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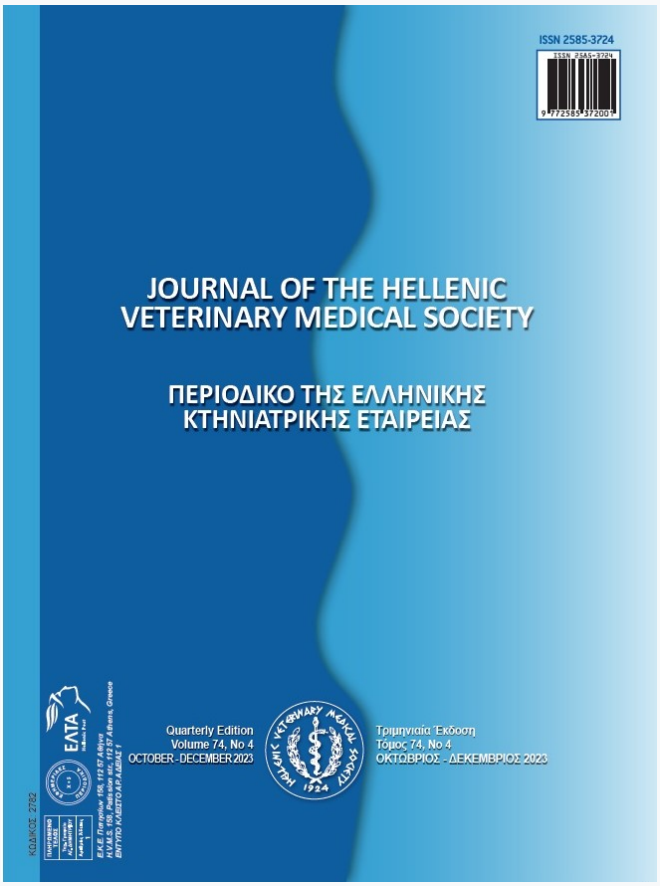

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Local Cheese: Factors Affecting Consumption and PLS-Path Modelling Study

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ABSTRACT: This paper proposes a model for investigating the current preferences of local cheese consumers in terms of the extrinsic and intrinsic quality attributes associated with local cheese consumption awareness and the willingness to pay for local cheese in the Republic of Serbia. Local cheese extrinsic quality attributes such as adequate price, country of origin, geographical indication, and attractiveness of the label, have shown the strongest direct influence on the willingness to pay for local cheese. Strong influence is also manifested in the perceived extrinsic quality attributes of local cheese on the consumers' awareness of local cheese consumption. The intrinsic quality attributes of local cheese have a positive impact on local cheese consumption awareness, but not on the willingness to pay more for local cheese, which shows that the intrinsic qualities of local cheeses should be further promoted to enhance the willingness to pay more for the local cheese in a specific location. Local cheese consumption awareness has manifested a direct positive relation with the willingness to pay for local cheese therefore the increased awareness of the importance of the consumption of local cheese can be reflected in stronger buying intentions. These insights can offer opportunities for strategic actions of local cheese market stakeholders regarding local cheese promotion and consumption.

Keywords*:* local cheese; consumption awareness; extrinsic and intrinsic quality attributes; willingness to pay; PLS-path

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INTRODUCTION

With droughts and climate changes resulting from global warming, as well as the impact of chemical residues on flora and fauna, the current agro-food production system has undergone increasing changes (Aguilera et al., 2020; Sri Shalini et al., 2021; Vapa Tankosić et al., 2022). Due to this, farmers tend to migrate to organic food production systems with Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), and Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) brand designations(Dias and Mendes, 2018). In addition, direct marketing approaches (Brkić and Tomaš-Simin, 2022) or Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC) have been adopted to meet consumer demand more effectively and to increase farmers' annual activity income by producing higher value-added dairy products(Horská et al., 2020; KabirandSaib, 2022) such as Serbian local cheeses (Tasić, 2018) pirotski, somborski, kraljevački, homoljski, zlatarski, sjenički, and svrljiški. Small farms and small dairy plants produce all of these cheeses for their consumption as well as for commercial purposes (Lika et al., 2021; Puvača et al., 2020).

To maintain robust skeletal and muscular systems, dairy products are an essential part of a healthy and balanced diet(Tunick and Van Hekken, 2015).There has been an increase in the consumption of dairy products throughout the world in recent years due to the health benefits of dairy products(Park, 2021).

It is essential to combine traditional sensory analysis with modern market research methods to develop a comprehensive approach to evaluating the intrinsic and extrinsic cheese attributes, as well as consumers' socioeconomic characteristics and their possible interactions(Bogue et al., 1999).Consumer socioeconomic characteristics have been explored in the framework of extrinsic product attributes on consumers' food decisions (Hoffmann et al., 2020).

For increasing the competitiveness of cheese production, in view of European integration, it is necessary to define and implement a strategy to strengthen the competitiveness of the dairy industry which will focus on adopting technological changes and additional investment in research and development, by the government support for small producers based on a system of subsidies for the financing of production, education, building new association of producers as well as legal harmonization with the acquis. Serbian consumers' have cognitively better impressions of health, taste, and care for the environment concerning organic and local produce (Vapa-Tankosić et al., 2020) and tend to pay more for local value-added products if the local food produce denotes quality, freshness, and authenticity (Cvijanović et al., 2020).

The research on the relationships between extrinsic and intrinsic quality attributes of cheeses, sustainability, local characteristics, and willingness to pay for cheeses, perceptions, and preferences in cheese consumption in Serbia is still limited. Therefore, to increase the share of domestic local cheeses in the total dairy consumption significant activities should be taken to motivate local dairy producers to approach new potential markets. The consumers should be additionally educated on the quality of domestic cheeses also by developing a loyalty relationship with local producers (Carić et al., 2022). In light of the above said, this paper tries to further reveal the existence of statistically significant and positive relations between extrinsic and intrinsic quality attributes of local cheese, consumers' local cheese consumption awareness, and their willingness to pay for local cheese in the Republic of Serbia, which can bring about some significant findings for all the stakeholders involved in the process of the consumption of local cheeses and dairy products in general.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted during the first six months of 2021 in the Republic of Serbia, at the entrances of shops selling local cheeses and shopping centers. Personal interviews were carried out by trained interviewers. The details of the study are presented in Table 1. The questionnaire consisted of the following statements on the consumption of local cheeses. The statements referred to Extrinsic quality attributes of the local cheeses (EXT-1: importance of price, EXT-2: importance of brand, EXT-3: importance of country of origin, EXT-4: importance of geographical indication, EXT-5: importance of received awards and recognitions, EXT-6: importance of product design, EXT-7: importance of attractiveness of the label). Intrinsic quality attributes of the local cheeses have also been investigated (INT-1: importance of smell, INT-2: importance of taste, INT-3: importance of colour, INT-4: importance of fat percentage, INT-5: importance of protein percentage, INT-6: importance of nutritional value, INT-7: importance of shell life, INT-8: importance of overall sensory quality).The following statements investigated the local cheese consumption awareness (CA-1: importance of the knowledge of the producer, CA-2: cheese coming

from local small farmers nurtures traditional production techniques, CA-3: local cheese is an important local gastronomic product, CA-4: local cheese satisfies a variety of tastes, CA-5: satisfaction with the consumption of local cheese, CA-6: consumption of local cheese contributes to the promotion of local communities, CA-7: domestic cheese is better than the imported cheese, CA-8: domestic cheese is cheaper than the imported cheese). The variable denoting Willingness to pay more for the local cheese has also been included in the investigated statements (WTP-1: I am willing to pay more for the local cheese in specialty stores; WTP-2: I am willing to pay more for the local cheese by buying directly from the producer).

The research hypotheses have been defined as follows:

H1: Extrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (EXT) have a positive and significant impact on Local cheese consumption awareness (CA),

H2: Extrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (EXT) have a positive and significant impact on the Willingness to pay more for local cheese (WTP),

H3: Intrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (INT) have a positive and significant impact on Local cheese consumption awareness (CA),

H4: Intrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (INT) have a positive and significant impact on the Willingness to pay more for local cheese (WTP),

H5: Local cheese consumption awareness (CA) has a positive and significant impact on Willingness to pay more for local cheese (WTP).

The proposed conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

The assessment of the subjective judgments of the respondents i.e. adults over 18 that consume local cheese, has been measured using the Likert scale with five levels: 1 - I completely disagree to 5 - I completely agree. The answers that were obtained in full, and that could be further elaborated, on were received from 626 respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

By applying the method of partial least squares structural equation (Hair et al., 2019; Hult et al., 2018), the size of the sample has been estimated. The sample size satisfies the criterion (Hair et al., 2014; Knapp and Brown, 1995) as the sample is 10 times larger than the number of pathways leading to the endogenous variable in the structural model. After descriptive statistical processing of the data, the normality of the distribution was tested (Kolmogorov - Smirnov test, Shapiro - Wilk and Jarque-Bera test), although Chin and Todd(1995) indicate that this is not an oblig-

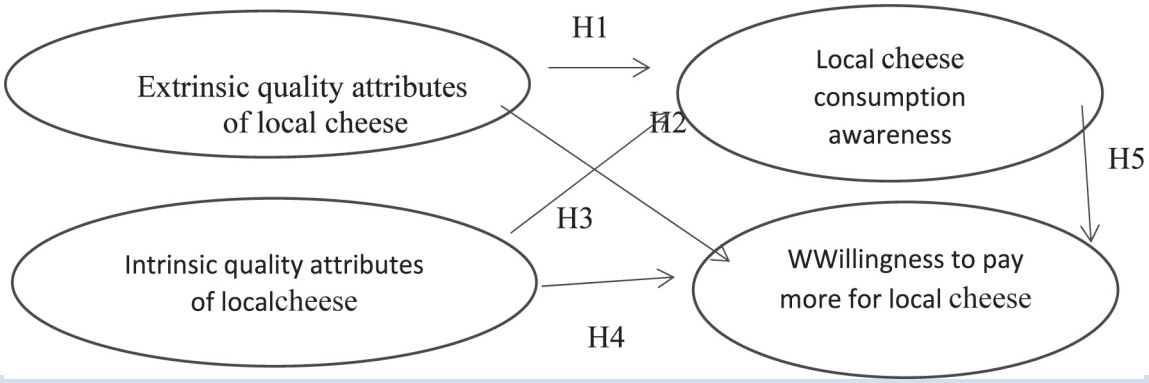

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Table 1. Details of the study

Country	Republic of Serbia
Sample unit	Adults over 18 that consume local cheese
Methodology	Personal interviews based on a structural questionnaire
Sampling procedure	Random sample
Sample size	626 valid interviews
Date and place of the conducted fieldwork	The research was conducted during the first six months of 2021 at the entrances of shops selling local cheese and shopping centers

atory condition. Further analysis was performed using PLS SMART software. The external PLS-SEM model has the following structure: EXT - seven reflective variables as the first latent construct and INT - eight reflective variables as the second latent construct. The third latent construct is Local cheese consumption awareness (CA) and which consists of eight reflective variables and the fourth latent construct is WTP and which consists of two reflective variables. The internal model consists of three latent exogenous constructs (EXT, INT, and CA) and one endogenous latent construct (WTP). The external model consists of 25 reflective variables.

The results show that in the reflective measurement of the model out of a total of 25 variables (consisting of EXT-7, INT-8, CA-8, and WTP-2) 13 variables with a factor load > 0.6 were retained. The variables that were retained in the model and further elaborated were: EXT-1: importance of price, EXT-3: importance of country of origin, EXT-4: importance of geographical indication, , EXT-7: importance of attractiveness of the label, INT-2: importance of taste, INT-4: importance of fat percentage, INT-5: importance of protein percentage, INT-6: importance of nutritional value, CA-2: cheese coming from local small farmers nurtures traditional production techniques, CA-7: domestic cheese is better than the imported cheese, CA-8: domestic cheese is cheaper than the imported cheese,WTP-1: I am willing to pay more for the local cheese in specialty stores; WTP-2: I am willing to pay more for the local cheese by buying directly from the producer).Further analysis of Path coefficients, Cronbach α, Composite reliability, and Convergent validity is shown in Table 2.

The standardized factor load is in the range of manifest variables in the range of 0.643 and 0.900. Manifest variables that had a value of less than 0.60 have been excluded from the model, while variables that had a factor load of 0.6-0.7 were retained because there was no increase in composite reliability

Table 2. Statistical analysis of Path coefficients, Cronbach alpha, Composite reliability, and Convergent Validity.

	Variable	Path coefficients	Cronbach α	CR -Composite Reliability	AVE - Convergent Validity
EXT	EXT1	0.717	0.731	0.832	0.554
	EXT3	0.747			
	EXT4	0.702			
	EXT7	0.806			
INT	INT2	0.859	0.762	0.831	0.553
	INT4	0.720			
	INT5	0.647			
	INT6	0.734			
CA	CA2	0.900	0.788	0.875	0.701
	CA7	0.841			
	CA8	0.765			
WTP	WTP1	0.643	0.720	0.847	0.653
	WTP2	0.891			

Table 3. Statistical analysis of Fornell Larcker criterion and Cross loadings

Fornell Larcker				*Cross loadings*			
EXT	INT	CA	WTP	EXT	INT	CA	WTP
0.744				0.717			
				0.747			
				0.702			
				0.806			
0.451	0.744			0.238	0.859		
				0.319	0.720		
				0.528	0.647		
				0.517	0.734		
0.517	0.346	0.837		0.499	0.246	0.900	
				0.188	0.066	0.841	
				0.527	0.501	0.765	
0.495	0.195	0.490	0.808	0.464	0.427	0.344	0.643

above the reference value. Values of Cronbach's alpha coefficients of latent construct variables indicate a high level of reliability (Hair et al., 2019; Knapp and Brown, 1995) and values range from 0.720-0.788 (EXT has a value of 0.731, INT has a value of 0.762, CA has a value of 0.788 and for WTP has a value of 0.720). The obtained values of composite reliability (CR) are in the range of 0.831-0.875, which means that the selected variables well represent latent constructs. Convergent validity is satisfied for all latent constructs (AVE values are in the range 0.553-0.701, i.e.> 0.5).

The criteria for discriminant validity (Fornell Larcker criterion and HTMT values) have been met, as shown in Table 3.

As part of the analysis of the structural model using the bootstrapping procedure at the level of significance of 5%, the connection between latent constructs (EXT, INT, CA, and WTP) was examined as shown in Table 4. Inner VIF values range from 1.255-1.543, i.e. the obtained values are less than 3 (Hair et al., 2019), which in both cases confirm the fact that there is no collinearity in the model.

The findings indicate the existence of the direct and indirect effects of latent constructs as shown in Table 5. The strongest direct connection exists between EXT and CA (0.454) and between EXT and WTP (0.460). The direct bond between INT and CA (0.141) is stronger than the bond between INT and WTP (-0.082). The total indirect effect of EXT on WTP is 0.151, while the indirect effect of INT on WTP is 0.047. The total effects of EXT on WTP is 0.511 and INT on WTP is -0.035.

In the model, the value of the adjusted coefficient of determination for CA is $R^2 = 0.283$, we can classify it in the category of moderate influence. The coefficient of determination indicates that 28.3% of CA is explained by the predictor variables EXT and INT. In addition, the variables EXT, INT, and CA predict 32.4% of the WTP.

In the continuation of the evaluation of the internal model, the predictive relevance of the model was calculated using the blindfolding procedure. The value of cross-validated redundancy was calculated using Stone-Geisser Q^2 indicators (Chin, 2010; Henseler et al., 2009). The findings in table 6 indicate that the obtained value is greater than zero (Chin, 2010), which proves a satisfactory level of predictive significance of the model. The value of Q^2 is shown below in Table 6.

After the obtained corrected coefficient of deter-

Table 4. Statistical analysis of Inner VIF Values and Path Coefficients.

	Inner VIF Values	Inner VIF Values	Path Coefficients	Path Coefficients
	CA	WTP	CA	WTP
EXT	1.255	1.543	0.454	0.360
INT	1.255	1.283	0.141	-0.082
CA		1.396		0.333

Table 5. Statistical analysis of path coefficients in the model.

	Direct Path	Total Indirect Effect	Specific Indirect Effects	Total Effects
EXT > CA	0.454			0.454
EXT > WTP	0.360	0.151		0.511
INT > CA	0.141			0.141
INT > WTP	-0.082	0.047		-0.035
CA > WTP	0.333			0.333
EXT > CA >WTP			0.151	
INT > CA >WTP			0.047	

Table 6. Statistical analysis of the Stone-Geisser indicator of cross-validated redundancy - Q^2.

	SSO	SSE	Q^2 (=1-SSE/SSO)
EXT	5760.000	5760.000	
INT	5760.000	5760.000	
CA	4320.000	3582.408	0.171
WTP	4320.000	3446.922	0.202

mination was obtained, the coefficient of effect size has been calculated and the result shows that the obtained values indicate a small influence of exogenous latent constructs on endogenous variables. Finally, testing of the significance of the structural model and confirmation of hypotheses was performed as shown in Table 7.

The results of the tested model are also shown in Figure 2. Based on the results the following conclusions regarding the hypothesis testing can be drawn:

H1: Extrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (EXT) have a positive and significant impact on Local cheese consumption awareness (CA), which is confirmed due to the empirical relationship (β = 0.454; t = 13.869) which is a statistically significant at the level of p <0.05 in the confidence interval from 0.391 to 0.516.

H2: Extrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (EXT) have a positive and significant impact on the Willingness to pay more for local cheese (WTP), which is confirmed due to the empirical relationship (β = 0.511; t = 16.983) which is statistically significant at the level of p <0.05 in the confidence interval from 0.448 to 0.569.

H3: Intrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (INT) have a positive and significant impact on Local cheese consumption awareness (CA), which is confirmed. The empirical relationship is statistically significant and stable (β = 0.141; t = 4.596) in the significance range from 0.245 to 0.452.

H4: Intrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese (INT) have a positive and significant impact on the Willingness to pay more for local cheese (WTP), which is not confirmed. The empirical relationship is not statistically significant.

H5: Local cheese consumption awareness (CA) has a positive and significant impact on the Willingness to pay more for local cheese (WTP) is confirmed. The empirical relationship is statistically significant and stable (β = 0.333; t = 10.491) in the significance range from 0.271 to 0.397.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have tried to focus on the factors

Table 7. Results of hypothesis testing using the PLS-SEM technique.

	B Original Sample (O)	Standard Deviation	T Statistics (|O/Stdev|)	P Values	Confidence Interval		Hypothesis Confirmation
H1: EXT > CA	0.454	0.033	13.869	0.000	0.391	0.516	+
H2: EXT > WTP	0.511	0.030	16.983	0.000	0.448	0.569	+
H3: INT > CA	0.141	0.031	4.596	0.000	0.088	0.208	+
H4: INT > WTP	-0.035	0.028	1.263	0.207	-0.092	0.024	-
H5: CA > WTP	0.333	0.032	10.491	0.000	0.271	0.397	+

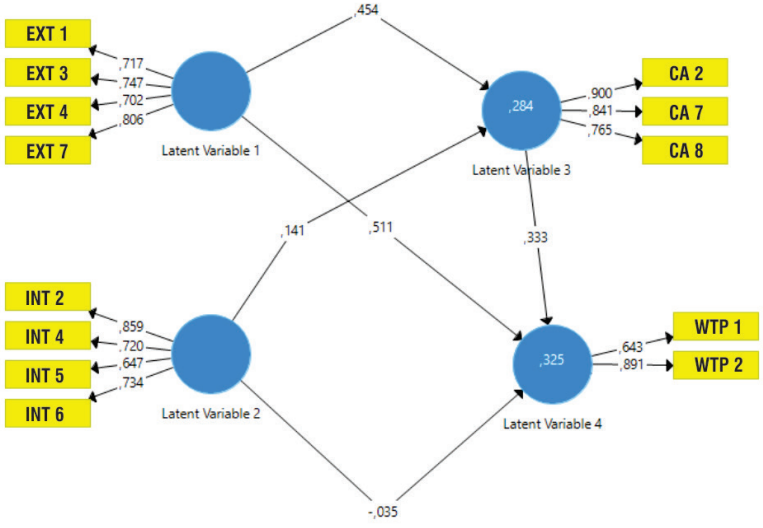

Figure 2. Testing of the proposed model.

affecting the consumption of local cheese through a PLS-path modelling study. The factors analyzed were the extrinsic and intrinsic quality attributes of local cheese associated with the consumers' local cheese consumption awareness and the willingness to pay for the local cheese. The strongest structural relationship exists between the extrinsic quality attributes of the local cheese and the willingness to pay for the local cheese. Therefore we can conclude that in our model, the extrinsic quality attributes such as the adequate price, the country of origin, geographical indication, and attractiveness of the label, have the strongest direct influence on the willingness to pay for local cheese in a specific selling location. Strong influence is also manifested in these perceived extrinsic quality attributes of local cheese on the consumers' local cheese consumption awareness. It can be concluded that extrinsic quality attributes contribute to perceived local cheese consumption awareness of traditional production techniques, better quality, and price than imported cheese, factors which can spur further local cheese consumption and local community support. The findings confirm that local cheese producers to attract and retain customers should be further educated on creating an effective marketing strategy with intensified efforts on the setting of adequate price, but also brand visibility while emphasizing the geographical origin, awards, and recognitions, as well as the design of product and attractiveness of the label.

The intrinsic quality attributes of local cheesesuch as taste, fat and protein percentage, and nutritional value, have been positively associated with local cheese consumption awareness in terms of valuing the cheese coming from local small farmers nurturingtraditional production techniques, and preferring domestic cheeses to the imported cheeses. The intrinsic quality attributes of local cheese have not shown a statistically significant relationship with the willingness to pay for local cheesein terms of buying local cheese in specialty stores or directly from the producer. Therefore the intrinsic quality attributes need to be additionally promoted to encompass also the consumers that could be characterized as „quality seekers «inclined to manifest a WTP in a specific selling location. Consumers that tend to value the preservations of the traditional production techniques by local farmers, the better quality of domestic cheese (than the imported ones), and affordable price (cheaper than the imported cheese) have manifested a direct positive relation with the willingness to pay for local cheese. We can conclude that the promotion of local cheese and small producers should be continued in the local community, for increased support of local cheese producers. The knowledge and awareness of better informed and educated local cheese consumers can represent the potential for further growth of consumption of this product in our country. The success of placing on the market this specific commodity depends on marketing efficiency and targeted marketing strategies. Future research can be directed towards monitoring the development of the local cheese market and the successful implementation of local cheese promotion strategies to attract new and retain current consumers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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