71st ICoMST
GIRONA - CATALONIA - SPAIN
3rd-8th August - 2025

ATTITUDES OF SLOVENIAN CONSUMERS REGARDING PORK QUALITY - COMPARING "ORGANIC" AND "SELECTED QUALITY" LABELS AND STANDARD PRODUCT

Bojana Savić[1], Martin Škrlep[1], Klavdija Poklukar[1], Marjeta Čandek-Potokar[1*]

[1] Agricultural Institute of Slovenia, Hacquetova ulica 17, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia.

*Corresponding author email: meta.candek-potokar@kis.si

I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding consumer preferences is essential for successful food marketing [1]. Concern for health is becoming a critical factor in food consumption and purchasing decisions, leading consumers to demand products they trust to be healthier, such as organic foods [2]. Consumers are also becoming increasingly sensitive to factors related to the way meat is produced, often linked to the trust they place in local origin [3]. In the EU, organic food is certified ensuring that the food has been produced in accordance with EU organic farming legislation. The quality policy of EU foresees other quality labels to protect and promote certain products and their specific characteristics, particularly regarding geographical origin but also voluntary certification schemes at national level. Thus, Slovenia introduced the national quality scheme "Izbrana kakovost" (en. "Selected quality") in 2014, which is aimed at products of premium quality and Slovenian origin. For pork, in practice, this means primarily the Slovenian origin of pork. The attitude of Slovenian consumers towards fresh pork in general and towards quality attributes is not well known. The aim of this study was to assess the attitudes and expectations of Slovenian consumers for pork in relation to intrinsic and extrinsic cues. Specifically, an attempt was made to assess their attitudes and expectations towards "Organic" and "Selected quality" compared to standard pork from conventional pig farming.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data were collected using an online survey in May 2023 using the computer-assisted web interview method. The survey included 574 participants (297 men and 277 women) from 12 Slovenian regions, all of them consumers of pork. Participants were aged between 18 and 65 years. The questionnaire included 23 statements/criteria reported in Meyer-Höfer et al. (2015) [4], addressing farming practices, meat quality, environmental sustainability, and circularity. Of these, 20 items focused on extrinsic attributes, while 3 addressed intrinsic attributes (see Figure 1). In addition, socio-demographic characteristics of the participants were recorded. The main question to the participants was: "To what extent do you agree that the statement applies to the product?" and they had to provide answers for each of the three labels using a five-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree). Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 23.0, with the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test employed to compare consumer attitudes toward the "Organic", "Selected Quality" label, and standard (commodity) products.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Slovenian consumers showed the least favorable attitude towards conventionally produced pork (Figure 1), which was expected, however the average score for most of the statements was generally neutral. Only for some extrinsic attributes i.e. biodiversity protection, low water or energy consumption, waste, and climate concern the average scores deviated towards a negative perception. For consumers standard pork has more chemical additives, more use of mineral fertilizers, more genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and was associated with poorer animal welfare. Standard pork was considered as being less sustainable regarding farm feed production, biodiversity protection, environmentally friendly processing and packaging, water usage, energy usage, waste. It was unexpected that this trend was consistent across all statements, including those lacking scientific support e.g. standard pork was also rated lower for intrinsic cues like taste, appearance, food safety. On the other hand, for meat labels "Selected quality" and "Organic", the average scores showed much more positive perception with more favorable views on "Organic" than "Selected quality" label though the difference was lesser. Both labels were perceived as more sustainable but also of better taste and appearance in comparison with standard pork. Our results align with research von Meyer-Hoyer et al., 2013) [5], who showed that consumers associate organic food with natural farming and as more environmentally friendly [6]. It was remarkable to observe the closeness in perceptions between the "Selected quality" and "Organic" meat labels, especially given that the latter is primarily based on the origin of the pork. This result demonstrates the trust of Slovenian consumers to local origin of meat, in line with the literature review [3], which showed that country of origin is the most important quality cue for meat consumers in big part of the world. Moreover, our study highlights that even when certain consumer beliefs are not evidence-based, they still evoke a general positive attitude. For example, beliefs that quality labeled pork was produced using less energy, less water and that it has a better taste. The results show that Slovenian consumers perceive "Organic" and "Selected quality" similarly regarding taste, appearance, regional production, short transport distance, and fair price.

This aligns with the finding that consumers often view locally-origin labels as nearly equivalent to the “Organic” label [7].

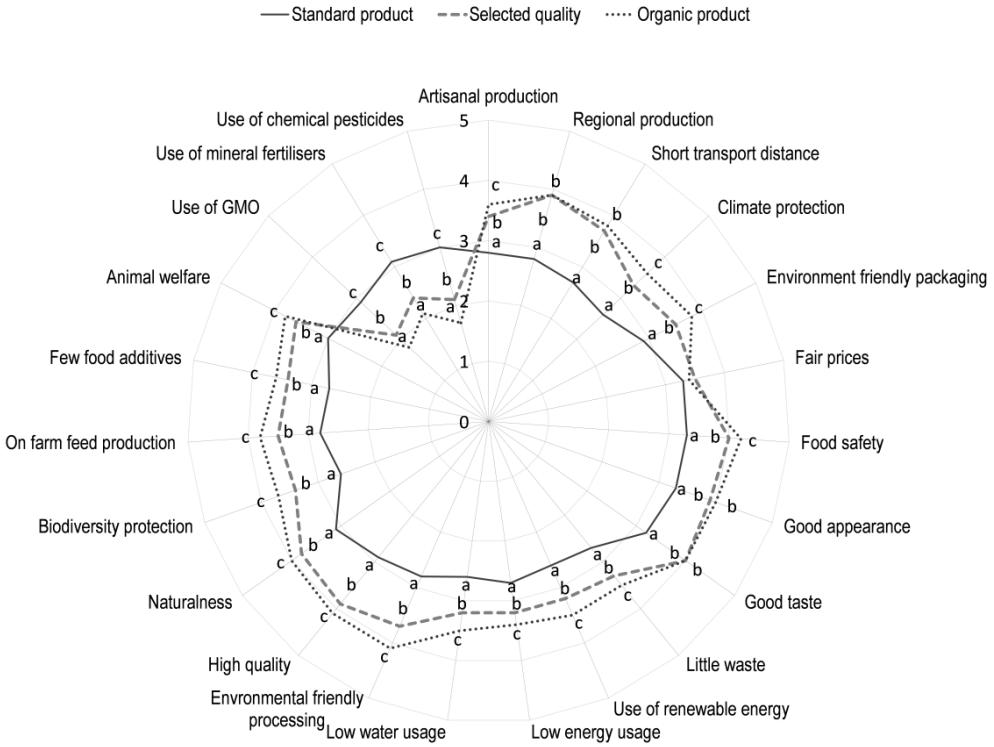


Figure 1. Consumers' attitudes towards pork with quality label (“Organic” and “Selected quality”) compared to the standard product (average scores shown). Different letters denote a statistically significant ranking difference for the statement.

IV. CONCLUSION

Slovenian consumers’ attitude toward pork from conventional pig production was mainly neutral. A positive attitude was observed for both labels, but “Selected Quality” label was closer to “Organic” than standard meat, providing a marketing advantage and posing a challenge for organic pork production.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study has received funding from Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (grants P4-0133, L7-4568) and Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (L7-4568).

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