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A review of traditional Hungarian products' reputation with a special focus on consumer behaviour

Anett Popovics[1]

Abstract

The quality of traditional and regional products is essentially determined by geography, history and culture. Being protected by a distinctive quality label (based on the geographical origin, traditions and special features) may enhance traditional Hungarian and regional products' competitiveness.

Based on our survey's questionnaire results (N = 425) (basic statistics, factor and cluster analysis) it can be proved that consumers are able to identify and appreciate Hungarian products. They also highly value traditional quality.

Key words

traditional Hungarian products, consumer survey, reputation, value added

Introduction

Since 1st May 2004 when Hungary joined the European Union, Hungarian agricultural products have no longer enjoyed a protected local market. As the EU is the most important producer and consumer of processed food, Hungarian agricultural products have to compete with those products from other EU countries. Only by having the highest quality products can Hungary compete in the saturated EU market. However, traditional Hungarian products just might possess the necessary quality standard to do so.

In our research we began by describing traditional Hungarian food as a concept and subsequently by probing consumers' behaviour in terms of traditional products.

1. Hungaricum

In everyday parlance, the word "hungaricum" has again become a fashionable word. In numerous contexts it is used by people and experts, but its exact meaning has not yet been established.

There is no officially accepted definition for the proper use of this word. Every Hungarian knows that it not only refers to food, but also has a broader meaning related to Hungary and Hungarian traditions. Andrásfalvy (2003) offers a useful agribusiness definition:

'Hungaricum can be a plant, or an animal itself, but also a processed product made of that which is associated with Hungarian production culture, know-how, and Hungarian traditions, and which is accepted as typical of Hungary both by inhabitants and foreigners.'

[1] Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
Hungarian Collective Agricultural Marketing Centre (AMC) Public Benefit Company
H-1055 Budapest, Kossuth Lajos tér 11.
E-mail: anett_popovics@amc.hu

Based on the above, it is noteworthy that Hungaricum is not the proper word to use when examining consumer behavior toward traditional products.

2. Regional products

In contrast to the 'Hungaricum' concept, the term 'regional product' refers only to agricultural products and foodstuffs. According to Ittersum (2002) a regional product is one with a quality and a reputation originating from the specific region and its market entry is highly influenced by the the region's name.

An EU regional product's quality features are clearly defined and they are also accepted by Hungarian regulations. Regional products must differ from standard products from the same market. Based on the above definition, regional products can be distinguished from standard products if they have clearly measurable attributes and if these attributes are obvious to consumers (Kisérdi – Palló, 2003).

The other parameter for establishing regional products' protection is ***typical traits*** meaning the particular value enhanced by the region and by the region's specific human factors which is intrinsic to the product. Due to this synergic effect it also has an additional cultural value (Casablanca – De Sainte Marie, 1997). Based on these two criteria, it is possible to determine regionality as a parameter. Tregear (1999) contends that when accepting a product as regional, its physical and cognitive psychological caracteristics should mesh with a sense of of traditon.

To preserve regional products' additional value and to protect their special identity from being illegally assumed by other parties, and to help consumers in gathering product information, the EU passed the Council Regulation (EEC) 2081/92 on the protection of geographical indications and the place of origin for agricultural products and food. However, in 2006 this was set aside by the new Council Regulation (EC) No. 510/2006. Those agricultural products and foodstuffs come under Council Regulation ruling (EC) No. 510/2006 where there is a relationship between the product itself (its features) and its origin (EC No. 510/2006).

The regulation contributes to diversification in agricultural production, which is also a rural development policy objective. It gives preference to the rural economy and also furthers increasing farmers' income and maintaining the rural population (Strossová, 2006).

The regions have other important roles as Kovács (2004) points out: "...the region itself is not only a physical place, but a concept having spiritual aspects as well. In many cases the traditional culture, the national identity or the authentic way of life may also define the relationship with the region".

For consumers the EU regulations were also essential: generally speaking, when selecting a product, consumers value quality over quantity.

According to some international studies the demand for specific products is generating increased demand for agricultural and food industry products of which the origin is definite and certified. (Kisérdi – Palló, 2003).

Given that on the market there are numerous similar products and a barrage of information, it is important that consumers have the necessary information on product origin.

EU regulations provide protection against copying, fakery, and unauthorized appropriation of rights: 'The designation of origin or the geographical indication shall not be registered if – considering the good reputation of a certain trademark and the period of time it has been used for – the registration might mislead the consumers' (EC No. 510/2006).

3. Specific (traditional) quality

Council Regulation (EEC) 2082/92 and a new Council Regulation (EC) No. 509/2006 declared the certification of specific caracteristics and created the 'Traditional Special Product' concept.

As previously mentioned, there is a wealth of cheap products and information and in order to arouse consumer interest, one must conduct a brief yet extensive information campaign. This should be beamed via the appropriate channels to establish the products' unique quality.

Council Regulation EC No. 509/2006 outlines how to protect given traditional agricultural products and foods and procedures related to this. To further provide protection specific traditional products need to be registered. This registration should provide information to companies and to consumers. 'The registered labels are protected against any practice aiming to mislead the consumer (EC) No. 509/2006)'.

Definitions applied by Regulation (EC) No 509/2006 are the following:

a) 'specific characteristic' means the characteristic or set of characteristics which clearly distinguishes an agricultural product or a certain food from other products or foodstuffs of the same category;
b) 'traditional' means the product which has been on the market for the required period of time for the product presented to the next generation; this period of time usually means usually a period of one generation, but at least 25 years;
c) 'traditional special product' means a traditional agricultural product or food having a specific characteristic recognised by the EC in accordance with the registration of this regulation.

4. Traditions – Tastes – Regions program

The Traditions – Tastes – Regions (in abbreviated form HÍR) was a national Hungarian initiative aiming to identify and assemble traditional Hungarian and regional foodstuffs and to improve their competitiveness.

In 1998 the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) entrusted the Hungarian Community Agricultural Marketing Centre (AMC) with implementing the program in Hungary. This included the organisation of data collection, product description evaluation, and database maintenance.

From this program came two published volumes containing 300 traditional and regional products (excluding wines and recipes); the HÍR trademark was registered by the Hungarian Patent Office. Also the volumes were made into a CD with versions in Hungarian, English, and German, which is marketed by the AMC (Kisérdi-Palló, 2003).

In Tregear's (1999) theory on physical and psychological cognition, the consumer is influenced by two different factors: first come product related factors (name, appearance, packaging and trademark), but when actually buying the product various psychological subconscious factors influence the consumer such as tradition, habits, knowledge and experience.

Our main question is the impact of such psychological factors as product origin when buying traditional Hungarian goods. Moreover, what do customers consider a traditional Hungarian product?

In our study, the focus was on local characteristics and Hungarian consumers' opinion on buying traditional Hungarian products. The reason for this focus is related to Hungary's economic objectives. In order for traditional Hungarian products to preserve their competitveness on the overstocked EU market, the government aimed to protect the local market and domestic products. For the sake of clarity, when presenting our results we will use the terms 'traditional product' and 'traditional Hungarian product'.

Material and Methods

The consumer survey's samplings were based on an arbitrary selection, which were not representative. Therefore the data are diagnostic, and limit the scope of interpretation.

During the Foodapest exhibition at the Hungarian Community Agricultural Marketing Centre's stand interviewers completed the questionnaires. Using the Microsoft Excel and SPSS 10.0 statistical software package, 425 questionnaires containing valuable data were processed

On Table 1 is the distribution of the sampled persons (N = 425).

Table 1

The distribution of the sampled persons

Sex	
male	30.6%
female	63.1%
Age	
18-24 years	23%
25-34 years	21%
35-44 years	15%
45-59 years	27%
60-74 years	7%
more than 74 years	1%
Place of living	
Budapest	29%
other big city	34%
smaller town	15%
village	16%
Education	
higher education	47%
high-school graduation	39%
skilled worker	6%
pimary school	3%

Source: own research

Using factor analysis, we analysed the relationship based on the correlation between the variables, meaning we strived to uncover those groups of variables relating to each other. We determined the number of factors defining the own values. As the own value expresses the variance of a certain factor itself, only those factors were included in the model whose own value was bigger than one (Malhotra, 2001).

To interpret those factors, we had to apply the transformation method of orthogonal rotation, and within that we applied varimax procedure. For the factor analysis we used SPSS 10.0 statistical software.

Table 3 and Table 4 show the results of the rotated factor matrix.

In the Appendix there is information about the significance of the T-test values which includes two samples, and there is also information regarding the variance analysis. We set up independent hypotheses which don't exclude each other.

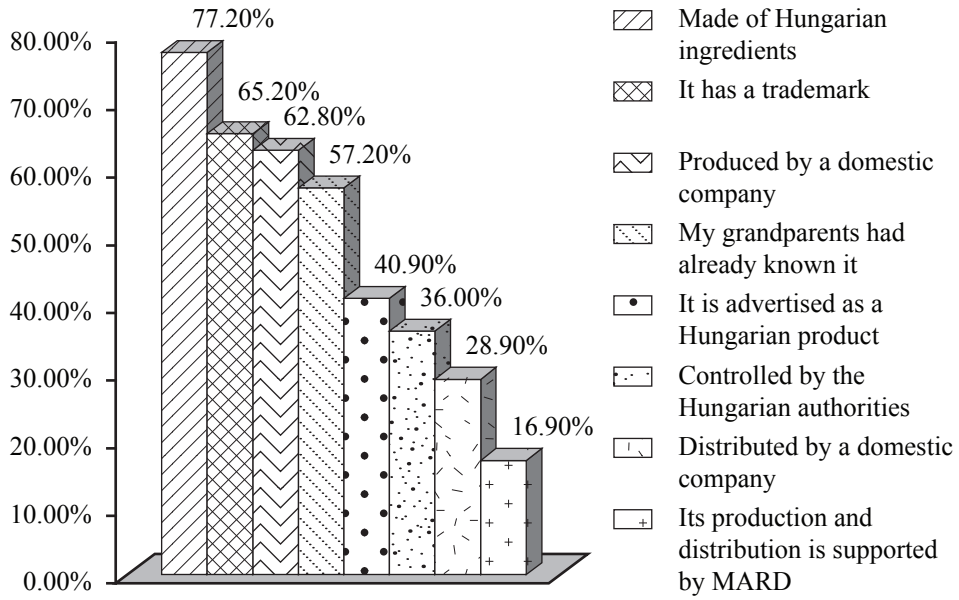
Results

Hypothesis 1: Consumers are able to define the concept of a traditional Hungarian product and able to place it in time and space.

In the first part of our questionaire we wished to know what a traditional Hungarian product means to consumers? Figure 1 shows the result.

Figure 1

Defining the traditional Hungarian product (reference%)



Source: own research

It can be seen in Figure 1 that consumers are able to place the concept of traditional Hungarian product both in terms of time and space (heritage and location). Based on this, dimensions of space and time can be clearly separated. ("Made of Hungarian ingredients = space", "My grandparents had already known it = time"). As a third dimension, culture is closely connected to a given region and to the time dimension because, rather than simply capitalizing on existing opportunities, production also requires tradition and know-how.

It proved important to highlight the importance of registered trademark, which comes second on the list of factors determining a traditional product's parameters. The system of certification protecting food origin and traditional specific characteristics has been created to further the quality of European agricultural products and food. It also serves to increase their competitiveness and and to provide more specific information to customers.

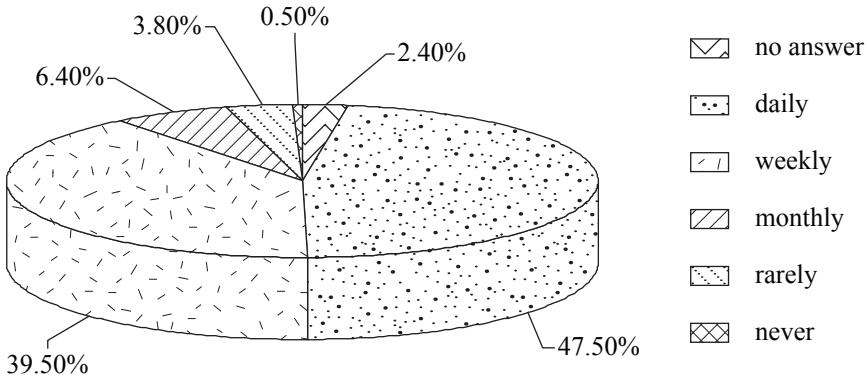
Both the previously mentioned EU regulations determine and introduce three different kinds of trademarks. These are protected designation of origin (PDO), protected geographical indications (PGI), traditional specific product (TSP). These help consumers find better quality and outstanding product features (FVM – AMC, 2004).

Hypothesis 2: Hungarian consumers seek out traditional Hungarian products and often buy them. Rural people consume more traditional products than city dwellers.

According to consumers, traditional Hungarian products are of superior quality and are more expensive than foreign products.

Figure 2

Frequency of consuming traditional Hungarian products



Source: own research

On a daily or weekly basis, Hungarian consumers buy those products identified as traditional Hungarian. According to Tolvéth (2005) there is a relationship between purchasing frequency and purchase location.

Once a week to save time they shop in a supermarket or hypermarket, and this becomes a new habit. However, what matters is the variety of traditional Hungarian products which can be found on the shop shelves. Probably these products are more limited in supply, and are more available in smaller shops and in a market-halls. A further objective is to estimate traditional Hungarian products' supply in hypermarkets and supermarkets.

It can be generally stated that the consumption of Hungarian products is not related to a consumer's age. However, extreme values were found among 18-24 and 25-34 year olds as among them there was a trend toward less frequent consumption of Hungarian products. Our hypothesis was not supported by the statistical results: country people do not consume more often traditional Hungarian products. The daily consumption of these products is higher among those living in bigger towns and cities.

According to 38.1% of people the quality of Hungarian products matches the quality of the foreign products. 6.4% of them said that it was worse and 41.9% answered that it was better.

The answer to the question on the quality of Hungarian products versus the quality of foreign products is independent of one's sex, age and place of residence. However, people with a higher education prefer traditional Hungarian products compared to people with only primary school education.

We have a ''symmetrical'' answer for the question related to the price of Hungarian food: 23% of respondents thought the prices were generally the same. 35-35% of them answered that the price was lower or higher and 2-2% thought it much lower or much higher. One can thus draw the same conclusions as those based on Tolvéth's (2005) research where the following answers were given for the same question: 60% of respondents felt Hungarian products to be of better quality and 54.1% felt Hungarian products were more expensive than the imported products.

Hungarian customers are therefore seeking traditional products, and consider them to be of higher quality. However, consumers' price sensitivity may explain why they choose foreign products over Hungarian ones, and one can only hope this tendency doesn't strengthen and, for the same product, the gap in prices between Hungarian and foreign goods narrow. In order that people permanently consume these products a reliable supply is required.

By using SWOT analysis, Lakner-Szabó (2004) examined the potential of those traditional Hungarian product's included in the HÍR collection (Traditions – Tastes – Regions program). Due to traditional goods' unique character, the two researchers thought that selling them might prove profitable and that, due to consumer interest, marketing them could be pursued. However, other than their unique nature, they were not sure of the products long-term competitiveness.

As regards sex and age, there is no difference in price sensitivity. More highly educated people consider traditional Hungarian products to be more expensive while most Budapest residents think Hungarian products are cheaper than imported goods.

Hypothesis 3: When examining a consumer's decision making process, origin and traditional features are more important when buying traditional Hungarian products than for other products. Consumers appreciate the value added by the traditional features and they are willing to pay more for these products.

Pursuing this hypothesis we asked the consumers to evaluate separately the importance of 12 parameters when buying food in general and when buying traditional Hungarian products. The 12 parameters were: habit, taste, price, packaging, smell, brand, Hungarian origin, place of origin (region), traditional features, advertising, availability and trademark on the package. The importance of the various factors were evaluated on a 5 degree scale with the following extreme values: 1 = absolutely not important, 5 = very important. The statistical results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Statistical parameters of product characteristics valued by scores of responders, in case of buying foodstuffs versus traditional Hungarian products

Statistical parameters of scores in case of buying foodstuffs (N = 425)				Statistical parameters of scores in case of buying traditional products (N = 425)			
Caracteristics	**mean**	**mode**	**standard deviation**	**Caracteristics**	**mean**	**mode**	**standard deviation**
Habit	3.05	4	1.71	**Habit**	2.94	5	1.90
Taste	3.95	5	1.69	**Taste**	3.68	5	1.91
Smell	3.51	5	1.71	**Smell**	3.38	5	1.86
Price	3.36	4	1.61	**Price**	2.99	3	1.71
Packaging	2.80	3	1.48	**Packaging**	2.54	3	1.60
Origin	3.33	5	1.70	**Origin**	3.31	5	1.90
Place of origin	3.02	4	1.67	**Place of origin**	3.13	5	1.86
Traditional features	3.00	4	1.63	**Traditional features**	3.26	5	1.85
Brand	2.88	3	1.59	**Brand**	2.91	5	1.79
Advertisement	2.02	1	1.34	**Advertisement**	1.90	3	1.39
Availability	3.08	4	1.64	**Availability**	2.68	4	1.73
Trademark	2.96	3	1.64	**Trademark**	2.89	5	1.83

Source: own research

To explore the variables and the demographical relationships we applied t-tests with 2 samples and we found the following results: when buying food the consumer's age is important for the following parameters: habit, taste, smell, packaging, origin, place of origin, traditional features, brand, availability and trademark on the package. It has no relationship with price and advertising.

When buying traditional food the consumer's age is significant for the following parameters: taste, smell, price, packaging, origin, place of origin, traditional feature, brand, availability and trademark on the package. It has no relationship with habits and advertising.

After examining the previous hypothesis results indicated the same both in the case of buying food and in the case of buying traditional food:

- Habits have a smaller influence in the 18-24 age group and in the 60-74 age group, but have a stronger influence in the 25-59 group.
- Taste and smell have a significant influence in every age group, except in the 60-74 group.
- For those above 60 price is also highly important.
- Regarding origin, place of origin,and traditional features there is no significant deviation between the different age groups.
- Young people are strongly influenced by advertising, while availability and the package trademark are more important to the older respondents.
- From variance analysis we conclude that there is at least one subgroup whose average significantly differs from the mean of other groups: this is the group of

people above 74 (remark: for 1-2 parameters this can also be found for the 18-24 and 60-74 age groups).

Lehota (2006) states that consumers do not have all information when making a purchase decision. Cognition of a product's characteristics also depends on the type information available. Based on that the product characteristics can be defined as follows:

- 'characteristics based on the information seeking process'
- 'characteristics based on empirical advantage'
- 'characteristics based on inherent trustworthy product components'

On focusing on the origin and traditional features, our research results were the same factors as above. Table 3 and Table 4 show the results of the rotated factormatrix.

Table 3

Factor weights of caracteristics from the rotated factor matrix of buying foodstuffs

Caracteristics	1st factor	2nd factor	3rd factor
PLACE OF ORIGIN	**0.829**	0.269	0.278
ORIGIN	**0.829**	0.273	0.321
TRADITIONAL FEATURES	**0.688**	0.381	0.265
TRADEMARK ON THE PACKAGE	**0.540**	0.428	0.358
ADVERTISEMENT	0.244	**0.663**	0.200
AVAILABILITY	0.320	**0.663**	0.355
PACKAGING	0.393	**0.601**	0.363
BRAND	0.435	**0.560**	0.307
TASTE	0.421	0.374	**0.773**
SMELL	0.408	0.295	**0.773**
PRICE	0.288	0.536	**0.563**
HABIT	0.192	0.471	**0.480**

KMO = 0.938 Bartlett Approx. Chi-Square = 3929.448 Sig = 0.000
Rotation Suns of Squared Loadings (%) = 68.466 Maximum likelihood, varimax
Source: own research

Table 4

Factor weights of caracteristics from the rotated factor matrix of buying traditional products

	1st Factor	2nd Factor	3rd Factor
Packaging	**0.716**	0.370	0.290
Availability	**0.700**	0.342	0.316
Price	**0.681**	0.282	0.487
Advertisement	**0.669**	0.308	0.213
Brand	**0.554**	0.512	0.356
Habit	**0.480**	0.319	0.425
Pace of origin	0.386	**0.777**	0.349
Traditional features	0.402	**0.661**	0.475
Origin	0.457	**0.657**	0.417
Trademark on the package	0.520	**0.541**	0.347
Taste	0.385	0.435	**0.814**
Smell	0.383	0.477	**0.659**

KMO = 0.946 Bartlett Approx. Chi-Square = 5136.958 Sig = 0.000
Rotation Suns of Squared Loadings (%) = 75.165 Maximum likelihood, varimax
Source: own research

There is an obvious relationship among the 'inherent trustworthy product components': place of origin, origin and traditional features. The trademark on the packaging is connected to these parameters. The importance attributed to a trademark indicates that consumers want to be sure that the place of origin is truly traditional and the best way to achieve this is a trademark or logo showing geographical origin. This is one way to reduce the risk to which consumers are exposed (Lehota, 2006).

The second factor covers those advantages related to 'information seeking'. The following features are part of this category: availability, packaging, brand and advertising.

The third group contains the 'empirical advantages'. Besides taste and smell, price also belongs here and this may reflect Hungarian consumers' strong price sensitivity.

Price and shopping habits reveal a relationship with the 'information seeking' process advantages. When buying traditional products, price and product familiarity are important. This might indicate that it is quite difficult to market one regional product in another region, especially if the products are significantly different.

Hypothesis 4: By forming consumer groups we can create one or more target groups which might prove important toward buying traditional Hungarian products and, following purchasing process parameters, certain marketing tools can be allocated to them.

In addition to the factor analysis we also applied cluster analysis. Rather than using only factor analysis, in order to decrease the number of consumers by sorting them into fewer clusters, we also applied cluster analysis.

Our aim was to organize the observed units into relatively homogenous groups based on the selected variables. We searched for those clusters whose elements are similar to each other, but they differ from other culsters' elements. We applied Euclidean distance to define similarity or difference and the method was non-hierarchical K-mean cluster analysis. Table 5 shows the results of this cluster analysis.

Table 5

Results of the cluster analysis

Order and name of cluster	1st Cluster	2nd Cluster	3rd Cluster
	Exacting and conscious consumers	**Rambling consumers influenced by advertisements**	**Consumers prefering traditions and high quality**
No. of persons (N)	139 capita	79 capita	131 capita
Caracteristics of clusters	Products arealways overvalued	Products are over and undervalued with a changing frequency	Products are usually undervalued
	The parameters related to the place of origin are also overvalued	The parameters related to the place of origin' is undervalued!	The parameters related to the place of origin is extremly overvalued!
	The number of females within this group is outstanding (77%)	The ratio of the males and females is the same asin the sample (40-60%)	The ratio of the males and females is the same asin the sample (40-60%)
	Mailnly elderly, married pairs belong to this group	Mainly young married pairs, families with young children belong to this group	Mainly elderly people or the average distribution
	They think a bigger percantage of the Hungarian products have a better quality than the foreign products have	They think a bigger percantage of the Hungarian products have a lower quality than the foreign products have	They think a bigger percantage of the Hungarian products have a better quality than the foreign products have
	They think the prices of the Hungarian products are lower than that of the foreign products	Most of them think the prices of the Hungarian products equal to the prices of the foreign products	They think the prices of the Hungarian products are higher than that of the foreign products
	They consume Hungarian products every day	They consume Hungarian products every week	They consume Hungarian products every week

Remark: The certain clusters were described on the basis of the significant deviations of the clusters full mean sample.
Source: own research

When marketing traditional Hungarian goods consumers belonging to the first cluster can be a highlighted target group, as they appreciate the place of origin and they are ready to pay more for this additional value. The marketing tools proposed are: sales promotion and reduced prices at the purchase location. The third cluster is inconsistent as the consumers value the traditional features and origin, but probably this is only due to 'nostalgic feelings' felt by elderly people. Accepting the second cluster as a target group might also prove correct despite the responses, but it is deemed advisable to change certain marketing-mix elements as the members of this group are young people who are more susceptible to advertising and special event promotions.

Conclusions

Our research is a non-representative one, and therefore it provides only diagnostic-type results.

Basically all of our four hypotheses proved correct.

H1: Consumers are able to define a traditional Hungarian product, and they can place it in time and space and also connect it to a third dimension, meaning culture.
H2: Consumers are seeking and buying traditional Hungarian products, which they consider of superior quality, but the highlighted target group thinks those products are cheaper. Rural area residents do not consume traditional Hungarian products more frequently, and daily consumption of these products is higher among urban residents.
H3: Consumers appreciate the value added by the traditional features.
H4: We managed to create separate target groups and to determine their characteristics.

To sum up one can state that consumers are sensitive to traditional Hungarian products' additional value and, on the overstocked EU market, these products can thus obtain a competitive advantage. Obtaining collective trademarks might help in cementing these advantages, but priority should be placed on providing producers and potential producers information. Then products and trademarks can be widely marketed by establishing the proper marketing-mix. As traditional products form a part of our cultural and agricultural heritage, collective marketing tools should be applied while focusing on the target groups.

The results also indicate that in the saturated EU market, competitive advantage can be achieved only through our domestic products' special features (the value added). Therefore highlighting the traditional nature of our innovative products is an optimum way to capitalize on our research results.

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Appendix I.

Significance of relations between product caracteristics and ages of responders

Scaled question	Value of significance*
In case of buying foodstuff	
Habit	0.004
Taste	0.000
Smell	0.000
Packaging	0.002
Origin	0.001
Place of origin	0.000
Traditional features	0.000
Brand	0.003
Availability	0.002
Trademark on the package	0.000
In case of buying traditional products	
Taste	0.000
Smell	0.002
Price	0.001
Packaging	0.001
Origin	0.000
Place of origin	0.000
Traditional features	0.001
Brand	0.003
Availability	0.002
Trademark on the package	0.000

*Note: Values < 0.005 are significant.
Source: own research