set of preference judgments, PJ_c , the pairs (\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{u}) whenever consumer c assessed to sample represented by \mathbf{v} a higher rating than to the sample represented by \mathbf{u} .

In order to induce the ranking function, as in [10], we look for a function $F_c: \mathbf{R}^d \times \mathbf{R}^d \rightarrow \mathbf{R}$ such that

$$\forall \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \in \mathbf{R}^d, F_c(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) > 0 \Leftrightarrow F_c(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{0}) > F_c(\mathbf{y}, \mathbf{0}) \quad (1)$$

Notice that the right hand side of (1) establishes an ordering of functional expressions of a generic couple (\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) of objects representations. This suggests the definition

$$f_c: \mathbf{R}^d \rightarrow \mathbf{R}, f_c(\mathbf{x}) = F_c(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{0}) \quad (2)$$

The idea is then to obtain ranking functions f_c from functions like F_c , as in (2), when F_c fulfils (1). Thus, given the set of preference judgments PJ_c , we can specify F_c by means of the constraints

$$\forall (\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{u}) \in PJ_c, F_c(\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{u}) > 0 \text{ and } F_c(\mathbf{u}, \mathbf{v}) < 0 \quad (3)$$

Therefore, PJ_c gives rise to a set of binary classification training set to induce F_c

$$E_c = \{(\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{u}, +1), (\mathbf{u}, \mathbf{v}, -1) : (\mathbf{v}, \mathbf{u}) \in PJ_c\} \quad (4)$$

Nevertheless, a separating function for E_c does not necessarily fulfill (1). Thus, we need an additional constraint. So, if we represent each object description \mathbf{x} in a higher dimensional feature space by means of $\phi(\mathbf{x})$, then we can represent pairs (\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) by $\phi(\mathbf{x}) - \phi(\mathbf{y})$. Hence, a classification SVM can induce from E_c a function of the form:

$$F_c(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = \sum_{s \in S(c)} \alpha_s z_s \langle \phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(1)}) - \phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(2)}), \phi(\mathbf{x}) - \phi(\mathbf{y}) \rangle \quad (5)$$

where $\langle \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \rangle$ stands for the inner product of vectors \mathbf{x} and \mathbf{y} ; $S(c)$ is the set of support vectors, notice that they are formed by two d-dimensional vectors $(\mathbf{x}_s^{(1)}, \mathbf{x}_s^{(2)})$, while the scalars z_s represent the class +1 or -1. Trivially, F_c fulfils the condition (1).

Let us remark that if k is a kernel function, defined as the inner product of two objects represented in the feature space, that is, $k(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = \langle \phi(\mathbf{x}), \phi(\mathbf{y}) \rangle$, then the kernel function used to induce F_c is

$$\mathbf{K}(\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{x}_3, \mathbf{x}_4) = k(\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_3) - k(\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_4) - k(\mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{x}_3) + k(\mathbf{x}_2, \mathbf{x}_4) \quad (6)$$

Usually it is employed a linear or a simple polynomial kernel; that is, $k(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = \langle \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \rangle$, or $k(\mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y}) = (\langle \mathbf{x}, \mathbf{y} \rangle + 1)^g$, with $g = 2$.

Once we have a function F_c for a consumer c fulfilling (1), then, using (2), a ranking or preference or utility function f_c is given (but for an irrelevant constant) by

$$f_c(\mathbf{x}) = \sum_{s \in S(c)} \alpha_s z_s \langle \phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(1)}) - \phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(2)}), \phi(\mathbf{x}) \rangle = \sum_{s \in S(c)} \alpha_s z_s (k(\mathbf{x}_s^{(1)}, \mathbf{x}) - k(\mathbf{x}_s^{(2)}, \mathbf{x})) \quad (7)$$

Therefore, f_c can be represented by the weight vector \mathbf{w}^c in the higher dimensional space of features such that

$$f_c(\mathbf{x}) = \langle \mathbf{w}^c, \phi(\mathbf{x}) \rangle, \quad (8)$$

where

$$\mathbf{w}^c = \sum_{s \in S(c)} \alpha_s z_s (\phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(1)}) - \phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(2)})) \quad (9)$$

Notice that (8) defines the ranking of an object represented by a vector \mathbf{x} . This is not an absolute value; its importance is the relative position that gives to \mathbf{x} against to other objects \mathbf{y} in the *competition* for gaining the appreciation of consumer c .

Now we only need to define the distance of consumers' preferences. Given that preferences are codified by those weighting vectors, we define the similarity of the preferences of consumer c and c' by the cosine of their weighting vectors. In symbols,

$$\text{similarity}(\mathbf{w}^c, \mathbf{w}^{c'}) = \cos(\mathbf{w}^c, \mathbf{w}^{c'}) = \frac{\langle \mathbf{w}^c, \mathbf{w}^{c'} \rangle}{\|\mathbf{w}^c\| \|\mathbf{w}^{c'}\|} \quad (10)$$

Given that this definition uses scalar products instead of coordinates of weighting vectors, we can easily rewrite (10) in terms of the kernels used in the previous derivations. The essential equality is:

$$\begin{aligned} \langle \mathbf{w}^c, \mathbf{w}^{c'} \rangle &= \sum_{s \in S(c)} \sum_{i \in S(c')} \alpha_s \alpha_i z_s z_i \langle \phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(1)}) - \phi(\mathbf{x}_s^{(2)}), \phi(\mathbf{x}_i^{(1)}) - \phi(\mathbf{x}_i^{(2)}) \rangle \\ &= \sum_{s \in S(c)} \sum_{i \in S(c')} \alpha_s \alpha_i z_s z_i \mathbf{K}(\mathbf{x}_s^{(1)}, \mathbf{x}_s^{(2)}, \mathbf{x}_i^{(1)}, \mathbf{x}_i^{(2)}) \end{aligned} \quad (11)$$

4 Clustering consumers with homogeneous tastes

Once we have defined a reasonable similarity measure for preference criteria as we did in previous sections, we proceed to look for clusters of consumers with homogeneous tastes. For this purpose, we applied a nonparametric pairwise algorithm [9]. The following paragraphs sketch a description of this algorithm as we used it in the experimental results that we report in the last section. The second subsection will interpret the clustering output in terms of preference functions.

4.1 The clustering algorithm

Let $S = (s_{ij})$ be a square matrix where s_{ij} stands for the similarity between data points i and j ; in our case, data points are the vectorial representation of the preference criteria of consumers, and similarities are given by equation (10). In the following, S will be called the *proximity matrix*. Then, matrix S is transformed iteratively, following a two step procedure that converges to a two values matrix (1 and 0), yielding a bipartition of the data set into two clusters. Then, recursively, the partition mechanism is applied to each of the resulting clusters represented by their corresponding submatrices. To guarantee that only meaningful splits take places, in [9] the authors provide a cross validation method that measures an index that can be read as a significance level; we will only accept splits which level is above 0.90.

The basic iterative transformation uses the following formulae to go from iteration t to $t+1$:

$$\begin{aligned} p_{ij}(t+1) &= \frac{s_{ij}(t)}{\max\{s_{ik}(t) : k\}} \\ s_{ij}(t+1) &= \frac{1}{2} \left(\sum_k p_{ik}(t+1) \log \frac{p_{ik}(t+1)}{\frac{1}{2}(p_{ik}(t+1) + p_{jk}(t+1))} + \sum_k p_{jk}(t+1) \log \frac{p_{jk}(t+1)}{\frac{1}{2}(p_{jk}(t+1) + p_{ik}(t+1))} \right) \end{aligned} \quad (12)$$

The first step normalizes the columns of the proximity matrix using the L_∞ norm; then the proximities are re-estimated using the Jensen-Shannon divergence. The idea is to formalize that two preference criteria are close (after these two steps) if they were both similar and dissimilar to analogous sets of criteria before the transformation.

Notice that we could have used other available bottom-up clustering method; however, these methods tend to produce many clusters, and in sensory analysis applications we do not expect that many market segments exists. So a top-down clustering (like [9]) is more appropriate, but probably any other algorithm of this kind would yield to similar results, although with the cost of using more customizing parameters.

4.2 What do consumers' clusters mean?

Given a set of clusters $\{\text{Cluster}(j) : j = 1:n\}$, we have to explain the reasons that make people of each cluster to have those similar criteria that make them different from people of other clusters. The best way to achieve this is to induce a preference function using product descriptions. The learning algorithm is the SVM explained in section 3, but notice that now instead of using the preference judgments PJ_c sets of individual consumers, we consider for each cluster the union

$$PJ_{\text{cluster}(j)} = \bigcup_{c \in \text{cluster}(j)} PJ_c \quad (13)$$

The preference functions (see equation (7)) will be useful for two different things. First, we can compute the average ranking of the cluster, and the estimation of the ranking position of future products given their descriptions. Second, it would be possible to determine the influence of each feature that describes food products in the acceptability by consumers of the market segment represented by clusters. Therefore, we would be able to design policies to improve the acceptability by different kinds of consumers.

5 Experimental Results

In this section, we report the outputs obtained with the database of beef meat consumers described in section 2.2. Given that, the aim was to investigate the possibilities of existence of different sensibilities that could be understood as market segments, we

were interested in widespread consumers' behaviors. Therefore, we first selected those people involved in our consumers' panel whose ratings gave rise to more than 30 preference judgments; these yielded us to consider a set of 171 panelists that tested from 9 to 14 samples of meat. Notice that this is just a subset of all available panelists since samples rated with the same rate did not produce preference judgment pairs. In any case, this individual treatment contrasts with the global one that we reported in [3][4][2]. In all these cases, we were interested in modeling the general opinion of consumers; so for each session, to summarize the opinions of consumers, we computed the mean of the ratings obtained by each piece of meat.

The total amount of different samples was 303, since there were 101 animals with 3 different aging periods: 1, 7, and 21 days. Then the opinions of our panelists can only be estimated inducing a preference or ranking function as was explained in section 3. Notice that only such functions can be used in order to compare the preferences of different consumers; in general, two arbitrary consumers have not tested samples of the same animal prepared with the same aging. However, it is possible to compare the preference functions of any couple of consumers as vectors in a high dimension space following the kernel based method of section 3.

The clustering algorithm [9] returns the trees depicted in Figure 1. Split nodes achieved a confidence level of 91% for tenderness dataset, and 97% for acceptance. The leaves of these trees and the dataset of flavor reached lower confidence levels, and therefore they were rejected.

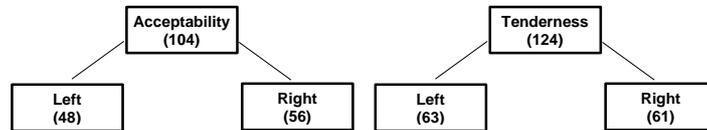


Fig. 1. Trace of the clustering algorithm. In each node we report the number of consumers

The job of clustering is to compute groups with minimal intra-group and maximal inter-group distances or differences. In our case, the relevance of clusters can be estimated, in part, by the coherence of consumers included into the same cluster, which can be measured by the classification error of the SVM used to compute the ranking or preference function of each cluster. Let us notice that the union of preference judgments of the members of the same cluster has some disagreements; if for each pair of samples we choose the most frequent relative ordering, then about 16% of preference pairs of each cluster express a particular disagreement with the majority opinion of the cluster, see Table 2. However, every preference judgment is included in the training set of each cluster; this sums more than 2000 preference judgments, what means (see equation 4 in section 3) more than 4000 training set instances for the corresponding classification sets.

When we use a polynomial kernel of degree 2, the errors range from 19.20% to 21.12%; we used this kernel following [4][3][2]. Nevertheless, if we apply the in-

duced classification function of each cluster to the other one, then the errors rise to more than 50% in the case of acceptance, and more than 60% in the case of tenderness. Notice that in both cases we are ranking the same samples and these errors can be understood as the probability of reversing the order given by one of such clusters when we use the criteria of the other one. Therefore, 50% of error means a random classification, and over that threshold means that ranking criteria is approaching the exactly opposite. All the details are collected in Table 2.

In general, it is well known that meat qualities are mainly the result of a set of complex factors. In this study, we focus our attention on two of them: breed and aging period. Specifically, we are interested in knowing if there are different groups of people who prefer some breeds to others or who prefer long to short aging periods.

To gain insight into the meaning of the preference criteria of each cluster, we used the ranking or preference functions to order the samples of meat; then we assessed 10 points to those samples included in the first decile, 9 to the second decile, and so on. Graphical representations of the average points obtained by each breed and each aging period are shown in Figure 2 (acceptance) and Figure 3 (tenderness); notice that the average score of all samples is 5.5. The results are quite the same if we use quartiles instead of deciles or any other division of the relative rankings of each cluster. We used breeds and aging periods since they are the most relevant features in the acceptance and tenderness appreciation of beef meat by consumers according to [2][5][6][7][8].

In the acceptance dataset (Figure 2a), let us emphasize the opposite role played by Retinta and Asturiana breeds: they were first and last (or almost last) in each cluster alternatively. In [2] we used Boolean attributes to include the breed in the description of each sample, and then Retinta and Asturiana were found to be the most relevant Boolean features in order to explain consumer's acceptance of meat. Additionally, these two breeds have significant differences in carcass composition (see Table 1). Notice that Asturiana breed is the only double muscled breed of the sample, and then it has the lowest values in percentages of subcutaneous and inter-muscular fat, and bone; while Retinta is the unimproved rustic breed with the highest percentages of fat and bone. Therefore, there are some reasons so as to assign opposite ratings to samples of these two breeds, although, in general, the final acceptance scorings rely on a complex set of features.

On the other hand, analyzing aging periods in both clusters, (Figure 2b) we can see that people in the left cluster prefer a 7 days aging period meanwhile in the right cluster longer aging periods have better acceptance.

In the tenderness dataset (Figure 3a), meat from Pirenaica and Retinta breeds are the tenderest for people in left cluster, however they are ranked in low positions in right cluster. We can say exactly the opposite of meat from Asturiana and Parda breeds. Again, Asturiana and Retinta breeds play opposites roles in each cluster.

In this case, we cannot appreciate differences between clusters' preferences about aging periods (Figure 3b): in both clusters, all breeds obtain higher tenderness scores as aging periods increase. This is not a surprisingly result, it is well documented that long aging periods give rise to more tender meat [6][7].

Table 2. For clusters of acceptance and tenderness datasets, this table reports the number of preference judgments (PJ), percentage of disagreements, and classification errors achieved into clusters with their own ranking or preference function, and using the function of the other cluster

Dataset	cluster	PJ	disagreements %	classification errors using function	
				own %	other %
acceptance					
	left	1927	16.19	19.20	50.96
	right	2150	17.07	21.12	54.95
tenderness					
	left	2487	15.96	19.38	61.98
	right	2432	15.21	19.59	61.06

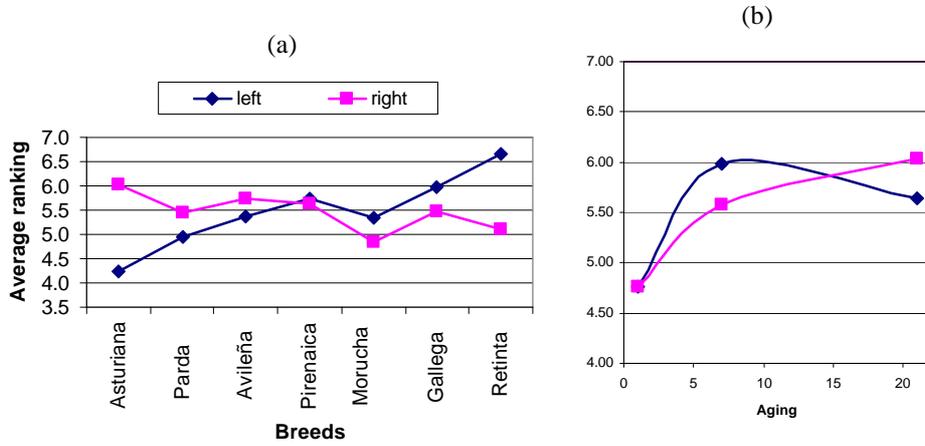


Fig. 2. Acceptance of beef meat. Average ranking scores for each breed and aging period

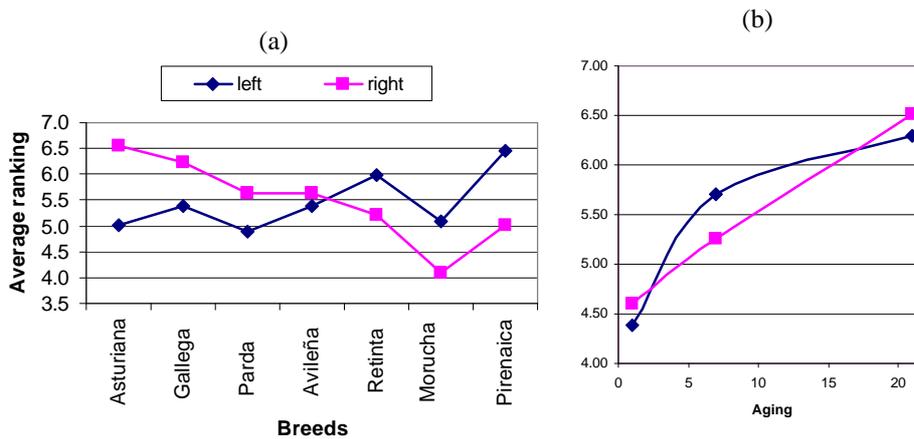


Fig. 3. Tenderness of beef meat. Average ranking scores for each breed and aging period

6 Conclusions

In this paper we propose a method for learning the reasons why groups of consumers prefer some food products instead of others of the same type. To illustrate our method, a real case of consumers of beef meat was studied. We revealed the existence of different market segments characterized by divergent sensibilities in the appreciation of this kind of meat. This conclusion can be useful for breeders to design policies to improve the acceptability of beef meat.

The proposed method stresses that it is possible to map with continuity people's preferences into a metric space, where it is possible to compute the similarity between preference criteria. Given that, in general, consumers only rate some products of the sample, we codify their preferences by linear functions in a high dimensional feature space, and then we compute the similarity between these functions by means of a kernel based method.

Once we have a reasonable similarity measure for preference criteria, the main goal is to discover different groups of consumers (or market segments) and explain which kinds of products they prefer. For this purpose, we use two learning tools: i) to group people with similar preferences, a hierarchical clustering algorithm that directly captures the intention of the similarity functions using a proximity matrix of pairwise relations; ii) a SVM algorithm to learn preferences functions using the descriptions of the products.

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