

Analysis of Consumers' Attitudes and Preferences Toward Fermented Dairy Products

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Abstract

Global trends in food fortification, particularly in milk, and the increasing availability of fermented milk products have raised awareness of the link between nutrition and health, leading to higher consumption of these products. Consumers' decisions to purchase fermented milk products are influenced by economic, psychological, cultural, and socio-demographic factors, along with preferences related to brand, price, taste, and nutritional value. This study aims to examine the impact of socio-demographic characteristics on production and marketing factors when purchasing fermented milk products, as well as on the choice of specific brands. The research was conducted using a survey method, with a questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. A total of 326 consumers participated in the survey. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, analysis of variance, and the chi-square test. The results indicate that socio-demographic characteristics significantly influence production and marketing considerations, as well as brand choice when it comes to fermented milk products. However, the chi-square test showed no statistically significant relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and consumer attitudes toward fermented milk products. These findings can help producers and marketers better understand consumer behavior and tailor their strategies accordingly.

Keywords: *functional foods, dairy consumption, health-conscious consumers, food quality perception, probiotic products*

First Section

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a notable shift in public attitudes toward health and healthy living, with a growing emphasis on the role of nutrition in maintaining overall well-being. This awareness has been recognized at national levels, leading to numerous public health campaigns aimed at promoting healthier dietary habits (Mitić & Gligorićević, 2012). In developed countries, health and nutrition have become prominent political and economic issues, while in underdeveloped regions, food security remains a critical concern (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP & WHO 2017).

Healthy food is typically associated with products that align with nutritional guidelines and contribute to disease prevention. Among these, milk and dairy products hold a special place due to their balanced nutritional profile, including essential macronutrients and micronutrients (Ćurin & Cetinić, 2007). The growth of food technology has expanded the variety and availability of health-oriented products, particularly fermented dairy products, which today represent one of the most popular groups of functional foods (Kralik & Grčević, 2015). Their value can be further enhanced by the addition of ingredients such as inulin, whey protein, stabilizers, and vitamins (Stijepić et al., 2013).

Consumer attitudes have always played a central role in marketing theory and practice. There is no successful product without positive consumer perception, and attitudes are closely tied to behavior (Nakić, 2014). Understanding the cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors that influence purchasing decisions is essential for adapting to consumer needs and building competitive advantage (Knežević & Bilić, 2015).

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Delivering value—through quality, price, convenience, and service—ultimately leads to customer loyalty and business success (Krkušić, 2012).

The dairy industry represents a significant segment of the food sector, and the increasing demand for fermented dairy products reflects growing consumer awareness of health and nutrition. However, purchasing decisions are influenced by numerous factors beyond product characteristics, including demographic, social, and marketing elements. This study aims to analyze consumer attitudes and preferences toward fermented dairy products during both consumption and purchase.

Material and methods

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the collection and analysis of secondary data related to consumer preferences toward fermented dairy products. The secondary data were collected from reputable scientific databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar.

The second, experimental phase of the study was based on primary data collection through a structured online questionnaire created with Google Forms. The survey was conducted over the period from May 23 to June 5, 2022, and distributed via online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and email. A total of 326 respondents participated in the survey. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections: General demographic data (age, education, employment status, income), Consumer behavior when purchasing fermented dairy products, Factors influencing preferences during purchase decisions, Consumer attitudes toward fermented dairy products.

Most of the questions were Likert scale statements (from 1 to 5), and multiple-choice questions. Respondents rated the importance of various purchase-influencing factors using a five-point Likert scale, where: 1 = not important at all, 2 = not important, 3 = neither important nor unimportant, 4 = important, 5 = very important.

The sample included individuals of various ages, educational backgrounds, employment statuses, and monthly income levels, selected using a random sampling method. Data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software. Statistical methods applied included: Descriptive statistics, Frequency distribution analysis, Analysis of variance (ANOVA), and Chi-square tests.

The non-parametric Chi-square test was used to examine the relationship between socio-demographic variables and product-related as well as marketing-related factors influencing purchasing decisions. All collected data were systematized according to the structure of the survey and presented through tables and graphical representations.

Results and discussion

Before discussing the findings, it is essential to consider the demographic characteristics of the participants, as these factors play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors in response to food and beverage marketing on social media (Acar, Çizmecı, & Turan, 2021). Demographic characteristics can influence how consumers interpret and engage with social media marketing features, affecting their attitudes and purchase decisions (Hanaysha, 2022). Moreover, differences in age, gender, and other demographic variables significantly impact how consumers experience and respond to inbound marketing strategies on social media platforms (Vasquez-Reyes, Bravo-Martínez, Coral-Morante, & Cordova-Buiza, 2023). Table 1 provides an overview of the main socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

A total of 326 respondents participated in the study. In terms of gender distribution, 88% were female, while 12% were male.

Respondents represented a variety of age groups. The youngest group, under 20 years old, made up 2% of the sample. The largest age group was 21 to 30 years, accounting for 41%, followed by 31 to 40 years with 32%. The 41 to 60 years age group included 23% of respondents, and those over 60 years of age accounted for 2%. In summary, the majority of respondents were between 21 and 40 years of age.

In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents (46.5%) held a bachelor's degree. This was followed by 29% with secondary school education, and 21% with a college or associate degree. Respondents with a master's degree made up 2% of the sample, while 1% had no formal qualifications, and 0.5% had a doctoral degree.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Socio-demographic characteristics	Total	%
Sex		
Male	39	12
Female	287	88
Age		
<20	7	2
21-30	134	41
31-40	104	32
41-60	75	23
>60	6	2
Education level		
No formal qualification	3	1
Secondary school diploma	95	29
Associate degree	68	21
Bachelors degree	152	46,5
Masters degree	7	2
Doctoral degree	1	0,5
Employment status		
Student	52	16
Employed	183	56
Unemployed	85	26
Retired	6	2
Monthly income (EUR)		
<255	20	6
256-510	72	22
511- 1.022	124	38
>1.022	111	34

Regarding employment status, 56% of the respondents were employed, while 26% were unemployed. Students accounted for 16% of the sample, and 2% were retired.

When it comes to monthly household income, 6% of respondents reported income of up to 500 BAM, 22% earned between 501 and 1,000 BAM, and 38% had income between 1,001 and 2,000 BAM. Respondents with income above 2,000 BAM accounted for 34%.

Using the Chi-square test, the influence of respondents' socio-demographic characteristics on the choice of a specific brand of fermented dairy products was examined.

As shown in Table 2, a statistically significant difference was found between genders in relation to the choice of a brand offering a wide product range (Sig = 0.032) and in relation to loyalty to a single brand (Sig = 0.016). These findings align with research by Melnyk et al. (2009), who observed that women tend to exhibit stronger brand loyalty compared to men, particularly when the brand offers a diverse product range. This suggests that gender differences play a significant role in brand perception and loyalty within the dairy product market.

Additionally, a statistically significant difference was observed in terms of education level and the selection of a brand based on product quality (Sig = 0.020). This supports the findings of Baruk and Iwanicka (2016), who reported that consumers with higher education levels have

more specific expectations regarding product quality and packaging, which influence their purchasing decisions. Furthermore, their study indicates that educated consumers are more likely to prioritize product quality over other attributes when selecting dairy products.

These results underscore the importance of considering socio-demographic factors such as gender and education level in understanding consumer preferences and behaviors in the dairy product market. Tailoring marketing strategies to these characteristics can enhance brand appeal and consumer loyalty.

Table 2: Influence of Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents on the Choice of a Specific Brand of Fermented Dairy Products

	Sex	Age	Education	Working ststus	Income
They are cheaper	0,665	0,682	0,461	0,542	0,287
They are more accessible	0,402	0,895	0,409	0,757	0,907
They are of higher quality	0,805	0,534	0,020	0,328	0,812
They are more well-known	0,619	0,590	0,989	0,282	0,733
They taste better	0,786	0,461	0,247	0,345	0,658
They offer a wide range of products	0,032	0,961	0,698	0,172	0,479
I am loyal to one brand only	0,016	0,574	0,334	0,583	0,654

The bolded value indicates a statistically significant difference in the distribution of responses at $p < 0.05$.

A wide range of factors influence consumers' decisions when purchasing food products. It is therefore important to identify which key factors most strongly impact purchase decisions and which have relatively little influence (Table 3).

Table 3: Importance of Production and Marketing Factors in the Purchase of Fermented Dairy Products

	N	Descriptive Statistics			
		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Brand	326	1.00	5.00	2.9785	1.23643
Taste	326	1.00	5.00	4.4387	0.85624
Price	326	1.00	5.00	3.6074	1.03737
Country of origin	326	1.00	5.00	3.8466	1.17451
Attractiveness	326	1.00	5.00	2.7301	1.11251
Promotion	326	1.00	5.00	2.4816	1.08044
Availability	326	1.00	5.00	3.9448	1.08274
Quality	326	1.00	5.00	4.4908	0.82550
Tradition	326	1.00	5.00	3.5000	1.18905
Discount	326	1.00	5.00	3.4325	1.19488
Habit	326	1.00	5.00	3.5951	1.14294
Health safety	326	1.00	5.00	4.4080	0.91943

N – number of observations in the sample; Mean – population mean; Std. Deviation – standard deviation of the sample; Min – minimum value; Max – maximum value

When selecting fermented dairy products, respondents rated product quality as the most important factor (mean = 4.49), followed by taste (mean = 4.43), health safety (mean = 4.40), and product availability (mean = 3.94). The least important factor for respondents was product promotion (mean = 2.48) (Table 3).

These findings are consistent with Liović (2013), who found that consumers prioritize quality and taste, followed by origin, price, brand, and packaging, while promotion was considered the least significant factor. Similarly, Grunert et al. (2004) emphasized that intrinsic product attributes like quality and flavor are key drivers in consumer food choices, especially in dairy products. Verbeke (2005) also highlighted the importance of health and safety concerns in consumer preferences for fermented dairy products.

Furthermore, Meiselman (2008) noted that while sensory characteristics such as taste and texture dominate consumers' decisions, extrinsic factors like promotion and advertising tend to have a lesser impact on purchasing behavior. These insights align with Annunziata and Vecchio (2013), who observed that consumers rank product quality and freshness higher than promotional activities when choosing dairy products.

The Chi-square test was used to determine the influence of socio-demographic characteristics on production and marketing factors in the purchase of fermented dairy products (Table 4).

A statistically significant influence of gender was found regarding the product safety factor (Sig = 0.045). This aligns with the findings of Verbeke and Ward (2006), who observed that women generally exhibit higher concerns about food safety than men, influencing their food choices accordingly.

Respondents differed in their choice of fermented dairy products based on age concerning taste (Sig = 0.009), price (Sig = 0.015), quality (Sig = 0.018), tradition (Sig = 0.030), and product safety (Sig = 0.043). These results are supported by Shepherd et al. (2011), who noted that older consumers tend to place greater value on traditional food attributes and product safety, while younger consumers prioritize taste and price.

Table 4. Results of Testing the Influence of Respondents' Socio-Demographic Characteristics on Production and Marketing Factors in the Purchase of Fermented Dairy Products

	Sex	Age	Education	Working status	Income
Brand	0,757	0,606	0,052	0,109	0,677
Taste	0,146	0,009	0,008	0,002	0,078
Price	0,155	0,015	0,018	0,032	0,092
Country of origin	0,783	0,203	0,680	0,381	0,133
Attractiveness	0,248	0,668	0,483	0,925	0,295
Promotion	0,167	0,833	0,180	0,057	0,620
Availability	0,102	0,240	0,101	0,092	0,870
Quality	0,380	0,018	0,010	0,013	0,047
Tradition	0,758	0,030	0,606	0,245	0,369
Discount	0,865	0,645	0,539	0,034	0,439
Habit	0,232	0,246	0,116	0,719	0,218
Health safety	0,045	0,043	0,023	0,025	0,025

The bolded value indicates the presence of a statistically significant difference in the distribution of responses at $p < 0.05$.

Education also had a significant impact on product choice in relation to taste (Sig = 0.008), price (Sig = 0.018), quality (Sig = 0.010), and product safety (Sig = 0.023). Similar conclusions were drawn by Nguyen et al. (2015), who reported that higher educational attainment correlates with increased awareness and demand for quality and safety in food products.

The employment status of respondents influenced their product selection concerning taste (Sig = 0.002), price (Sig = 0.032), quality (Sig = 0.013), and product safety (Sig = 0.025). This is consistent with the research by Roininen et al. (2001), who found that employment and lifestyle factors significantly shape consumer food preferences and priorities.

Finally, income level had an impact on the choice of fermented dairy products regarding quality (Sig = 0.047) and product safety (Sig = 0.025) (Table 4). This finding concurs with the study by Drewnowski and Darmon (2005), demonstrating that higher income consumers are more likely to prioritize food quality and safety over price.

As evidence of the connection between diet and health continues to grow, consumers are becoming increasingly conscious of the importance of healthy eating.

Respondents most strongly agreed with the statement that they consume fermented dairy products because healthy eating is important to them (mean = 4.21). This is closely related to the belief that these products contain beneficial bacteria for the body (mean = 4.00) and that they are a rich source of vitamins and minerals (mean = 3.93) (Table 5).

Tabela 5. Respondents' Attitudes toward Fermented Dairy Products

	N	Descriptive Statistics			
		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Healthy eating is important to me	326	1.00	5.00	4.2147	0.91646
Healthier than regular dairy products	326	1.00	5.00	3.7577	1.07253
Tastier than regular dairy products	326	1.00	5.00	3.9233	0.98462
Easier to digest compared to fresh milk	326	1.00	5.00	3.7822	1.02513
Contain beneficial bacteria for our body	326	1.00	5.00	4.0000	0.98917
Rich source of vitamins and minerals	326	1.00	5.00	3.9325	1.02058

N – number of individuals in the sample; Mean – population mean; Std. Deviation – sample standard deviation; Min – minimum value; Max – maximum value.

These results align with the findings of Cerjak et al. (2007) regarding “light” products and respondents’ attitudes toward their own health and nutrition. Fermented dairy products also fall into the category of “light” products. Consumers who reported regularly consuming “light” products pay more attention to healthy eating, particularly to calorie intake from food, compared to other respondents.

Similarly, Steptoe et al. (1995) highlighted that health-conscious consumers tend to prefer foods perceived as beneficial for well-being, such as fermented dairy products rich in probiotics. Craig et al. (2017) also emphasized the role of fermented dairy in contributing essential nutrients and supporting gut health, which influences positive consumer attitudes.

Furthermore, Roberfroid (2007) underscored the health benefits of probiotics in fermented foods, reinforcing consumers’ motivations for choosing such products as part of a healthy diet.

However, the Chi-square test did not reveal any statistically significant influence of respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics on attitudes toward fermented dairy products, which is consistent with findings by Lea and Worsley (2005), who reported that health motivations often transcend basic demographic categories.

Conclusion

This scientific paper demonstrates that socio-demographic characteristics of consumers play a contextual role in shaping both production and marketing dynamics related to the consumption and purchase of fermented dairy products. While these variables did not exhibit a statistically significant influence on consumer attitudes, they nonetheless offer meaningful insights into patterns of consumer behavior.

The findings indicate that product quality emerges as the most influential factor in purchasing decisions, followed by taste, safety, and availability. In the selection of a specific brand, taste is the dominant criterion, with quality and the breadth of the product assortment also playing notable roles.

Despite the absence of statistically significant associations between socio-demographic variables and attitudes toward fermented dairy products, the majority of respondents expressed a strong alignment with health-related motivations, particularly the importance of healthy eating and the perceived health benefits of fermented dairy products.

These insights have practical implications for stakeholders in the fermented dairy sector. Strategies aimed at enhancing product quality, optimizing sensory attributes, ensuring safety, and expanding product variety—while effectively communicating the associated health benefits—are critical for fostering consumer engagement and brand loyalty. As health consciousness continues to shape consumer markets, understanding these nuanced drivers of behavior remains essential for evidence-based decision-making in both production and marketing contexts.

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Supplement Material

Questionary:

1. General Information

Gender *

- Female
- Male

Age Group *

- Up to 20
- 21 to 30
- 31 to 40
- 41 to 60
- Over 60

Education Level *

- Unskilled (NKV)
- Secondary School (SSS)
- University Degree – Bachelor's (VSS)
- College Degree – Associate or Higher Education Diploma (VŠŠ)
- Other: _____

Employment Status *

- Student
- Employed
- Unemployed
- Retired

Monthly Household Income (in EUR) *

- Up to 255
- 256 to 510
- 511 to 1.022
- Over 1.022

Number of Household Members *

- One
- Two
- Three
- Four
- Five
- More than five

1. Consumer behavior**Why do you most often prefer fermented dairy products from certain producer? ***

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

1 - Strongly disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 - Neither agree nor disagree, 4 - Agree, 5 - Strongly agree

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
They are cheaper	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They are more available	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They are of higher quality	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They are better known	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They have better taste	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They offer a wide range of products	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am loyal exclusively to one brand	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Factors Affecting Preferences When Purchasing Fermented Dairy Products *

Please indicate the importance of the following criteria when choosing fermented dairy products:

1 - Extremely unimportant, 2 - Unimportant, 3 - Neither important nor unimportant, 4 - Important, 5 - Extremely important

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
Brand	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Taste	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Price	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Country of Origin	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Attractive Packaging	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Impact of Promotional Activities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability at Point of Sale	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Quality	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Producer's Tradition	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sales Promotions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Habit	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Product Safety and Health Standards	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Consumers' Attitudes Towards Fermented Dairy Products *

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about fermented dairy products?

1 - Strongly disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 - Neither agree nor disagree, 4 - Agree, 5 - Strongly agree

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Healthy nutrition is important to me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They are healthier than regular dairy products	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They taste better than regular dairy products	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Easier to digest compared to fresh milk	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They contain beneficial bacteria for our body	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
They are rich sources of vitamins and minerals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐