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Societal changes and their implications on agri-food systems and rural areas

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CONSUMER

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Does the origin matter? Results from a cross-national study with poultry meat consumers

Cathleen Lehmann and Inken Christoph-Schulz¹

Abstract - Purchasing domestic and particularly locally produced food is gaining growing interest among consumers within many EU countries. Focus groups were conducted in Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom to assess the importance that consumers put onto the country of origin (COO) of poultry meat and consumers' reasons for their preferences regarding the COO. Especially French consumers seem to put great importance on the COO of poultry meat, whereas Danish, Dutch and British consumers do not seem to care as much about that aspect. However, consumers from all study countries preferred primarily domestic or even locally sourced products. This was mainly due to the perception that stricter regulations are applied in the home country and consumers having more confidence in the domestic production process, environmental issues, meat freshness and support of the domestic economy.

INTRODUCTION

In the European Union unprocessed and pre-packaged poultry meat must always be labelled with the country of rearing and the country of slaughter of the animal (Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011). But do European consumers actually care about this information? Only 34% of surveyed EU citizens stated that the geographical origin of food is very important and 27% even indicated that it is totally unimportant. Quality and price, however, seem to be far more deciding criteria for food purchases of consumers from the EU (European Commission, 2012). In another more recent survey, the response category "where the food comes from" seemed - among the other categories cost, food safety, taste, nutrient content, personal ethics and beliefs and others - to be the EU citizens' most important food purchasing criteria (EFSA & European Commission, 2019).

This paper deals with the attitudes of consumers from Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom regarding the COO of poultry meat. Besides the importance of the COO, the reasons for consumers' preferences regarding domestic or imported poultry meat will be assessed.

METHOD

Online focus group discussions were conducted in Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in August and September 2021. This method can be used to explore the opinions and attitudes of individual participants and capture the diversity of consumer opinions (Flick, 2009).

In each study country, five online focus group discussions were carried out with six poultry meat consumers in each group. Participants were recruited via a market research institute. The sample

was selected according to specific characteristics in order to create heterogeneous groups of consumers. Focus groups were set for a maximum of 120 minutes and were guided by a qualified moderator (native speaker) who followed a given structured series of questions. For the evaluation, a qualitative content analysis was applied.

RESULTS

Discussants from **Denmark** mainly stated that the COO of poultry meat is not of great importance to them. Many claimed that they do not care or "*never thought about checking where the chicken is from*". In the opinion of some consumers, "*it doesn't make any difference where the poultry meat comes from*", at least if it comes from neighbouring countries. The participants also revealed not knowing if and where the COO is indicated on the product packaging. Some consumers mentioned that they assume that the purchased poultry meat is of Danish origin due to a high domestic production volume. Others declared that "*what matters is the quality*". Despite that, it was mentioned that the COO can be decisive for the purchase of poultry meat primarily due to environmental reasons. Others claimed to have more confidence in domestic meat, inter alia because of the perception of stricter and more trusted regulations and product freshness due to shorter transportation (see table 1). Also, the support of domestic economy and agriculture as well as food safety in general were mentioned motives for purchasing domestic poultry meat. Besides these, price was stated to be important which can lead to buying imported poultry meat.

For most **French** participants, however, the COO of poultry meat is (very) important. Very few consumers stated that they do not pay attention to the origin or that they might buy imported products "*if the price is more within [their] range*". Nevertheless, the vast majority of consumers declared that they prefer domestic, at best locally produced poultry meat. Reasons for that preference were, besides the perception of stricter regulations in France and more confidence in domestic meat products, the quality of French poultry meat. Further motives were "*giving work to local traders and farmers*" as well as to "*support Made in France*", environmental issues (carbon footprint), food safety which is related to domestic regulations, and price.

The majority of **Dutch** discussants, on the other hand, stated that they do not care about the country of origin of poultry meat or "*have never looked at that*". It was claimed that this is due to time reasons, because "*it is always a hassle to look where*

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it comes from". Furthermore, it was mentioned that if the meat is domestic or imported "does not matter much as long as it is good". However, few participants find it "very important where the meat is from". The main reason for preferring domestic poultry meat seemed to be confidence in domestic production as well as regulations and "that you are not being swindled". Other motives were meat freshness, support of the Dutch economy, transportation costs, environmental reasons and food safety.

In the discussions with **British** consumers, many participants also claimed not being interested in the COO of poultry meat. Some have never thought about the origin of meat and "would just have thought chicken was from here". Since "pretty much all of the EU have got the same standards anyway" and since "it's not making a difference [...] as long as it tastes good", consumers tend not to pay attention to the COO. Participants from the United Kingdom often referred to eating out, e.g. in a restaurant, and mentioned that they have never asked about or checked the COO of poultry meat. They assumed it was good quality as well as probably locally sourced meat. However, a considerable number of participants claimed that COO is important to them and that they prefer domestic, specifically locally produced meat. It was also explicitly mentioned that the COO just matters when it comes to fresh and raw meat, but not regarding frozen meat. Reasons for preferring domestic or even local poultry meat were again domestic regulations and confidence in domestic products, environmental motives, freshness, support of domestic economy and agriculture as well as animal welfare aspects.

DISCUSSION

The importance of the COO for consumers seems to differ between the study countries and also between the consumers within the countries. The vast majority of French participants of the focus groups classified the COO for poultry meat as (very) important, which goes in line with the findings of an EU wide study about food in general. According to that study, the importance of the COO of food was among French consumers above the EU average with 75% of consumers claiming it to be totally important and 24% totally not important (European Commission, 2012). The results of this paper suggest that consumers from Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom do not place as much importance on COO as French consumers and often do not even look at it. This can also be confirmed by the EU wide study, in which the importance of the geographical

origin of food was lowest in the Netherlands, followed by the United Kingdom and with Denmark ranked in fourth last place of the 27 countries studied (European Commission, 2012). Nevertheless, if consumers have to choose, they would mostly prefer domestic or even locally produced poultry meat.

Consumers from all study countries primarily prefer domestically produced poultry meat due to perceived stricter regulations in the home country and confidence in domestic production as well as in information given on the product. This goes along with food safety issues. Environmental reasons, product quality as well as freshness and support of the local economy and agriculture also play a major role for the preference of domestic or even local poultry meat. Feldmann & Hamm (2015) reviewed 73 publications on local food from the consumer's perspective and also found better quality, taste and freshness as well as greater trust, support of the local economy, environmental friendliness and animal welfare to be decisive factors for purchasing local food.

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Table 1. Consumers' reasons for preferring domestically/locally produced poultry meat (sorted by frequency of mention)

Denmark	France	Netherlands	United Kingdom
Transportation	Regulations/confidence	Regulations/confidence	Regulations/confidence
Environmental reasons	Meat quality	Meat freshness	Environmental reasons
Regulations/confidence	Support of economy	Support of economy	Meat freshness
Meat freshness	Environmental reasons	Cost of transportation	Support of economy
Support of economy	Food safety	Environmental reasons	Animal welfare
Food safety	Price	Food safety	