

## DUAL FOOD QUALITY IN SLOVAKIA VERSUS EUROPEAN STATES: ARE CUSTOMERS CONCERNED?

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### ABSTRACT

Recently, the topic of dual food quality has been intensively discussed in the media, as well as becoming an issue for European Union institutions. In the presented work, we answer the question of whether the topic of dual food quality is just as interesting for consumers as it is for the media and politicians. In March 2018, a questionnaire survey was conducted on the quality and availability of local foods. A total of 1 984 respondents answered, with 1 224 of them taking the opportunity to answer a general open question regarding the quality and choice of food. Almost 22% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of local foods. Moreover, about 32% expressed a desire for a wider selection of goods with no complaint about quality. The wording of the answers expresses remarkably high confidence in local foods. Only 36 respondents mentioned foods of foreign origin. Opinions on foreign food were either positive, neutral, or negative. Consumer comments have shown that they do not perceive differences in food quality as an issue of interest. Furthermore, it is not possible to unequivocally say whether foreign products are perceived as of higher or lower quality. We recommend repeating a similar survey while the idea of dual quality is not instilled in the respondent during the survey. A similar survey can be conducted in other European countries as well.

**Key words:** dual quality, product, customers preferences, food

**JEL codes:** F15, M31, L15

### INTRODUCTION

Discussions regarding dual food quality have recently emerged as a high priority on the European level. This topic has always been present in Slovakia in a variety of forms: nostalgia for the good old times, for example, when sugar was sweeter, stories about contaminated food from Chernobyl or Poland, or even legendary western food products from France or Italy. However, it has only become a sensitive topic in recent years, with discussions beginning on the highest political and academic levels.

‘Dual quality’ is the practice in which companies use different recipes, formulations, or standards for items sold under the same brand name and with very similar-looking packaging. Depending on the market where they are sold, some products might be of lower nutritional value, contain inferior ingredients, or have lower efficacy. Most cases have been reported predominantly about food; however, there is evidence that it also concerns non-food products, such as detergents (e.g. washing liquid) and toiletries (e.g. toothpaste, shampoo) (BEUC, 2018).

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Thanks to the attention given to the topic of dual food quality, we consider it useful to verify whether this subject is of interest to consumers as well. Previous research was conducted in the form of a questionnaire. In the majority of cases, respondents were asked whether they considered dual quality to be a problem, or whether they had even heard about it. Most of the respondents answered affirmatively, regarding the problem of dual food quality as a problem and that they were aware of the issue. However, these results did not confirm whether consumers address the dual quality of products unless the problem had been indicated by the researcher. A rationally-minded consumer cannot say they do not care about the quality of products, or more specifically, the dual quality of food.

The answer to the research question was predicted as so: Consumers in Slovakia do not consider dual food quality in different states of the European Union as a problem.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

The issue of 'dual quality' of food products rose to prominence during 2016 and 2017, after tests in the several Member States showed that some branded products, which had been sold under the same or similar brand name and packaging, had either different ingredients or sensory characteristics within the different Member States. The study, of which the results were published in June 2019, followed allegations that companies were selling inferior products in the Member States that joined the EU after 2004; however, the JRC analysis did not reveal any consistent geographical patterns (Šajin, 2019).

The GAIN report presents a specific example of dual quality in food. In Iglo fish sticks, for example, the fish content in Slovakia is lower than its Austrian counterpart. However, the Slovak product contains the same fish content as the product sold in the UK, the Netherlands, and Portugal. A Nestlé representative responded to allegations by stating, 'Our recipes reflect cultural differences between countries and regions, including within the European Union and developed according to local consumer preferences. There may be some minor variations in the ingredients used in some of our products sold within the EU

to cater to local consumer preferences' (Walker and Williams, 2017).

The survey was conducted between September and December 2018 and presented a negative reaction against the existence of dual quality in products from 80% of respondents. In total, 919 participants took part in the survey (Bartková, 2019). Respondents were required to answer the following question concerning dual quality: Have you ever heard of the problem of dual quality? 80% of all respondents considered dual quality in food a problem, while only 24% considered it a problem in the case of cleaning products and cosmetics (Bartková and Sirotiaková, 2021). At the same time, 47% of respondents disclosed that they had been informed primarily by the media. Further research on quality perception was conducted in Slovakia where respondents evaluated the overall quality of two different samples of honey (one from a local beekeeper and one imported honey sold in a retail store). Respondents tried to evaluate quality based on sensory attributes such as taste, aroma, consistency, and colour (Šedík et al., 2018). The research confirmed that Slovak respondents prioritize locally-produced products over general quality.

All previous research has shown that respondents have a negative perception of the possible occurrence of dual quality. The occurrence of dual quality has been confirmed (Bíreš, 2018). However, there is no confirmation that it is aimed specifically at member states of Central and Eastern Europe (Walker and Williams, 2017). Despite the existence of dual quality, several heated discussions have developed. Evidence suggests that instrumental aggression may be motivated by some alleged threat (Fromm, 1992).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In March 2018, we used a questionnaire to find out consumers' preferences towards local and regional agricultural food products. The questionnaire contained 21 questions, including demographic and personal information. We received a total of 1 984 complete answers. Answers were collected electronically. Respondents were asked to answer a questionnaire during doing purchases on the biggest e-shop portal in Slovakia.

Males comprised 53% of the total number of respondents with females comprising the remaining 47%. The share of respondents who participated in the survey corresponded to the share of citizens in individual regions of the Slovak Republic as described in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Geographic distribution of respondents according to different regions in Slovakia

County	<i>n</i>	% of the <i>n</i>	Population	% the population
City of Bratislava	222	11	422 923	8
Bratislavský kraj	79	4	210 356	4
Trnavský kraj	171	9	559 697	10
Trenčianský kraj	230	12	589 935	11
Nitrianský kraj	238	12	682 527	13
Žilinský kraj	241	12	690 434	13
Banskobystrický kraj	234	12	653 024	12
Prešovský kraj	299	15	820 697	15
Košický kraj	268	14	796 650	15
Total	1 982	100	5 426 252	100

Source: own empirical research.

The share of respondents who participated in taking the questionnaire represented the share of citizens in individual regions of the Slovak Republic. To confirm these claims, we used a paired t-test that corresponded to two middle values. The calculated value of the tested characteristic is larger than the critical value  $t_1 - \alpha$ , that is, with 95% probability. Based on these results, we can thus use a selected group of respondents from the questionnaire to represent the preferences of the Slovak Republic as a whole.

In the questionnaire, we collected data about customers' opinions about the quality of food products. In the last question (21st), respondents had the opportunity to express their opinion on the quality and availability of food in Slovakia. The question was: Please share with us your opinion on the quality or availability of food. What do you believe is lacking in the Slovak market? Out of the total number of 1 984 respondents, 1 224 respondents were willing to express their opinion in the form of a written text.

The intention of open question number 21 was to collect information about other possible interests of customers above the main goal of research. We analysed how many times the respondents used the words 'foreign', 'imported', 'western', or other word combinations used in the Slovak language, which is associated with products that are not produced in Slovakia.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During collection responses 1 224 respondents took advantage of the opportunity to answer the open question. This comprises 62% of the total number of respondents (1 984). This concerned the last question in the questionnaire. There was no motivation of any kind for answering this question, such as a discount or financial reward. Therefore, it can be inferred that the average respondent is not only interested in food and its characteristics such as quality, but also wants to express their own opinion. Lengths of responses varied, from either one-word answers to several sentences.

From all participating respondents 13% of respondents (or 21% of those who answered the question) wrote that they were satisfied with the current situation. Likewise, 20% of respondents (or 32% of actively answered) used the word 'more' in various forms. Respondents presented the word 'more' using a variety of conjunctions, for example, with selection or quantity. 6% of respondents (or 10%) felt that something was lacking. As a whole, the written comments regarding food on the Slovak market were either positive or very positive. Respondents expressed exceptional confidence in the good quality of domestic products. This was expressed using a variety of words, such as domestic, local, traditional, Slovak, and so on.

Only 36 respondents used a phrase in some form or another referring to products produced outside of Slovakia. This comprises less than 3% of respondents (or less than 2% of the entire number of respondents). Given that this is a very low number of respondents who mentioned foreign-produced products on their own, we can therefore confirm the answer to our research question: Slovak consumers do not consider

dual food quality in different states of the European Union as a problem.

From the answers provided, it is not possible to say unequivocally whether foreign-produced food or food available abroad can be considered of being of higher quality or not. However, the answers show that negative responses were expressed more aggressively, and institutions or companies, especially those from abroad, were attributed to having bad intentions:

- 'Slovakia should be self-sufficient and not import harmful, cancer-causing waste from around the world';
- 'More Slovak food products. They are of higher quality than from Poland or the "waste" sent to us from the west';
- 'Real quality food and not "pretend" quality food products that deceive consumers';
- 'As far as the availability of quality food is concerned, we know that fewer quality products are exported to Slovakia, even though we do not have any food shortage here'.

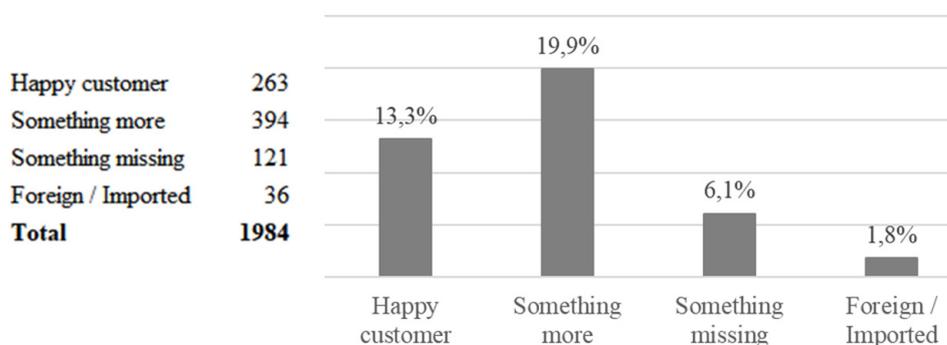
Due to the low number of negative responses, it is not possible to perform further statistical tests or provide more evidence. Therefore, it can be concluded from this low number those consumers are not interested in comparing the quality of products available abroad or foreign-produced products unless they have been informed by someone else. However, when asked directly about dual quality, they agree that the difference in quality is a problem. Rational consumers must consistently answer

the question of whether they consider dual quality to be a problem. Disagreement would indicate irrational behaviour, which is, accepting and paying for inferior products.

Collected data presented in Figure 1 clearly shows that customers are much more interested in a wider selection of goods above fact that food products are imported. A frequency of 1.8% can be interpreted as a statistical deviation. As explained above answers contain mostly suggestive expressions with a very negative tone.

We recommend repeating the previously conducted research under new conditions. The consumer should not be aware that the research is focused on dual quality, especially when examining their opinions. In the case that the consumer is aware of the nature of the research, their reaction must be negative. A further condition for examining emotions related to purchases and the quality of products abroad is the separation of emotions that are unrelated to the quality of purchased items. It is quite likely that the consumer already has positive emotions in connection to the occasional trip abroad.

The single, unanswered question concerns the frequency of occurrences of dual quality and the reasons why it happens. The existence of dual quality is undoubted; however, it is not known whether the reason for it is due to cheap raw materials or the necessity to satisfy the local consumer preferences. The findings to date in the majority of cases have concerned only minor products.



**Figure 1.** Respondents' interest in specific food quality

Source: own empirical research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The sample survey of 1 984 respondents showed that 62% of consumers are willing not only to answer closed questions but also express their opinion with a written response. Satisfaction with quality or selection was directly expressed by 13% of consumers. A greater selection would appreciate 20% of consumers; however, at the same time, they would not complain about the quality. Only 36 respondents, which is less than 2% of the total number, mentioned foreign-produced products in their responses.

With regards to the results, which showed that respondents do not even consider comparing the quality of foreign-produced products, we recommend that a separate study be conducted to either support or refute this conclusion. At the same time, it would be interesting to compare the results of different research from a variety of member states in the European Union. When creating the questionnaire, special attention must be paid so as not to suggest answers to the respondent, for example, so that they are not aware that the research is focused on the dual quality of products.

A further recommendation is to support general education on the activities and competencies of European Union institutions. Our research has shown that respondents prioritize locally-made products, yet do not consider the question of dual quality to be of any interest. This does not correspond to the attention given to dual quality in the media or politics. The academic community can play a positive role in the education and contribution towards European integration, especially in cross-border cooperation.

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