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Consumer perception of food value: A comparative study of global supermarkets and local farmers' markets in Slovakia

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Abstract

The paper explores how Slovak consumers perceive the value of food, sold by different retail formats (especially farmers' markets and supermarkets), in terms of the quality, price, and healthiness. The aim of this paper is to evaluate consumer perceptions regarding global and local types of retail stores where they buy food most frequently. In the study, the segmentation of consumers by generation, income, and type of residence is provided. From the methodological point of view, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests are used to test hypotheses. According to the sample of respondents (n = 1,004), large-scale stores do not offer healthier and higher-quality food. This perception, however, varies based on the income of the consumer groups. On the other hand, respondents perceive that food sold at farmers' markets is healthier and of higher quality than food in conventional stores. They do not perceive that food sold at farmers' markets is cheaper than food in conventional stores.

Keywords: *consumer perception, farmers' markets, retail choice, supermarkets, Slovakia*

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1. Introduction

Consumer behaviour changes over time and space. The economic and political conditions of retail development, as well as the current processes of retail globalisation, influence consumer perceptions (Yiridoe et al., 2005; Trembošová et al., 2021; Križan et al., 2022). Almost 35 years have now passed since the start of the economic transformation of Central European countries from centrally controlled to market economies, and this has also been manifested in changes in retail (Garb, 2007; Križan et al., 2016; Biesok & Wyród-Wróbel, 2018; Kunc & Križan, 2018; Sikos, 2019; Kunc et al., 2022; Trembošová et al., 2022). The transformation of retail had certain specifics in various countries, but their general manifestation had the nature of a change in the spatial organisation of retail and especially the emergence and dynamic development of new shopping formats, such as supermarkets, hypermarkets, and shopping centres. There continues to be a trend towards large-scale stores developing.

At the same time, however, consumers are gradually reorienting themselves on value and quality, and more recently the term sustainable consumption, linked with environmental protection, has begun to be discussed more. Its foundation rests on the use of resources in accordance with sustainable development (Geels et al., 2015). The focus on sustainable consumption patterns further extends to tackling food-related challenges, including efforts to reduce food waste and promote universal access to information for fostering sustainable lifestyles (Gasper et al., 2019).

Alternative consumption, associated with sustainable development, leads to the development of new forms of retail sales and alternative food networks (Goodman et al., 2012). Notably, consumers have transitioned from global conventional retail chains to alternative food networks during certain periods (Spilková, 2018). In exploring consumer behaviour, studying the drivers behind purchases, as well as understanding motivations for choosing alternative channels like local businesses, presents valuable research directions (Lemaire & Limbourg, 2019).

This paper highlights a shift in consumer behaviour towards quality and sustainability, with a growing interest in sustainable consumption and alternative food networks. Additionally, it notes a shift in consumer behaviour towards quality and sustainability, with a growing interest in sustainable consumption and alternative food networks. The aim of this paper is to evaluate consumer perceptions regarding global and local types of retail stores where they buy food most frequently. We will consider conventional large-scale stores, such as supermarkets and hypermarkets, as the global type of retail, and farmers' markets,

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as a representative of alternative food networks, as the local type of retail and will work with selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators.

A potential research gap lies in a more profound insight into the factors that shape the embrace of sustainable consumption practices in CEE countries that have undergone economic transformation over more than three decades. This may involve investigating the specific drivers and barriers that impact consumers' choices towards sustainability in the context of food and retail. The research also explores the reasons behind consumer shifts from global conventional retail chains to alternative food networks, examining the implications for both consumers and the retail sector.

An understanding of the factors influencing these shifts could contribute to a more comprehensive analysis of the transformation of the retail environment in post-socialist Central European countries, which are already reaching the level of the developed Europe in many aspects of retailing. It also explores perceptions related to the quality, cost, and healthiness of food offered in both global and local retail settings. Perceptions play a pivotal role in shaping preferences, as the subjective perception of retail significantly influences the intention to make a purchase (Niosi, 2021).

2. Theoretical background

The discussion of the relationship between supermarkets and alternative food networks is relevant from the viewpoint of consumer research (Yuan et al., 2021). A research gap still seems to exist in the academic literature on the opinions of consumers regarding food sold in global and local stores. The entry of multinational retail chains into the market in many CEE countries has changed the localities of purchase. The retail landscape has undergone dynamic shifts over the years, marked by the evolution of various formats (Gauri et al., 2021). Consumers have adapted relatively quickly to the new shopping formats and large-scale stores, and global retail outlets have become the preferred shopping formats (Spilková, 2008, 2012; Kunc et al., 2022).

The advent of each new format puts pressure on the older ones to evolve. In response to competitive pressures, older formats are now adopting features from newer ones while rediscovering their original strengths. In this retail evolution, there has been a further transition from larger stores to smaller, more convenient formats, demonstrating a continual adaptation to consumer preferences (Gauri et al., 2021). Therefore, both smaller and larger stores place emphasis on the provision of organic and local products, and hybrid sales concepts, such as omnichannel strategies, to facilitate convenient and rapid shopping experiences (Lichter & Malý, 2023).

This research demonstrates that there are significant differences between the customers of diverse retail formats. The study of Spilková (2018) shows that, although the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of shoppers are still important features of their segmentation, their shopping place or alternative possibilities to acquire food are also among the most important distinguishing factors characterising shoppers. The relationship between preference for different outlets and consumer segmentation is not clearly explained (Pearson et al., 2011; Nilson et al., 2015; Dabija et al., 2018; Najdený et al., 2022; Salvietti et al., 2023). Based on this, the following hypothesis was formulated:

- H1: There is no statistically significant relationship between the type of store of most frequent purchases and selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators.

According to some authors, food sold in supermarkets and hypermarkets is often perceived as inferior (Ozimek & Żakowska-Biemans, 2011). Other authors consider supermarkets as stores that offer safe foods (Maitiniyazi & Canavari, 2021). On the other hand, the production of local farmers at farmers' markets is a qualifier of food safety, but it is based on blind trust (Wertheim-Heck & Spaargaren, 2016). Moreover, consumers may prefer global retailers over small independent local retailers, who may be suspected of engaging in fraudulent practices (Xia & Zeng, 2006). Supermarkets, however, also provide more information on the origin of their food, hygiene and sanitation, and try to provide the best possible guarantee of food safety (Wang et al., 2009).

Globally, large-scale stores offer convenient one-store shopping, meaning shopping for a wide range of food under 'one roof', Hübner et al. (2016) state that consumers shopping in hypermarkets have higher expectations of services provided or reliable information regarding food and prices, and the results of Lim et al. (2022) pointed out that trust in food has a major impact on the satisfaction of consumers shopping in hypermarkets and shopping centres. The results of a study by Kimenju et al. (2015) indicate that shopping in supermarkets contributes to a higher likelihood of overweight or obesity in adults, with most consumers stating low food prices as the most important reason for shopping. According to these studies, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H2a: There is no statistically significant relationship between the perception that large-scale grocery stores offer healthier food than small-scale stores and the selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators;
- H2b: There is no statistically significant relationship between the statement that large-scale grocery stores offer less expensive food than small-scale stores and the selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators; and
- H2c: There is no statistically significant relationship between the statement that large-scale grocery stores offer higher quality food than small-scale stores and the selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators.

Farmers' markets can be characterised as consumption sites that provide fresh and local food, often through direct interaction between the consumer and the producer (Benedek et al., 2018; Fendrychová & Jehlička, 2018). Increased demand for quality food can be considered an important factor in the development of alternative food networks, which highlights the recognition and supports the importance of small producers in the food system (Guthrie et al., 2006; Goodman et al., 2012). This demand is driven by the overarching challenge of sustainability and the necessity to ensure the production of high-quality, affordable, and healthy foods. In response, alternative food production and distribution schemes have emerged, utilizing technological or organisational innovations to enhance food production without compromising environmental sustainability (Lioutasa & Charatsarib, 2020).

The cost and availability of fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets are entirely dependent on the farmers servicing the market (Abley et al., 2020). The research of Valpiani et al. (2016) suggests that in many cases the fruit in farmers' markets has a similar price as that in supermarkets, and fruits sold through farmyard sales have lower prices than at supermarkets. In contrast, Thomson et al. (2021) found, that farmers' markets (compared to grocery stores) had less variety and higher prices, but locally sourced produce was more prevalent, which means an increasingly positively perceived support of local communities and small farmers, the local economy, but also the reduction of global waste and the use of local resources. According to Reicks et al. (1994), the higher food price is commonly stated as a barrier to increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables. A study by Wunderlich et al. (2008) points out that seasonal foods (sold at farmers' markets) bring more nutritional benefits and nutrients than foods sold in supermarkets. Furthermore, farmers' markets have the potential to be a place that will make food available in low-income areas, so-called food deserts (Larson et al., 2009; McCormack, 2010).

Even from the brief overview given, it is evident there is an ambiguity in the scientific community. In this paper, it is not a question of comparing the physical prices of products; they change significantly due to inflation caused by the European (global) crisis. It is not a question of comparing the nutritional values of foods based on chemical and biological tests. The consumer must buy food regardless of whether it costs x EUR or x + 1 EUR or whether chemical analyses are more or less favourable. There is a research gap in understanding consumers' perceptions of purchased food based on their own experience and de facto reasons for choosing a place to buy it.

Based on the arguments listed above, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H3a: There is no statistically significant relationship between the statement that food sold at farmers' markets is healthier than food in conventional stores and the selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators.
- H3b: There is no statistically significant relationship between the statement that food sold at farmers' markets is less expensive than food in conventional stores and the selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators.
- H3c: There is no statistically significant relationship between the statement that food sold at farmers' markets is of higher quality than food sold in conventional stores and the selected demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators.

3. Data and methods

The research was conducted in November 2020 in the form of a questionnaire survey. The sample consisted of 1,004 respondents who represent the population of the Slovak Republic over the age of 18 in terms of gender, age, education, nationality, size categories of municipalities, and regional division. The spatial distribution of municipalities with respondents participating in the survey is visualised in Figure 1. The responses of consumers were recorded through the FOCUS research agency (Hencelová et al., 2022).

Women dominated the sample of respondents and the average age of the respondents was 47.3 years. The oldest consumer generation of respondents ('Pre-Boomers') represented 2.4% of the total, and nearly one-third of respondents (32.9%) can be included in the 'Baby Boomer' generation. A significant share of respondents belong to Generation X (22.5%) and Y (34.1%), and less than one-tenth (8.2%) of the respondents are from Generation Z. More than half of the respondents have a net monthly income of up to EUR 700, and 44.1% of respondents come from the countryside (Tab. 1). A total of 15.4% of respondents live in municipalities with under 1,000 inhabitants, 45.6% in municipalities with up to 5,000 inhabitants and almost 90% (87.5%) of respondents live in municipalities with up to 100,000 inhabitants. Since this was a representative study, the term respondent is identical in the paper with the term consumer.

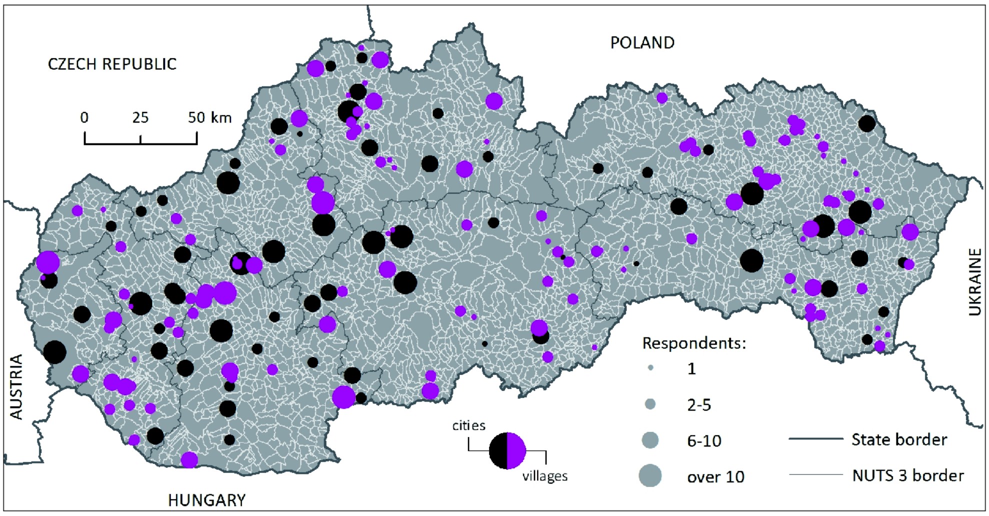

Fig. 1: Spatial distribution of respondents participating on the survey
Source: authors' elaboration

Indicators	Share (%)	Indicators	Share (%)
Gender		*Status*	
Males	48.4	Single	25.4
Females	51.4	Married	62.1
		Divorced	6.1
Education		Widow/widower	6.4
Primary	12.5		
High school without graduation	27.0	*Residence*	
High school with graduation	37.4	Urban	55.9
University	23.1	Rural	44.1
Net monthly income		*Size category of residence*	
Less than 300 €	8.0	Less than 1,000	15.4
301–500 €	21.2	1,000–1,999	14.5
501–700 €	25.4	2,000–4,999	15.7
701–900 €	17.7	5,000–19,999	16.3
More than 900 €	22.7	20,000–49,999	16.3
NA	5.0	50,000–99,999	9.3
		100,000 and more	12.5

Tab. 1. Basic characteristics of the respondents (n = 1,004)
Source: authors'calculations based on data from the FOCUS research agency

The age of the respondents and their inclusion among the various generations of consumers was the demographic indicator analysed. The respondents' declared net monthly personal income was the socioeconomic indicator. The place of the respondents' residence (urban vs. rural) and the size category of the municipality they lived in based on the number of inhabitants was the spatial indicator. The Mann-Whitney U test was used as the test statistic when there were two variables and the Kruskal-Wallis test was for three or more ordinal variables in the SPSS software (Gaur and Gaur, 2006).

4. Results

4.1 In what type of stores do consumers most often buy food?

In many post-socialist Central European countries, global large-scale hypermarkets and supermarkets are the most popular retail outlets (Kunc & Križan, 2018; Spilková, 2012; 2018; Machek, 2012; see Fig. 2). It generally applies that nearly half of consumers in Slovakia (41.6%) shop in supermarkets, and at the same time it needs to be noted that nearly a quarter of consumers shop in hypermarkets. Thus, two-thirds of consumers in Slovakia shop in large-scale stores, which indicates the leaning of Slovak consumers towards the consumer society (Búzik & Zeman, 2020), towards global retail. Smaller self-service stores appear to be the second most common place of shopping for Slovak consumers (25.2%), and only 0.5% of consumers in Slovakia used the Internet (online shopping) as their most frequent place of grocery shopping. Local markets (farmers' markets) show similarly low values. These are answers, however, to the question of the most frequent place of purchase, and it can be assumed that consumers often select alternative food chains, but that they are the place of most frequent purchases only in exceptional cases.

The results of testing hypothesis H1 indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.000$) between the type of store of the most frequent purchases and the generation of consumers. In comparison with the entire sample of respondents, Generation Z shops particularly in hypermarkets over expected values, while Generations X and Y shop especially in supermarkets, and the generation of 'Baby Boomers' and 'Pre-Boomers' in small stores.

The results of testing hypothesis H1 show that there is a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.000$) between the type of store of the most frequent shopping and the net monthly personal income of consumers. Although large-scale retail stores are generally the most popular, low-income groups of consumers buy food or other common consumer goods in small stores in excess (compared with the expected values). These in particular are consumers with a net monthly personal income of up to EUR 500, who, compared with the entire sample of respondents, buy excessively in smaller self-service stores and smaller over-the-counter stores. Consumers with a higher net monthly personal income over EUR 500 shop in excess particularly in supermarkets and less prefer small retail stores for their most common grocery shopping.

In the case of consumer segmentation according to the place of residence, a statistically significant relationship was confirmed ($p = 0.002$) between the type of retail store for the most frequent purchases and respondents from urban or rural areas. While urban consumers in comparison with the whole sample buy predominately in supermarkets over the expected values, the values for rural consumers are, in contrast, genuinely lower than expected. At the same time, the opposite trend was noted with the preferred most frequent shopping in smaller self-service stores. Smaller expected and larger real values are typical for rural consumers, while the opposite trend is true for urban consumers. The size category of residence, determined by its population, is associated with the type of retail they choose for their most frequent purchases ($p < 0.000$). Although preferences for large-scale stores for the most frequent purchases prevail in all the size categories of municipalities, in municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, small stores do retain an important position. The most frequent shopping in hypermarkets or supermarkets in the case of consumers from such municipalities does not reach the expected value when compared with the entire sample of respondents; it represents a lower portion of shoppers.

4.2 Consumers' perceptions of food offered by global large-scale supermarkets and hypermarkets

In general, nearly two-thirds of consumers in Slovakia (62.7%) definitely or rather disagree with the statement that large-scale supermarkets and hypermarkets offer healthier foods (Fig. 3). Further, 8 out of 10 consumers in Slovakia view supermarkets and hypermarkets as stores that offer less expensive food (rather or definitely agree with this statement). According to the majority of Slovak consumers (73.7% of consumers), however, these stores do not offer higher quality food; in the case of consumers from the younger generations (X, Y, and Z) this fact is, after all, perceived more positively. The analysis indicates that there is a statistically significant relationship between the perception of large-scale grocery stores that offer healthier, less expensive, and higher-quality food with respect to the generation of consumers (Tab. 2).

A statistically significant relationship was also shown in the case of net monthly personal income of consumers and perception of healthier ($p = 0.002$) and higher quality food ($p = 0.002$). Regarding the perception that large-scale grocery stores offer less expensive food, no statistically significant relationship was shown ($p = 0.425$). A higher share of respondents who definitely or rather agree with the statement that supermarkets and hypermarkets offer healthier food appeared among consumers with a higher net monthly personal income. In the case of respondents with an income above EUR 900, more than 40% agree (definitely or rather) with the perception of higher quality food, and 44% agree with the perception of healthier food offered in large-scale stores. Consumers with a net monthly personal income of EUR 500 or lower have the opposite perception. A similar statement applies regarding the perception of supermarkets and hypermarkets as stores that offer

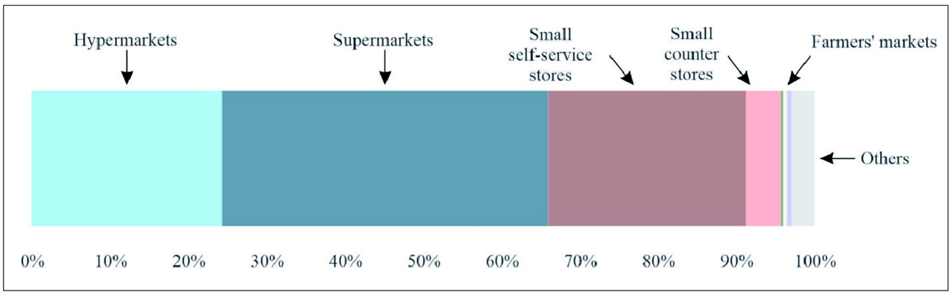

Fig. 2: Retail for the most frequent purchase of food by Slovak consumers
Source: authors' processing based on data from the FOCUS research agency

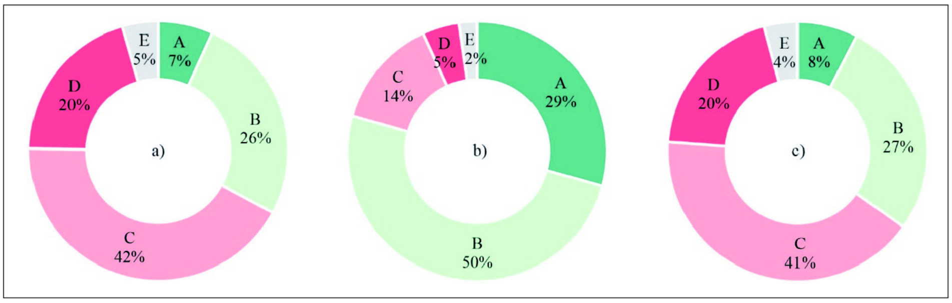

Fig. 3: Perception of Slovak consumers regarding large supermarkets and hypermarkets
Source: authors' processing based on data from the FOCUS research agency
Explanatory notes: a) Large-scale grocery stores offer healthier food than smaller stores; b) Large-scale grocery stores offer less expensive food than smaller grocery stores; c) Large-scale grocery stores offer higher quality food than smaller grocery stores;
A: definitely agree; B: rather agree; C: rather disagree; D: definitely disagree; E: I don't know

	H2a	H2b	H2c
Indicators	p-value		
Generation	**0.000**	**0.020**	**0.003**
Net monthly personal income	**0.002**	0.425	**0.002**
Residence	**0.038**	0.319	0.070
Size category of residence	**0.000**	0.066	**0.002**
Level of significance α = 0.05			

Tab. 2: Relationships between H2 (perception of large-scale grocery stores) and demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators
Source: authors' calculations based on survey data

	H3a	H3b	H3c
Indicators	p-value		
Generation	0.235	0.507	0.674
Net monthly personal income	0.361	0.852	0.139
Residence	0.802	**0.000**	0.466
Size category of residence	0.270	**0.000**	0.224
Level of significance α = 0.05			

Tab. 3: Relationships between H3 (perception of farmers' markets) and demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial indicators
Source: authors' calculations based on survey data

higher-quality food. Income plays an important role not only in grocery store choice (Hiller et al., 2011; MacNell, 2018) but also in perceptions of other food attributes.

Urban consumers have a similar perception of food on offer at supermarkets and hypermarkets as rural consumers. A relationship was confirmed in the case of the perception of the offer of healthier foods. Compared with the whole sample of respondents, urban consumers definitely disagree with the statement that large-scale grocery stores offer healthier food. With the segmentation of consumers based on the size of their municipality of residence, it can be said that those from less populated localities view the offer of healthy food in large-scale stores less negatively (definitely or rather agree) than those in more populated localities. Similarly, up to half of consumers in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants agree with the statement that supermarkets and hypermarkets offer higher quality food. The opposite perception occurs in the case of consumers from municipalities with a larger population. This may be related to the lack of food stores and food variability in less populated municipalities (Bilková et al., 2018).

4.3 Consumer perceptions of food offered on local alternative food networks

Nearly 90% of consumers in Slovakia perceive food sold at farmers' markets as being healthier than those sold in conventional stores (34.7% definitely agree, 55.2% rather agree). At the same time, it can be said that consumers do not view the food sold at farmers' markets as less expensive compared with those in conventional stores (see Fig. 4). A total of 45.5% of Slovak consumers rather disagree with the statement that food sold at farmers' markets are less expensive than food in conventional stores, and 20.3% definitely disagree. The opposite perception was recorded in the case of the quality of food offered at farmers' markets, as up to 89% of consumers expressed agreement that food sold at farmers' markets is of higher quality than those sold in conventional stores. No statistically significant relationship was observed between such perceptions and consumers' net monthly personal income (Tab. 3).

With indicators linked to consumers' place of residence, a statistically significant relationship was recorded only in the case of the perception of the statement on less expensive food. More than half of consumers from municipalities with up to 1,000 inhabitants predominately agree (definitely or rather) with this statement and consider food at farmers' markets to be less expensive. Similarly, more than 42% of rural consumers perceive food at farmers' markets as less expensive than those in conventional stores. Urban consumers have the opposite perception (Tab. 3). Farmers' markets in rural areas have a long tradition of selling local products at lower prices because many consumers source their seasonal food themselves. In contrast, urban farmers' markets are considered a new phenomenon in Slovakia and have become a trendy shopping venue associated with sustainable consumption and higher prices (Križan et al., 2022).

5. Discussion

Retail is changing in both time and space, and consumer shopping behaviour is changing with it. In post-socialist Central European countries, global large-scale supermarkets and hypermarkets have become the most frequently visited stores for the purchase of food (Kok, 2007; Ozimek & Żakowska-Biemans, 2011; Machek, 2012; Rudawska & Bilinska-Reformat, 2018; Fehér et al., 2021). These findings were also confirmed in the case of Slovak consumers, two-thirds of whom shop most often in global retail stores. Although local farmers' markets are gaining in popularity in post-socialist countries (Qendro, 2015; Syrovátková et al., 2015; Balogh et al., 2016; Spilková, 2018; Blumberg & Mincyte, 2019), only a negligible share of consumers use them as the most common place to buy food. On the other hand, it is necessary to consider the seasonality of farmers' markets, because of their shorter season which operates mainly from late spring to early autumn (Dimitri et al., 2015). This might be one of the main reasons for the reduced participation at farmers' markets and the lower availability and variety of local foods (Schmidt et al., 2011; Tchoukaleyska, 2013). The results from Slovakia indicate that there is a statistically

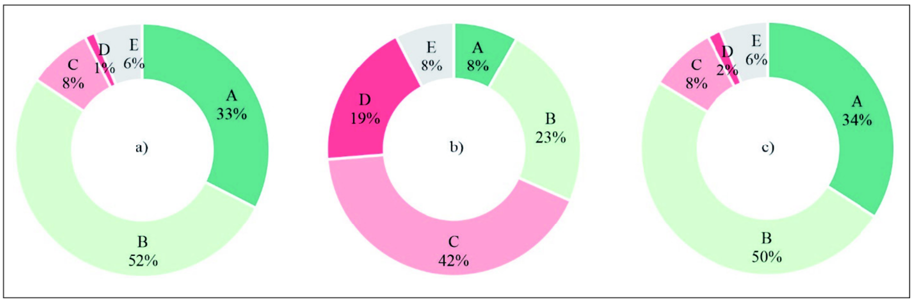

Fig. 4: Perception of Slovak consumers regarding farmers' markets
Source: authors' processing based on data from the FOCUS research agency
Explanatory notes: a) Food sold at farmers' markets is healthier than food sold in conventional stores; b) Food sold at farmers' markets is less expensive than food sold in conventional stores; c) Food sold at farmers' markets is of higher quality than food sold in conventional stores; A: definitely agree; B: rather agree; C: rather disagree; D: definitely disagree; E: I don't know

significant relationship between the type of store of the most frequent purchases and the generation of consumers. Compared with the entire sample of respondents, Generation Z shops above the expected values in hypermarkets, Generations X and Y mainly in supermarkets, and the 'Baby Boomers' and 'Pre-Boomers' in smaller stores (cf. Klapilová Krbová, 2016; Koksal, 2019).

As many as 8 out of 10 consumers in Slovakia perceive global supermarkets and hypermarkets as stores offering less expensive food, though not higher quality food. On the contrary, a large majority (almost 90%) of consumers agreed that food sold at farmers' markets is better quality than food sold in regular stores. Statistically significant relationships were confirmed only between the given statement in the case of the net monthly personal income of consumers and the perception of healthier and higher quality food. The greater popularity of smaller, specialised shops, farmers' markets, etc. with often fresher and healthier, but also more expensive food has been demonstrated in earlier studies in Central Europe (Kunc et al., 2012a; Križan et al., 2015). On the other hand, the advantages associated with higher quality but also higher price were more likely to be sought by higher income groups (Kunc et al., 2012b). Thus, it is possible that even average affluent Slovak consumers are turning their habits towards more sustainable consumption.

Differences in perceptions of the food offered in large-scale stores between urban and rural consumers were not confirmed either. It can be stated, however, that consumers from less populated municipalities perceive the offer of healthy and higher quality food in large-scale stores less negatively than consumers in more populated municipalities. From our own experience, previous research, and expert studies (Kunc et al., 2012c; Maryáš et al., 2014; GfK, 2017), this finding can be explained by the relatively long-standing habit of (not only) Slovak consumers prefer shopping in super/hypermarkets, which is also associated with a slightly 'blind' trust in packaged and often foreign food. Even this shopping behaviour may soon start to turn in favour of smaller stores and farmers' markets, however.

Nearly 90% of consumers in Slovakia perceive food sold at local farmers' markets as healthier compared to those in conventional stores. Consumers believe that the food they buy mostly comes from farmers' markets and their own production has characteristics linked with organic food (Petrescu et al., 2017). The perception of Slovak consumers on the quality of food sold at farmers' markets is similar to that of other countries (Spilková et al., 2015; Wolf et al., 2005), which points to a similar conception of alternative foods in different regions of the world. Consumers perceive food at farmers' markets as being fresher, healthier, and of higher quality than food from supermarkets. The quality, freshness, and ripeness of produce are the most important factors for shopping food at farmers' markets (Trobe, 2001) since food sold at farmers' markets is of higher quality compared to those available elsewhere (Smithers et al., 2008). The generally accepted thesis that, in comparison with the younger generations, older people are aware that industrially produced and processed foods from conventional retail chains do not taste the same as the food they ate as children (Syrovátková, 2016) was not confirmed in the case of Slovak consumers. In Slovakia, the relationship between generations of consumers and their perceptions of food sold at farmers' markets was not confirmed. This may indicate a trend that alternative food networks in Slovakia are generally perceived as places that offer healthier and higher quality food, regardless of the age of consumers.

According to a study by Lyon (2009), consumers at farmers' markets in Scotland are looking for high-quality food and direct contact with local producers. A study in the Czech Republic shows that farmers' markets are not socially exclusive, since pensioners, a social group traditionally with a lower income, represent a significant proportion of all customers (Syrovátková et al., 2015). The economic situation of the household is an important factor in shopping at farmers' markets, but other factors likely need to be taken into consideration (Spilková et al., 2013). From a study on Slovak consumers, the conclusion has been reached that the difference between consumer income is not a significant factor in the segmentation of consumers in terms of their perception of farmers' markets and the food they offer.

Slovak consumers do not agree with the statement that food sold at farmers' markets are less expensive than those sold in conventional stores. Similar results can be seen in other countries, and food prices at farmers' markets are a barrier to consumer purchases (Żakowska-Biemans, 2011). Consumers, however, do perceive food in farmers' markets as having higher value at a more reasonable (lower) price than in supermarkets (Wolf et al., 2005), though a higher price may lead to hesitation in purchasing such food (Żakowska-Biemans, 2011). Gil et al. (2000) call for lowering the existing price gap between conventional and organic food so that consumption at alternative food networks can be increased. On the other hand, consumers are willing to pay a higher amount (surcharge) for food at farmers' markets (Yiridoe et al., 2005), especially with a clear local (regional) origin (Lang et al., 2014). In Slovakia, differences between the perception of the price of food from farmers' markets and place residence were identified. Urban and rural consumers perceive the price of food differently. Rural consumers consider food sold at farmers' markets to be less expensive (compared with conventional stores) than urban consumers. While farmers' markets in the Slovak countryside are considered to be something obvious with a long tradition, in cities they are transformed into modern and trendy places of consumption. Urban consumers in this way express a kind of attitude, particularly towards globalisation or consumerism, and positive attitudes towards a more ethical and greener lifestyle (Spilková et al., 2013). This, too, may be one of the reasons why food sold at urban farmers' markets is more expensive than those in conventional stores, which consumers have confirmed with their own attitudes. These results also indicate that for a more detailed understanding of consumer behaviour, it is necessary that research focus not only on traditional demographic or socioeconomic indicators but also on spatial indicators, such as place of residence (Weatherell et al., 2003).

Although the results of the questionnaire from one small European country will not address the established research gap, they do offer an additional piece of the puzzle for understanding the dichotomy of consumers between the choice of global and local food retailers. The results have implications for the grocery sector, in the sense of emphasising aspects associated with the quality, price, and health aspects of foods that influence consumers' food choices. This study examines the profile and perceptions of shoppers in global and local types of grocery stores, which can provide additional information regarding consumer behaviour and preferences in understanding the retail environment.

6. Conclusions

Large-scale food retail outlets of a global nature, such as supermarkets and hypermarkets, have gained popularity among consumers in Central Europe. This research demonstrates generational differences among consumers in their preferences for the most common shopping formats (H1). Although not universally applicable due to senior citizens favouring super/hypermarkets during discount promotions, older generations generally prefer smaller stores. This preference is influenced by factors such as the spatial distribution of the population and the availability of stores. Particularly in rural areas, an older generation and smaller stores prevail, whereas in urban areas, larger retail outlets are favoured by the younger generation. These findings highlight the discernible differences in preferences between rural and urban areas, emphasising the spatial dimension in understanding consumer shopping behaviour. Furthermore, this research reveals a statistically significant relationship between the type of preferred shopping formats and the consumer's net monthly income. These findings offer crucial insights for marketing strategies.

Contrary to studies addressing food security and food deserts, the survey in Slovakia contradicts the notion that global food retailers offer healthier and higher-quality food items. Varying perceptions of the healthiness of food sold in supermarkets were identified among different age groups, income categories, residential areas, and municipality sizes (H2a). While the majority of consumers prefer supermarkets, possibly due to their perceived affordability, distinctions in attitudes were observed among different generations of consumers (H2b). Negative emotions towards supermarkets as outlets offering higher-quality food items (H2c) may be associated with widely publicised scandals and sanctions for non-compliance with hygiene regulations. Consumers seem less aware of the quality, however, associated with product diversity (BIO, lactose-free, gluten-free, vegan, etc.) and the range of choices, from lower to higher-quality items, available in global retailers.

The trust established between consumers and local farmers is evident in the conclusion that the vast majority (up to 9 out of 10) of Slovak consumers consider food from farmers' markets to be healthier compared to regular stores. This sentiment is consistent across all analysed consumer segments. People often trust food from farmers' markets more due to direct contact with producers, increasing transparency in production, and the perception that these markets offer local, seasonal, and less 'industrially processed' foods, all associated with higher quality and health benefits (H3a). On the other hand, most consumers perceive food at farmers' markets to be more expensive. Opinions on this matter vary based on location, with a statistically significant relationship observed between consumers from urban and rural areas. Consumers from urban areas view farmers' markets as trendy with added value and, consequently, higher food prices. Conversely, consumers from rural areas in Slovakia maintain the tradition of affordable local food purchases. These perceptions regarding the quality of food sold at local farmers' markets hold true across all analysed consumer segments (H3c).

It is important to note that Slovakia has not yet implemented a 'farmers' market code', which may lead to different consumer attitudes towards farmers' markets. While global retailers exhibit a degree of uniformity and networking, local farmers' markets are characterised by heterogeneity and individualism. These findings open avenues for future research in the geographic study of retail and consumption trends.

The primary contribution of this research is the revelation that consumers in Slovakia perceive global retailers (supermarkets) as offering lower-quality food. This perception is consistent among urban and rural consumers, indicating that location does not significantly affect the perception of food quality in supermarkets. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that consumers consider food sold at farmers' markets to be of higher quality and healthier compared to food in global retail outlets. This perception is consistent across all age groups of consumers. At the same time, differences in income do not significantly affect consumer perception of the products offered by farmers' markets.

Furthermore, the research provides insights from a post-socialist country, where consumer behaviour exhibits specific characteristics due to the past political and economic insularity that has also impacted the retail sector. This is an important contribution that allows us to understand the dynamics of changing shopping behaviours and adaptation to globalization trends and patterns from other developed countries. Over the past three decades, Slovak consumers have adopted shopping behaviour patterns that have been in place elsewhere for a longer time. The results also expand the theoretical understanding of how consumer decision-making varies depending on socio-demographic characteristics and perceptions of different consumer groups.

Understanding consumers as individuals within specific segments, categorised by their place of residence or the size of their communities, is crucial for grasping their food retail preferences and making informed predictions. The study underscores the importance of location-specific factors in shaping consumer perceptions, urging retailers to consider these factors in pricing, promotion, and product strategies. With data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research highlights the need for businesses to adapt operations, strengthening online shopping, and ensuring health and safety measures.

This adaptive approach enables managers to continually gather consumer insights. By incorporating these insights, producers and farmers' market managers, as well as retailers and supermarket managers, can make informed decisions in response to market dynamics, optimize product offerings, and enhance the overall shopping experience in both global and local food retail environments. This not only ensures a more efficient allocation of resources but also facilitates a more responsive and consumer-centric approach across the entire food supply chain.

The paper and its findings should be considered within the broader context of the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Given that the data collection took place during the pandemic (November 2020), it is essential to interpret the results in light of this unique situation. Future studies could be focused on other factors with an impact on the perception of consumers in Slovakia on conventional or alternative food networks. These studies could also take into account the consequences of other ongoing crises such as the energy and geopolitical crises in Central Europe on changing preferences observed in global supermarkets and local farmers' markets.

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